

Four is the magic number

Complaints that the four new schemes to increase public trust and confidence are a waste of resources are unjustified, says Beth Breeze, who suggests critics should take a look at the wider picture

Just like our famously unpredictable public transport, it seems we've been waiting a long time for something to be done about trust and confidence in charities and then four initiatives come along at once.

The four separate efforts aimed at providing information and boosting the public's confidence in charities are: the Guidestar UK website presenting a comprehensive database of charity information, the Alan Gosschalk-led project to co-ordinate charities' communications with the media, Professor Adrian Sargeant's charityfacts.org website and the Self-Regulation of Fundraising Unit.

Some commentators have criticised this glut of efforts as an unnecessary diversion and have suggested that a single, co-ordinated initiative would be a more efficient use of time and money that would be better received by the public.

There are a number of flaws in these arguments. Firstly, such critics fail to appreciate the aims and nature of each of the initiatives and their potential for mutually supporting each other, thereby creating a stronger outcome of reinforced trust and confidence in our sector.

For example, a journalist planning to write a piece criticising the use of a fundraising technique, such as face-to-face or street fundraising, could consult the self-regulation code relating to this issue before contacting the 'Gosschalk' media office to learn why charities continue to invest in this method of recruiting donors. If that journalist were planning to single out a specific charity as a case study, they could then surf over

to the Guidestar UK website to find out more about that organisation's investment in fundraising costs and to discover how the charity is using donations to make an impact on society.

Alternatively, a donor might begin by searching the Guidestar UK website database to identify which organisations are working in an area they wish to support, but having found they all report higher fundraising costs than anticipated, that donor might log on to charityfacts to learn more about the role of modern fundraising in enabling good causes to operate.

Therefore, once functioning, these initiatives will work jointly to enhance understanding of how charities operate.

Secondly, those who suggest that nothing should be done about trust and confidence until we are in the midst of a crisis fail to acknowledge the importance of anticipating societal trends and taking proactive rather than reactive defensive action such as we have recently seen in Scotland.

There is quite clearly an ever-increasing demand for greater information and transparency in all areas of public life. We could do nothing and wait for our supporters to get frustrated at our opacity until they begin withholding their support. Or we could make a sensible guess about the type and nature of information that will be demanded and seek to supply it before its absence becomes an issue. This pre-emptive approach demonstrates

good governance and echoes the government's justification for reforming charity law before this outdated legislation became a public bugbear.

Thirdly, the critics display a level of pessimism about their colleagues who are leading these various initiatives that is unhelpful and potentially self-fulfilling. It takes a lot of time, money and effort to get new ideas off the ground. If it so happens that different groups of well-intentioned people have been thinking along the same lines then surely the best response is to encourage and work for the success of each effort because of its contribution to the greater good of our sector. Predictions of inefficiency and inefficacy may prompt the leaders of each initiative to turn inwards, protecting the oxygen for their baby rather than risk reaching outwards to collaborate and build the success of all.

Finally, the suggestion that four initiatives is three too many, precludes the possibility that there is plenty of further space for other people and organisations to contribute to building trust and confidence in our sector. The efforts of those leading the separate initiatives will enable our sector to take great strides forward in reinforcing public trust and confidence. Their proactive approaches should be warmly congratulated, not carped at from the sidelines.

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