

Over the last twenty years the way that non-profits and charities work has changed beyond all recognition. Charities now run their operations like professional businesses: they set performance targets, employ professionals – fundraisers, marketers, campaigners, CEOs (but not yet trustees) – to do their work. Alongside these professional staff come agencies to advise and guide on a whole host of issues from the internet to mission and vision.

All this professionalisation means that charities now have to be much more careful about how they are seen by their different stakeholders: donors, public, staff, volunteers and clients to name but a few. The wrong image for a charity can affect levels of income, staff retention and update of client services. One of the side-effects of the professionalisation of the sector is that modern charities are no longer the same as the image that most members of the public have in their mind. Indeed in every area of our client research we find that the public live in a rosy fog of ignorance about how charities do their job. To be specific our research shows the public have misguided ideas about all of the following:

- The size of the organisations they give to, either in terms of the number of staff

Finding perspective

In a world where charities are becoming ever more professionalised, an essential task for every organisation is getting the right brand. Joe Saxton considers how public opinion of charities has not kept up with an evolving sector, and explains the key points of effectively marketing an organisation

or the income

- The amount of government funding many fundraising charities receive
- The economics of fundraising, particularly the fact that the recruitment of new supporters in many countries and contexts is doing well to break-even in the first year
- The nature of who is and isn't paid in modern charities
- The overall levels of fundraising and admin costs in relation to total costs

The public want to believe that non-profits do good works, are run by nice people in small homely organisations where everybody calls each other by their first names, the sun always shines and they do fantastic work all on a shoestring for little or no pay. Charity marketers want them to go on believing that too. They don't want this rose-tinted view to be shattered because they worry it will impact negatively on fundraising and less measurable types of support. As one colleague said to me, charities should never get 'caught marketing'.

For all these reasons managing an organisation's image is a key part of its work. And this isn't just the work of fundraisers or the PR team but everybody all of the time. The right brand is like physical fitness. It can make doing all those other activities that much easier. Often many people within charities are dismissive of the term brand and the idea of marketing. But if you ask service people if the image of their service does justice to them, or whether some client groups have the wrong idea about who they are and what they do, they will often say yes. Branding may be

perceived as anathema, but the right image seen as very important.

A good brand strategy will have a number of key components:

- Any brand exercise should start with your vision and your mission – the heart and soul of the organisation as we call it. Branding is not about papering over what lies at the heart of a charity but uncovering it and shouting it from every rooftop and in every communication
- A clear idea of key audiences whether they are a few key individuals (eg local authority commissioning officers) or hundreds of thousands of potential donors
- A clear idea of the key messages and what makes the organisation distinctive. These messages then need to be pumped out through every communication channel the organisation has – from website to radio interview to job recruitment materials
- Resources both financial and human to make sure the brand strategy is being delivered on the ground and across the organisation. This includes training and briefing people (staff and volunteers) to make sure they are empowered with their role in delivering the brand. Too many of us have experienced the company whose customer service didn't live up to the promises made in its advertising. The power of managing a charity's reputation and image is that it's not about big budgets (though in some cases that helps) or sexy causes. It's about consistency, clarity, and coherence from one end of the organisation to another – driven by energy and passion. And every charity can have those resources at its disposal.

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