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“Best Practice: Charity Sector Marketing”

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Best Practice: Charity Sector Marketing

Marketing your brand in tough times: Lessons from the charity sector

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These are tough times for charities. As in many sectors, the marketing budgets of not-for-profits are feeling the pinch. From our work with charities we know that this is nothing new - times are *always* tough in this field. Lean organisational structures and the pressure to preserve funds for core activities means that charity marketers are masters of frugal marketing budgets. In many ways, this puts them ahead of the curve. Not having extensive resources within, charity marketers have always looked outside their organisations to achieve their aims. They are adept at harnessing the energy of others – through attracting supporters to a cause and marshalling volunteers to help them. Charity marketing managers have taken this social competency into the online space, where they have provided many of the significant successes to date in social media marketing. Here we present some principles and examples of effective charity sector marketing in both the real and virtual worlds. There is much that can be learnt from charities about how to market your brand when the pressure is on.

Obtain a holistic view of brand touchpoints

As always, effective marketing begins with effective insight. Just as in other sectors, customers judge a charity holistically based on the totality of their experiences with that brand. Customer insight therefore needs to capture all of the ways that recipients encounter the brand, because these contribute to the brand image and perceived effectiveness of the charity. The range of touchpoints includes those under direct control of the manager - such as advertising and direct mail – as well as those outside your control – such as hearing about the brand from a friend or seeing someone else engaged with the brand. The challenge for the marketing manager is to get these touchpoints working together so that all brand encounters reinforce the message of an effective organization. A real-time tracking approach to research can identify which touchpoints are working together and where there might be gaps in your communication. Getting your touchpoints to work together can have a powerful impact. For example, Oxfam includes posters about its latest campaigns in its charity stores, so that message is not just “go to Oxfam and buy a second-hand book cheaply” but that by buying something in the Oxfam store you are also helping people in poorer countries. Conversely, we found in one study that a high-street charity’s expensive store refit was accidentally conveying the message that the charity was altogether too smart and clearly had too much money to spend!

You need to empower your advocates – the volunteers and supporters that help to drive your brand

There is rightly much talk of customer engagement and crowdsourcing in the commercial sphere. Charities are very effective at harnessing the influence of others as they have been doing this in the offline space for decades via armies of unpaid volunteers. Oxfam has found that its charity shops are not just a source of much-needed revenue: they also provably have a positive impact on brand image when they empower their (largely volunteer) sales force. For instance, imagine the scenario where a shop visitor starts talking to a volunteer and asks them about how the money they give to Oxfam is used. Where the volunteer is able to give an informed answer, such as clarifying that the portion of spend on admin versus charity is actually very small, the shop visit can have a powerfully positive influence on the individual's brand perception and hence on their subsequent engagement with the brand.

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) are masters of empowering their 1 million members through activities such as the Big Garden Birdwatch. In 2011, 600,000 members took part over two days in January, counting over 10 million birds. And despite recent reports that the numbers of charity volunteers are falling, RSPB announced that they had their best ever year in 2010-11 with 17,609 volunteers donating more than one million hours to the charity during the period.

Employees in for-profit firms are equally enthusiastic on day one of their new job, as indeed are many of their customers on day one of their new product ownership, so it's not just charities that need to harness the natural sociability and prosocial behavior of the human being. We just need to do two things. Firstly, provide some outlets for this natural collaborativeness. And secondly, make sure that we don't get in the way with over-restrictive policies on employee engagement with social media, siloed measurement systems or micromanagement of front-office staff.

A “feel bad” message can be a good outcome of advertising

Advertising messages typically carry a “feel good” message: use this brand and it will make you feel better, happier or more confident. However, in the charity sector, advertising often works via negative emotions. Charities tend to motivate their audiences using messages that promote pride or guilt. A successful ‘guilt’ message will result in audiences reporting that they felt negative about the ad (which with a regular ad testing campaign would be a poor outcome) but in this case is a very good result. This means that assessing an ad campaign in the charity sector requires non-standard metrics. For instance, Christian Aid ran an integrated campaign showing poor people in developing nations suffering the impacts of climate change and asking for a change in behaviour: “Be a love and switch your computers off at the end of the day” and “Any chance of turning that thermostat down a degree?” The response to the execution was that it made you feel “awful” but also left you with the feeling that

you could do something about this problem. A warning, though: according to recent research by Cranfield's Paolo Antonetti, pride is a more powerful motivator of future action than guilt. So help supporters to make a really small step, then make them feel good about it and want more of the same feeling! This brings us to our next topic, activation.

Social media can help with the key challenge – activation

A single charity campaign may have multiple calls to action. A campaign may seek to educate, change behaviour and engage support. For example, Asthma UK's 'Alert to Asthma' campaign aims to make school teachers and students aware of how to assess and take swift action. The important thing is to give the message that 'you can do something' by making the desired behaviour explicit and easy. In the case of 'alert to asthma' it's about correct use of an inhaler, and seeking medical attention within the first ten minutes of a serious attack.

The immediacy of many online channels can make it very easy for supporters to enact engagement behaviours. For instance, an online video message may be only one click away from an online financial contribution. A charity may seek a financial donation from some supporters, and offers to volunteer from other supporters. Often the same campaign will be seeking both of these actions from different segments. For example, older people may have the financial means but not the time to help, while younger people may have the time but not the money. Charities that have members who are strongly committed can harness this energy to reach out to more people via Facebook pages and viral media. When presenting at the Cranfield Customer Management Forum, Claire Zuurbier from Great Ormond Street Hospital Charity told of how the hospital was using social media to quickly activate supporters, so for instance, if they receive a late notice opportunity to sell theatre tickets or fill a hotel, they are able to do this rapidly via Twitter and Facebook.

Online social media can be a valuable resource to charities because of its power to reach lots of people cost-effectively. Royal National Lifeboats Institute has won multiple awards for a campaign which effectively harnessed supporter participation and the impact of key influencers to reach teens. They solicited crowdsourced content (that is, supporter-generated messages) which they then distributed to twelve influential bloggers. As a result the campaign reached 11% of 15-20 year olds, turning RNLi from one of the least-known charities among young people to a hot online topic. Not a bad result from just twelve envelopes!

There is a worrying tendency in some quarters to patronise charity marketers as in some way the poor relation of their for-profit colleagues. This is far from our view. Many areas in which charity marketers have long been expert – speaking with authenticity, harnessing the enthusiasm of brand advocates, managing the complete

customer experience – are only now being grappled with by the major blue-chips. We can all learn much from this rich melting-pot of creativity and commitment.

FURTHER READING ON WARC.COM

Fiona Blades and Rachel Brown, More, more, more – How respondents are demanding more and co-creating the research process, ESOMAR Congress, Sept 2009.

Douglas Dunn and Debi Bester, New Media Research: User generated social media., MRS Annual Conference, 2010.

Nigel Firminger, Charity fundraising and brand building: do they go together?, Admap, Jan 2008, issue 490, pp. 46-48.

John B Ford and Altaf Merchant, Nostalgia drives donations: The power of charitable appeals based on emotions and intentions., Journal of Advertising Research, Vol. 50 No. 4, 2010.

OTHER RECOMMENDED READING:

http://www.asthma.org.uk/how_we_help/schools_early_years/schools_must_be_aler.html

<http://www.rspb.org.uk/media/releases/300740-rspb-volunteers-set-a-new-record-as-they-hit-a-million-hours-for-nature>

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