

The Write Effect for Charitable Donations

Taking a look at the delicate balance between slushy, begging copy; and copy that gets the right tone for a charity. It's all about collecting donations for a worthy cause, and maintaining the dignity - not only of the institution, but also of the recipients of the benefactor's gift.

It has to be said, from the outset, that there is a veritable plethora of charities sending out direct mail. We all see them and receive them, dropping through our letterboxes, some of them we've seen before, and we don't even need to open them to know that there will be images inside that will tug at our heartstrings. Everyone has their own level of commitment to such charities, but if you feel you've already reached yours, you might even bin the letter before you open it. Ever done that? I've even thrown out letters from charities that have a free gift inside - one because I don't want to feel obligated, and two because I've got enough cheap pens cluttering up my house (and these ones work!).

Of course, it's a numbers game. But the competition for your charitable donation is intense. And in the present financial climate, it's not too surprising that belts are beginning to tighten.

Most charities represent a minority whose need is not being addressed by government or public funding. The need is genuine, the cause is just. But there are literally thousands of them, and the individual has to make a decision as to where his or her charitable donation is going. Donors tend to fall into two main categories - regular and occasional. Those who regularly give to a particular charity, have for one reason or another, (close contact with the sufferer of an illness, affinity to animals, etc), made a decision to which they stick, and would usually donate monthly on a direct debit or standing order mandate. It's very unusual for them to switch allegiances, but they are quite likely to consider a "one off" gift to a particular appeal (natural catastrophe, etc).

Most people will give occasionally, to street collections, to door to door collectors (if the charity is well known); but how do you convert an occasional donor into a regular one? One area worth consideration is the demographic of the target audience. Those who are more settled in life - maybe with kids, or are enjoying their job or lifestyle. If they are approached for a regular donation that won't make a noticeable difference to their disposable income level, the main thing standing between you and their financial aid is the way you put your story over to them.

So how should this be approached? Again there is no "one size fits all" answer. As a general rule however, shock tactics tend to have a negative response value. It's ok to be open about the situation, (provide statistics, or even a case study), but stark reality might be too much. But not in all cases - as with all rules, sometimes it's better to break them. Take care over the

headings you use; make sure that they have an emotive content value. After all, you only have 6 seconds to grab someone's interest on average, so get off to a good start. Try to explain the predicament dispassionately - but don't lose sight of how important the issue is. You don't want to appear cold, but the quickest turn off in the book is emotional blackmail.

Celebrity endorsement can work wonders - but always make sure there is a genuine connection between your charity and the chosen one. An unsuitable "face" can be enormously damaging further on down the line - this is true of both charitable and "for profit" institutions. And always ask for the money! The easier you make it for the prospective donor, the better the conversion rates. Suggest set monthly figures to donate. Try giving an indication of what a certain level of donation would mean to the recipients - we've all seen this type of message "£2 per month means that each family would get clean water" etc - and it works!

So it's not easy I know. But I hope I've given some ideas here for the areas for consideration when it comes to asking people to donate to your particular cause. We're all pretty much the same in general, and if you think the cause is worthwhile, the chances are that others will as well - you just have to get the tone right when you ask for the money.