

The Donor Challenge

charity



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Convincing someone to give some of their hard-earned cash to charity is difficult at the best of times, but never more so than in a period of recession. Figures published earlier this summer suggested that four out of five charities and social enterprises had been badly affected by the economic downturn, and smaller, local charities and voluntary organisations have been particularly hard hit.

Ironically, the nature of recession means that the increasing lack of charitable donations comes at the very time when the need is greatest for the public to support organisations working to help the

poorest people hold their lives and families together.

People have their own distinct motives for supporting specific charities and their degree of commitment, and level of contribution, will very often be dictated by their personal or family experience and connection with the charity, the cause or the work it does.

But as the economic conditions inevitably temper public generosity, and competition for the donated pound becomes ever more intense, charities must recognise that now is not the ideal time to be going out trying to find 'cold' donors. Now is the time to look after the committed donors who have given in the past.

Few, if any, donors give readily to charities without wanting to know exactly how and where their money is being spent. Most want to get very close to their chosen charity, to share in its successes and achievements and to feel that their contribution has been worthwhile or helped to make a difference. Regular, effective feedback and communication with this audience nurtures that relationship, strengthens the commitment.

There are some 170,000 charities in the UK vying for our support and for most of them the greatest asset they have is often their stories; the progress they are making, an uplifting 'real life' case study, the scale of their fundraising efforts and, most crucially, what they have been able to achieve with their donations. Different consumer groups require different narratives but well-produced, content-rich magazines are one of the most effective ways of reinforcing the message.

One of the country's leading charities, The British Heart Foundation (BHF) has a very unequivocal vision; a world where

people no longer die prematurely from heart disease, and to that end it works alongside government, other health charities, health professionals and thousands of dedicated supporters, including patrons and donors.

At the heart of its work (no pun intended) are ongoing marketing and communication campaigns which emphasise the importance of a heart healthy lifestyle as well as the facts and figures about cardiovascular disease. The very nature of heart disease means that its target audience cuts across all demographics and the BHF was quick to recognise the relevant role that magazines could play in its communications strategy.

Its range of magazines has included 'Heart Matters', a publication targeted at patients recovering from heart problems, to 'Thrive', a magazine offering 'preventative' heart health, diet and lifestyle advice for families. The magazines are distributed free to subscribers, which would include anyone supporting the BHF with charitable donations, and also available in GP surgeries and health centres, where they may be picked up and read by a more 'passive', less im-

mediately targeted audience.

In either case, just because the core subject is heart disease, there is no reason why the magazines must not be lively, informative, educational and entertaining, in fact, all the more reason, some would argue. Encouraging healthier lifestyle choices may be the subtle message that underpins all BHF's external communications but there is a skill in delivering than in a persuasive, non-judgemental way and the BHF magazines manage to achieve that.

Such has been the success of its core titles that the charity has also gone on to introduce several mini magazines, targeting different ethnic or age groups with very specific messages. Recognising, for example, that the UK's South Asian community was 50% more likely to suffer heart disease than other members of the UK population, through a combination of health and dietary factors, a dedicated magazine was produced and distributed to this audience with excellent take-up results.



The real value of this form of magazine communication is reflected in an increased sign-up and participation in the BHF of some 350,000 people, with donor acquisition and retention a key element of that group.

As we said at the start, people's motivation for supporting specific charities can be varied and very personal, but today, more than ever, that support must never be taken for granted. As in any relationship, transparency and accountability are essential and donors need to be shown how their money is being used and how the charity they have chosen to support is performing. The British Heart Foundation has demonstrated that content-rich magazine communication is one way of keeping them continually informed and involved.

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