

Getting donors to tell the good stories about your work

Project 22. Media relations and the public face of charities

Tim Kitchin, February 2017

The original brief

Charities enjoy enormous public support. As a result they come under scrutiny but sadly the media too often focuses on the poor performing few rather than the excellent practice of most charities. This is as true for fundraising practice as for other areas. This project will look at how to build better relations with the media so that coverage is better informed about the totality of practice and that good fundraising, is not undermined by collateral damage from exposure of incidents of bad practice.

Project 22, “Speaking Out”, recognises that mainstream media reporting makes a significant difference to the way we feel about donating to charities. It suggests six simple principles for the not-for-profit sector to generate more positive coverage that builds donors’ trust and confidence.

The principles are straightforward:

1. Accentuate the Positive

- Communicate the positive impact of your work as much as the problems you address.

⇒ Specifically, work to bring project outcomes to life, particularly by using them to authentic voices and enliven your annual reporting

2. Grow the Grassroots

- Seek out the authentic voices of your most committed supporters and beneficiaries, and inspire them to talk freely on your behalf.

⇒ Specifically, allow, empower and encourage local evangelists to use social media on your behalf, and agree on protocols and training to engage with mass media

3. Work closely with the media

- Build collaborative media partnerships that engage readers and viewers, and which offer win-wins with media and advertising supporters.

⇒ Specifically, create fundraising propositions that have the media as a partner, rather than merely as a 'channel.'

4. Keep it Personal

- Communicate at a human level, across all channels, at all times.

⇒ Specifically, explain beneficiaries' experiences as personal stories that connect with donors' real lives, and encourage donors to tell their own stories of emotional connection.

5. Be Brave

- Don't be afraid to assert a measure of moral authority - in a humble way. Don't be afraid to lead change on behalf of your donors and beneficiaries.

⇒ Specifically, stand up for the work you do by celebrating its impact, while still acknowledging the work that remains to be done. Behave as if you were providing 'shareholder guidance' and quarterly forecasts.

6. Be Decisive

- Admit quickly when you screw up - and change things.

⇒ Specifically, take decisive actions to honour donors' needs in terms of your behaviour - and tell people when you've done it.

Next Steps

Whilst adopting these six simple principles should help individual charities to build trust and grow market-share for their organisations, they will not be enough to help the charitable sector to improve and innovate as a whole.

Left unfettered, market forces will tend to produce more and more noise and less and less cut-through, simply raising the cost of supporter acquisition and retention. What is needed instead are new forms of co-ordinated sector leadership that ground fundraising less in lifestyle interruption and more in the inspiration and restoration of operating effectively. However, what these measures should look like is beyond the scope of this paper.

The approach

The media reports the actions of charities and their representatives selectively – and tells stories about their impact.

Many of these stories are naturally negative. Negative stories are simply more interesting to readers. However, their reporting reinforces scepticism and cynicism regarding the sector. Specifically, in aggregate, these stories go to the heart of the very issues that are known to underpin trust,¹ according to the Charity Commission.

Negative media coverage would suggest to a neutral reader that:

- Charities do not make a difference to their cause.
- Donations do not reach the end beneficiary.
- Charities are poorly managed.
- Fundraising is dishonest.
- Charities cannot be trusted to work without external supervision.

Now, we simply do not know how far media coverage generates or intensifies public scepticism directly. We do not really know which types of citizens are most affected by it. And we do not know in what way any negative beliefs affect donors' real-world behaviour. Insight into this area needs more time to emerge, as well as more concerted and rigorous investigation.

We do have some very suggestive clues, however. Certainly, people *say* they are negatively affected by the media. For example, Harris Interactive, for Third Sector, found that media stories have made 33% of the public to think worse of charities.

From the Charity Commission's 2016 research, we know that trust and confidence have fallen dramatically since 2014 – placing charities below social workers and 'the general public at large' in the overall rankings. More concerning still is the fact that trust is actually lowest among the 55-64 age group (at an index of 5.2) – a group traditionally considered the heartland of charity donors.

More encouragingly, though, we also know that existing donors – or volunteers, or beneficiaries – are much less likely to be affected by this trust gap than are non-donors. And we know that it is the less affluent social grades (C2s say...) that are generally less trusting than the higher (As, Bs and C1s).

While some charity managers might suggest that switching off poorer, disengaged donors is neither here nor there, the net effect is obvious. The smaller the common funding pool from which charities draw, the more intense the mutual competition and the more important brand loyalty becomes.

Even here, though, the effects may be complex. An affluent, engaged donor may well trust the charity to which he or she donates personally, but falling trust across the board is still likely to deter them from switching to a less well-known competitor.

The net effect of both these trends could well play out in a similar way to the banking sector – creating a pool of ‘trapped’ and frustrated donors who will not switch, but who will not commit fully to their existing relationship, despite abundant loyalty investments.

In this scenario, the cost of acquisition will keep on rising, but lifetime value will slow. Project 20 within the Commission’s report “Fundraising Investment” reinforces this point. While overall individual donation levels appear to be both static and resilient – broadly just tracking GDP, to date – the cost of fundraising continues to rise and the number of individuals contributing continues to fall. On average, the ROI in fundraising has fallen by around 20% in the last decade as a direct result of more charities making more and more noise in pursuit of an essentially static funding pool.

The impressionistic evidence further supports this mental model of conservative decision making. For example, the public trusts domestic charities substantially more than it does international ones, smaller ones more than bigger ones, the well known more than the unknown, and the personally relevant more than the abstract good. Intimacy is the single most critical driver of trust. The more ‘disreputable’ a picture the mainstream media paints, the more demanding donors will become.

It is against this general backdrop, without the funds to conduct any fresh, primary research that Project 22 took a simple stakeholder-engagement approach to its brief and sought to do five things:

1. To consolidate the available evidence to understand what is actually happening to the charity sector’s reputation.
2. To assimilate (and not duplicate) activity already underway to improve the media environment.
3. To canvas expert opinion from industry stakeholders concerning other efforts that might prove fruitful
4. To review a representative selection of mainstream media coverage in order to understand the underlying story drivers.

5. To suggest some approaches to enlarge the coverage pool and rebalance the tone.

Consolidate the Evidence

In addition to the Charity Commission's own trust-tracking, research studies from nfpSynergy², CAF³, Britain Thinks (for CharityComms and NCVO)⁴ and New Philanthropy Capital⁵ were all reviewed

There was a striking similarity across all the studies - particularly in their qualitative conclusions, in that:

- The concerns foregrounded by the mainstream media are already latent in the public consciousness (the media is doing its job).
- Many, possibly even most people, have some direct experience of aggressive fundraising (the practices were prevalent and out of synch with public expectation).
- Many people also have some memory of seeing negative stories about the charity sector, albeit often at a non-specific level (the media revelations do have an impact on public consciousness at an emotional level).
- The public views charities as a largely homogenous block (thus, negative stories about 'charities' do affect the entire sector).

The strong implication of this is that the departure point for improvement must lie in substantive changes to the behaviour of some charities, and that this new behaviour must be made visible to supporters. While the sector is tremendously diffuse, with quite distinctive governance requirements (a point to which we will return), it must show, as a whole, that it has heard and understood the public's concerns and is responding with conviction. Then, and only then, can any more ambitious behaviour be communicated to the media.

Despite this realism, there remains a widespread and palpable sense of affront among many in the charity sector, namely that much of the implied media criticism is 'unfair'; for example:

- That CEO pay is not actually disproportionate;
- That fundraising costs and interruptive donation 'asks' are a fact of life; - - that governance efforts are committed and reasonable;
- That impact is measured as well as it can be, considering its complexity; and
- That modern marketing techniques that are acceptable in the private sector should also be acceptable for charities.

These views seem entirely reasonable inside the 'tent' of charity management. The consequent reluctance to address the public's concerns at face value is compounded by a latent, logical belief that the beneficiary is always paramount on a charity's priority list, and that donors are ultimately 'only' a source of essential cash. Many other projects with the Commission's efforts will demonstrate the 'race to the bottom' that this view naturally entails.

The principal thesis that comes out of this self-conflicted worldview is that ‘if only the media understood us better’, they would report us more accurately and fairly.

Assimilate existing activity

Responding to this complex worldview, and with an educational aim in mind, very positive efforts have been spearheaded by the Understanding Charities Group, led by CharityComms and Britain Thinks, under the guidance and support of both the NCVO and ACEVO. The group seeks to explain the changes underway in the sector, namely

- to consolidate a set of consistent messages;
- to supply a strong, educative stream of evidence to back that change;
- to co-ordinate and mobilise charity sector responses to media need; and
- to train its spokespeople and storytellers.

These efforts are highly reasonable and potentially very valuable. They respond directly to the need of the sector to rebut both legitimate and misguided criticisms from mainstream media rapidly. They will undoubtedly help to shore up its *license to operate* (LTO) and, by ensuring a good information flow, will be as influential amongst regulators and politicians as they are amongst journalists.

The approaches are powerful. They create more consistent communication ‘plumbing’ across the sector that will, slowly but surely, contextualise the negative concerns levelled at the sector, which will rebalance stories to include more positive elements.

However, this LTO approach still leaves certain key challenges unaddressed, from the standpoint of strategic co-ordination:

- A) It does not ensure that storylines that are proactively seeded by charities actually go to the heart of the public’s reputational concerns.
- B) It does not engage with the nature of the stories that the media likes to tell or what they might be influenced to tell.
- C) It does not leverage the things at which charities are actually good, such as eliciting solidarity, mobilising public support and delivering visible, visceral social good.

The deeper, structural risk of the LTO approach, however, is that it may implicitly and unwittingly accept a status quo in which charities learn to compete on cheapness, rather than excellence. It is eminently possible to imagine a dystopian future in which charities forego their expectation of any meaningful ethical premium (underpinned by genuine social responsibility) and become bland social service providers instead - indistinguishable from corporates or state departments.

This risk of strategic passivity leaves the sector open to colonisation by ethically conflicted models of social entrepreneurship and to a slide into co-dependency with an increasingly

austere state. If the charity sector ‘brand’ ceases to offer a public accountability framework that allows room for innovation, individual brands will increasingly abandon it as a useful communication ‘tag’, and present themselves as autonomous and independent brands - a path that has already been hinted at by the British Red Cross¹⁰.

Rather than abandoning the playing field, although the third sector needs to begin to rediscover and reframe its own reason for being, it must cultivate a clear mandate for exploration, experimentation and growth. It must earn the right to take managed risks in pursuit of clear social impact once again by behaving transparently and maturely towards its donors, and by connecting with them rationally and emotionally to ensure their beneficial social effect.

This need for a proactive, self-confident and strategic approach to growth may simply be characterised as cultivating a ‘Licence to Innovate’ (LTI). This is an agenda within which journalists and media platforms become vital partners, in addition to many others.

Canvas Expert Opinion

This project consulted widely, both with individual charity communicators and with acknowledged pan-industry experts, as explained in Appendix 3.

Inevitably, these consultations revealed a range of valuable but informal insights which, although they do not form part of the final project conclusions, create a consistent and sophisticated backdrop to the implementation thereof.

There are three main conclusions from the general input. Firstly, it reinforced the idea that “a charity” is often unhelpfully understood as a concept. Secondly, that the role and requirements of donors are poorly understood, and that the sector faces a particularly challenging media environment. The three issues are:

An ill-defined sector brand

- a) The simple legal definition of a charity covers a wide variety of operational and commercial models.
- b) The reputation of the ‘charity’ sector brand is often at odds with the reputation of specific charity brands.
- c) Charity as an act of giving, charity as an act of helping, charity as a means of altruistic social organisation and charity as a legal structure are all included in the brand, and are difficult to separate.
- d) There are significant regional differences in charity reputation, and the English charity-sector malaise may not be universally replicated.
- e) There is also a wide diversity of perception across different brand types - notably between campaigning brands and solution brands, between institutionally funded providers and individually funded ones, between small and large charities, and between membership propositions and donation propositions, to name a few.

We ignore these differences at our peril. The communication for any brand must, of course, be unique. What will be consistent across them, however, are the same broad drivers of trust, as per the Charity Commission's research.

Poorly-understood donors

- a) Donors may be treated as altruistic benefactors who give money freely to an inspiring, emotive cause.
- b) They may be treated as customers to be 'sold' crisply packaged social outcomes,
- c) Or they may be treated as investors in long-term social impact who provide committed funding for visible change.

The point of the simple summary above is merely to highlight that, although the three 'modes' of giving are not mutually exclusive, they inspire very different invitations to give, and they demand very different forms of follow-through in communication.

It is the benefactor's assumption that contributes to the public expectation that even full-time charity workers should be volunteers, surviving on thin air. And it is by thinking of donors as benefactors that it becomes acceptable to approach them with emotionally distressing images, creating the ever diminishing returns of poverty porn.

It is by thinking of supporters (donors) as customers that charities can justify investment in sophisticated - and expensive - merchandising, membership and sponsorship packages to reward long-term donors. It is this same customer ethos that creates a language of 'upselling' and 'cross-selling' different donation packages to supporters, and so legitimises the complex array of interruptive tools and engagement approaches that create increasing noise and decreasing returns.

It is by thinking of donors as long-term, social investors that we create an upward-spiralling demand for improved governance, transparency and accountability. Finally, it is by seeing donors as investors that results in designing over-prescriptive and assumptive solutions, tied to highly restrictive funding constraints: programmes that fail to respond to rapidly changing needs on the ground.

It is worth noting, in passing, that these models do not only have negative consequences. There are also many positive implications of these outlooks, but it is the failure to recognise these mental models for what they are, and to develop a self-aware and dynamic accountability structure around them that causes problems to arise.

In conclusion, it is the inherent conflicts inside these complex accountability models that create the space for negative media portrayals, which strike directly at the heart of the trust drivers:

Fundraising should be honest:

- However, today's professionalised fundraising still relies on hyperbolic, transactional marketing to feed the cash 'funnel'.

Donations should get to the end cause

- However, the costs of proactive donor acquisition in a crowded homogeneous market greatly exceed that which would be deemed acceptable by a typical donor

Charities should be well-managed

- However, the economies of scale that large charities can achieve also entail demands for infrastructure, engagement and regulatory burdens that require costly professional expertise. Size produces its own management challenges.

Charities should be trusted to self-manage

- However, governance is provided by trustees who are generally unpaid, untrained and sometimes inappropriately skilled

Charities should make a difference

- However, evaluating complex social or environmental outcomes can often be inordinately expensive to achieve, even when it is clear that donors do care about them.

In these circumstances, in which donors and charities do not really, honestly and transparently understand each other (or even themselves), there will continue to be a steady flow of negative stories from the sector, many of which will reach the media.

The final consistent thread in this informal stakeholder input was to reinforce the challenging nature of the media environment.

A problematic communication environment

Anecdotal feedback also highlighted the following concerns:

- The political climate for socio-environmental investment remains febrile. In a post-Brexit, public austerity scenario, the nature and strength of environmental and social policy, and international development commitments is uncertain. The media is certain to adjust its story gathering according to the news flow this creates.
- The mainstream press, which has substantial on-line dominance, has led aspects of the investigation of the sector and remains a constant source of critique and criticism. This is somewhat biased towards - but not exclusive to - the right wing media (see 4 below)
- There are few natural 'slots' for habitual positive charity stories in the mainstream media, particularly when compared to financial reporting; for example, political commentary, sport, entertainment, fashion or even the arts

- There are too few natural, sophisticated, authoritative voices to speak for the sector.
- The quality of financial data pertaining to the sector as a whole is generally poor, out of date and difficult to interpret or to action.
- ‘Softer’ data pertaining to social impact are compiled inconsistently across the sector and, in any case, are undervalued by media (and readers) when compared to the simple, blunt measures of financial performance.

Against this challenging backdrop, the sector faces an uphill struggle to restore trust. Its first, defensive, course of action must be to improve the consistency of presentation of the sector’s benefits. To this end, the existing licence to operate approach led by the NCVO et al., the Understanding Charities Group, goes a long way to addressing the collateral damage of these intrinsic conflicts, but it does not address the source.

The sector – and its leading (not necessarily its biggest) participants – must devise strategies to define their own license to innovate, disrupting the media’s reductivist assumptions of what charities are and can be, and hence how they should be covered. It must establish a new assertive social contract, not unlike the paradigm shift that accompanied the corporate world’s embrace of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) from the 1990s onwards.⁷

Review Media Coverage

To attempt to translate this investigation from an abstract, stakeholder-guided strategy into practical recommendations, an impressionistic sampling of the most negative media was undertaken via a media compilation by Howard Lake⁸ of UK Fundraising.

This revealed a clear correlation between the negative stories that appeared in 2015 and donors’ key reputation-drivers identified by the Charity Commission. This negative coverage takes us a long way as a hypothesis for the loss of trust. However, while reviewing only the extremely negative stories kick-started by the Olive Cooke story is instructive, it provides little guidance on how to improve the situation.

The assessment was therefore complemented by a more thorough and balanced review of one month’s UK charity media coverage from August 2016 across mainstream media, which included more than 160 articles.

This revealed a number of highly instructive insights into ‘what gets coverage’ over a typical period. No single observation is surprising in itself but, collectively, they are suggestive.

Positive Stories

Insight 1.

Medical stories that elevate or criticise possible cures (for cancer, heart disease, Alzheimer's and so on) receive consistently strong coverage.

Insight 2.

Charities achieve very positive stories in terms of identifying and validating social needs (housing, NHS rationing, children's services, health and safety, law and order, lack of pension provision, children's mental health and so on). Research, at whatever level of sophistication, is the key to placing these stories.

Insight 3.

Criticism works - if your voice is strong enough.

Oxfam criticised the UK government's Yemeni arms deals during this period, and Yvette Cooper was backed by charities in criticising conditions in the Calais Jungle. Such attacks are particularly credible when criticising government action, and even more so when the commentator is a known figure (for example, David Miliband was prominent in this period, and figures such as Samantha Cameron, Michael Sheen or Prince Harry were prominent in other periods).

Insight 4.

Novel fundraising stories do get picked up - in this period, the BBC covered a group of fundraisers that was committed drawing a picture of every goal its team scored in a given season in return for sponsorship. Sky News also highlighted a man who raised funds for dementia by performing karaoke in his car with his father who has dementia (the link to James Corden, plus the soft 'end of news' slot, create the context in which to place these human stories).

Insight 5.

Quirky human interest stories can always attract interest. In this period, a lengthy media article about a former banker who had founded an animal rescue shelter at great personal cost was placed in the Daily Mail. In another story, a dog who had learned to detect 550 cancer variants was featured. He 'happened' to be owned by the head of the 'Medical Detection Dogs' charity. In another case, a boy who died was profiled alongside the charity 'Mason's Magic' that he had founded after a brain tumour diagnosis.

Insight 6.

Industry statistics also get picked up. During this period, CAF's Giving Index received coverage, but was reinforced by a side story about the University of Oxford discovering a notional 'generosity centre' in the brain. The quirky angle gave the somewhat dry story an added boost.

Insight 7.

'Serious' stories will be picked up by serious media. The Charity Commission's review of governance received coverage during this period via an interview with William Shawcross, and a letter in response from Sir Stuart Etherington who then criticised the piece.

Insight 8.

Picture stories can cut through. The shocking picture of a Syrian boy in an ambulance in Aleppo shocked the world during this period, and was an excuse for charities such as IRC and Amnesty to be the 'go to' commentators on the situation in many media.

Insight 9.

The charity voices quoted tend to be CEOs, research authors, or grass-roots project leaders. Occasionally, titles are not attributed.

Insight 10.

Lifestyle and 'background' media opportunities can provide valuable outlets for messaging. During this period, Radio 4's Thought for the Day featured a mention of the World Giving Index from CAF.

Insight 11.

Finally, as a more general reflection, it is worth noting that social media and on-line news aggregators are the means whereby many citizens now consume mainstream media (MSM). Social media thus serve to escalate MSM stories and give them added legitimacy via a personal stamp of endorsement. Similarly, the sharing of social memes, personal experiences and niche media stories via social channels gives them legitimacy and may even escalate them into the mainstream, creating a virtuous or vicious spiral depending on the story.

Negative stories:

Insight 1.

Specific higher profile charities may well become the seed for extended negative reporting. The RSPCA and the National Trust appeared to come under particular discretionary attack during this period, as one bad story may well plant the seed for others. It is notable that the Daily Mail subsequently apologised to the RSPCA for its reports during this period.

Insight 2.

The media can and does follow through on campaigning agendas - for example, the follow through on the Daily Mail's cold-calling abuse investigation notably tracked the conclusion of allegations against the British Red Cross during this period.

Ambivalent Stories

Key Insight.

‘Celebrities’ will always attract attention; for example, Amber Heard (donating her divorce settlement to charity), Diane Abbott (spending a large portion of her charity’s money on a dinner event) and David Attenborough (fronting an RSPB report).

In summary, despite how things may feel to many charity workers, a large majority of charity stories are actually positive.

However, the vast majority of these only serve to validate ‘problems’.

While the message that the charity can help to resolve the problem may be implicit, it is seldom articulated in this way. Over time, this is likely to reinforce the impression of charities as trading in misery and using guilt and despair as their prime levers of influence.

The charities that best escape this ‘merchants of doom’ trap are primarily the health charities, which are able to balance positive (solution) stories alongside negative (need) stories. Another interesting aspect of media storytelling is that the bigger the brand, the less likely the media is to mention that the entity is a charity. This is abidingly true for positive stories, but flips when the brand is being attacked – in which case, its charitable status is generally an integral part of the story.

The net effect of all this storytelling is that the ‘charity’ brand is rarely raised in a positive context, and that ‘charity’ tends to resonate most strongly with messages of doom and decay, or when being criticised for organisational ineptitude or wastefulness.

The strong exception here is human interest stories, which can sometimes be turbocharged by celebrity (perfectly embodied in the media’s own fundraising and distribution efforts – Children in Need, Comic Relief, Sport Relief, The Evening Standard’s ‘Dispossessed’ and the like). A softer, but still valuable exception, is research-led reporting, while a third is instances of social (particularly medical) innovation.

Suggest a new approach

In summary, we explored what drives public trust; we acknowledged honestly, through expert input, the innate challenges in justifying that trust, and then analysed the media to understand what types of stories might ‘play’ well.

The following table now brings all these elements together.

	What types of ‘stories’ would be persuasive in this regard? <i>(emotional/rational)</i>	Whose voice would I trust about this? <i>(emotional /rational)</i>	Which channel(s) would I trust to inform me about this? <i>(emotional/rational)</i>
Donations get to the end cause	?	?	?
Charities are managed well	?	?	?
Charities can be trusted to self-manage	?	?	?
Fundraising is honest and ethical	?	?	?
Charities make a difference to their cause	?	?	?

On the left of the table are the critical reputation drivers. Against each, we can now ask the following media relations questions:

“Which story would persuade me (as a donor) that charities are doing good things in this area?”

“Who would I like to see as the voice of (or for) the charity?”

Finally, “Which media channel might I trust most to convey this type of message?”

Taking the first question first:

	What sort of 'stories' would be persuasive in this regard? <i>(emotional/rational)</i>	Whose voice would I trust in this regard? <i>(emotional/rational)</i>	Which channel(s) would I trust to inform me about this? <i>(emotional/rational)</i>
Donations get to the end cause	Interviews from the standpoint of the beneficiary or a proxy such as an 'on-the-ground' project manager. Human interest stories of quirky waste reduction to counteract the cliché of the CEO travelling first class.	The beneficiaries Volunteers	Social media - first-person storytelling offering unmediated experience Tabloid media

The key principle here is to embrace the need for grass-roots storytelling, in order to liberate the authentic voice of the beneficiary and use it to hold the charity to account, placing it in direct or mediated dialogue with donors.

And the second:

	What types of ‘stories’ would be persuasive in this regard? <i>(emotional/rational)</i>	Whose voice would I trust in this regard? <i>(emotional /rational)</i>	Which channel(s) would I trust to inform me about this? <i>(emotional/rational)</i>
Charities are managed well	<p>Stories about self-imposed cost restraint and self-scrutiny</p> <p>Innovations in measurement delivered in ‘funky’ ways, such as real-time impact reporting. As participatively as possible.</p>	<p>Trustees</p> <p>Donors</p>	<p>FT/Times as a seed for social media</p> <p>Social media shared by friends and family</p>

The principle here is that the main thing that conditions the public’s view of a charity’s effectiveness is their first- or second-hand experience of a charity’s conduct. The annual letter telling a supporter that the resale value of their charity-shop donations is a much more compelling experience than are all the negative headlines.

Next:

	What types of ‘stories’ would be persuasive in this regard? <i>(emotional/rational)</i>	Whose voice would I trust in this regard? <i>(emotional /rational)</i>	Which channel(s) would I trust to inform me about this? <i>(emotional/rational)</i>
Charities can be trusted to self-manage	Development of innovation in trusteeship Charity restructurings	Charity Commission/NCVO Beneficiaries. Volunteers. Trustees.	Local press and radio. Times/Telegraph and the Daily Mail

The principle here is that ‘prosecutions’, fines or censorship will merely lead to an abiding sense of institutional untrustworthiness (see PPI, LIBOR-fixing), and will not provide catharsis for the ‘customer’. The best way to cauterise misdeeds is to take rapid, individual and personal responsibility and to then initiate real change.

Next:

	What types of ‘stories’ would be persuasive in this regard? <i>(emotional/rational)</i>	Whose voice would I trust in this regard? <i>(emotional /rational)</i>	Which channel(s) would I trust to inform me about this? <i>(emotional/rational)</i>
Fundraising is honest and ethical	Adoption of opt-in and permission-led approaches. Voluntary abandonment of interruptive channels	Chief Executives Chief Executives	Guardian/Indy and the Mail/Telegraph with distinctive spins Social media shared by friends and family

The principle here is that individual charities within the donor’s personal orbit must visibly - and as spontaneously as possible - commit to a demonstrably ethical approach. Commitments embedded in its existing donor journeys will be the most powerful expression of this intent.

Finally:

	What types of 'stories' would be persuasive in this regard? <i>(emotional/rational)</i>	Whose voice would I trust in this regard? <i>(emotional/rational)</i>	Which channel(s) would I trust to inform me about this? <i>(emotional/rational)</i>
Charities make a difference to their cause	Charity shrinks to stay agile Charity mergers/divestments	Chief Executive Trustees	Times/Evening Standard Guardian

The principle here is for charities to avoid mission-creep and to take institutional action that shows 'purity of purpose'. For example, the decision of the Children's Society to focus predominantly on teenage children represents strategic clarity at its best, and shows clear organisational intelligence in the competitive child welfare market.

The relative woolliness of some other charity brands, particularly in the development and environmental spaces, or in social care, clearly shows the converse problem.

This concludes the explanation of the formal analytical work undertaken as part of Project 22.

Putting the principles and actions into practice

Clearly, the story suggestions above are only the tip of a very large iceberg, and are simply representative examples. Any individual charity must generate its own supporter (and donor-specific) narratives alongside its institutional brand strategy, and then determine how best to tell them.

However, the logic behind the approach from a fundraising standpoint is simple. If you are a charity leader or communicator:

“Focus your communication on driving the beliefs that will build donors’ trust.”

More than this, focus on building a *licence to innovate* among your donors in order for them to grant you the space (and give you the resources) to explore, experiment and evolve in pursuit of your authentic social purpose. Do not simply defend the status quo and retain your licence to operate. Seek to change. To differentiate. To win your battle for social impact. And be bold in how you do it.

Distilling all the analyses from the approach into six simple principles, the Project 22 recommendations are as follows:

1. **Accentuate the Positive**
2. **Grow the Grassroots**
3. **Work with the Media**
4. **Make it Personal**
5. **Be Brave**
6. **Be Decisive**

Accentuate the positive

We have already seen the ease with which charities place ‘problem-scoping’ stories in the media, and have noticed how infrequently they are able to communicate the social benefit of their efforts.

The net effect creates an impression of charities as whingers - self-important, critical, entitled, and impractical. Even despairing. It is a short step to imagine them as also being incompetent. Rather than spending all ‘our’ time as a sector providing apologetic and explanatory messages in response to negative media, the sector should take every opportunity to tell and retell its positive impact stories from the grass-roots level (see below) by leveraging the power of social media.

In reputational terms, most people still believe that charities deliver good value, that they are caring, and that they are committed to making a difference.

These are the sector's most valuable reputation assets.

Rather than erode them with doubt, communicators should take every opportunity to reinforce these credible messages. Charities should work constantly on ways of incorporating positive purpose, impact and value messages into their communication – at all levels, always.

One of the heartening trends across the charity sector is an initiative being led by Giselle Green of NCVO entitled 'Constructive Voices'. This programme is actively encouraging the media to adopt a more solutions-focused approach to coverage and to present, where appropriate, potential solutions to the problems identified in their news reporting. To support them in this, it is creating a resource for journalists by offering relevant thematic case studies. It is also working to establish links with journalism colleges and departments to ensure the reporters of the future are cogniscent of this emerging field of constructive journalism, and come to see the positive impact of the voluntary sector as a useful source of solutions-focused stories.

This approach is a mix of strategy, which will take time to bear fruit, and practical solutions, which have already had some success in obtaining positive print and broadcast coverage for voluntary organisations.

Grow the grassroots

The most powerful and credible advocates of any brand today are its foot-soldiers: its customers, its employees and its suppliers. This is even the case so for charities, whose supporters give measurable time, money and expertise in return for a 'feeling' of doing good.

Therefore, the most cost-effective investment a brand can make is to grow its grass-roots base and to empower these advocates to speak on its behalf. This approach is not only the logical way to leverage social media networks, but also meets the mainstream media's need for quirky human interest stories pertaining to individual fundraising and life transformation.

The Children's Society (see the case study) is one charity that mobilises its volunteers by treating them as a special type of employee, paying their expenses and bringing them inside the organisation for networking and briefings. They then act as local organisers, as fundraising pioneers and even speak to local media on its behalf. The aim is that they should feel as if, and speak as if, they are "part of" The Children's Society, rather than merely fundraising 'for' it.

As Michael Gove has reminded us, nobody trusts experts any more. In our increasingly fact-challenged age, with the death of deference around us, and with social media at every privileged fingertip, charities have an army of advocates at their disposal for storytelling – not just to tell robust, authentic stories, but also as input into their strategies and to hold them to account. They must include them as much as possible in their development, engage them respectfully and treat them honourably.

Of course, the approach has relevance far beyond media engagement. Advocates who invest in one dimension are often predisposed to invest other resources, and are also your most effective face-to-face recruiters.

Work with the media

One thing that becomes clear from looking at today's media environment is that most media do feel some form of social responsibility. The media also wishes to engage its readership in its social efforts.

From the homelessness campaigning of London's Evening Standard, to the mass publicity of fundraising events such as Comic Relief, the fusion of media and charity agendas creates win-win situations that should have a spill-over effect in terms of the sector's reputation.

In late 2016, we saw a deep partnership between Channel 4 and CRUK for 'Stand Up To Cancer'. In November, a significant media partnership was established with Metro newspaper, based on the NPSCC's Little Stars campaign. Blending a mix of paid spend, smart integrated planning and corporate advertising partnerships and committed editorial policy can produce a powerful level of impact – and implicitly build donor confidence.

Keep it personal

With facts and meaningful metrics pertaining to social impact being so very difficult to find, the readiest and most persuasive explanation of impact evaluation often lies in individual experiences. Stories of project outcomes, alongside the intelligent use of infographics and properly elucidated statistics are an increasingly common way to communicate impact to donors.

And the same logic applies to media. The media can be receptive to formal annual reporting, particularly for large charities that are a key part of social infrastructure. They may be receptive to an infographic that captures the state of a social problem (as influenced by a charity). However, the media will be much more likely to cover a story if it is peppered with unusual and engaging personal detail.

Charities, far more so than businesses, need to be permanently alert to the potential for personal stories from their beneficiaries and donors. To elicit these stories, they need to communicate personally at all times. Personal communication needs to be part of their DNA.

The Commission on the Donor Experience advocates the development of intimate, personal, respectful and responsive relationships with donors. If charities can consistently behave in this way with their donors, they will be much more likely to behave the same way back.

Building personal connections with charity supporters will give these communicators the insight they need to tell great stories. Supporters will then be much more likely to behave authentically and compellingly when they are put in touch with the media.

Be Brave

The central call to action of Project 22 is to invite charities to create strategies that will cultivate their 'licence to innovate'. Rather than use communication to defend the status quo, they should use it to shape demand; to build the conditions they would wish to see in the world, in which they could achieve the things they most yearn to see. They should stop fixing symptoms and start fixing causes. Stop reacting to change and start creating it. They should exploit their ethical advantage.

Charities are social innovators. When governments are too slow and cumbersome and markets are too greedy, passionate people step up and build novel coalitions to improve the world. They persuade diverse sets of people to step forward into these coalitions and contribute what they can through inspiring visions and clear, committed plans. They then maintain their enthusiasm through relentless, passionate investment in the network of action.

Be Decisive

The sector may, at times, risk becoming sclerotic. It can be complacent. It can be overly consensual. It can, oddly, be very conservative. And it can even, at times, exude a strange form of passive aggression, assured of its own righteousness, but ultimately unsure of its effectiveness. It must not yield to these temptations. Individual charities must raise their aspirations and inspire the very best people to join them, the most ambitious donors to fund them, and the most capable volunteers to support them.

When individual charities do make mistakes and take their donors' goodwill for granted, they must be swift to acknowledge them and implement clear and committed solutions.

Conclusions

To grow and thrive, charities must decide to communicate their individual and collective vision confidently to the world. There are plenty of examples of charities doing the right things. Among better known charities, we might call out:

Charity: Water's elegant, honest project-reporting.

MacMillan's community engagement efforts.

Cancer Research UK and RSPB's citizen science projects.

SolarAid's novel funding approach for solar lanterns.

RNLI's disruptive embrace of supporter opt-ins.

World Vision's commitment to rich media through its child sponsorships

British Red Cross's bold decision to switch off its most interruptive marketing in response to scrutiny.

Where these charities have led, others must follow, respecting their donors, testing out new collaborations with them, and seeking to engage them in a much deeper sense of their shared impact. They must then tell these innovation stories creatively and substantively in order to increase supporters' trust and confidence.

Leaders, of whatever size or shape, must now step up to co-ordinate a strategic response to the key questions of sustainable funding. These include:

- Can the overall pool of funding actually be grown through a different 'proposition' - for example, attracting a greater share of capital growth?
- Can the ever-rising cost of donor acquisition be halted or even reversed?
- What would it take in systems-thinking and action terms to reach these aims?
- What experiments might the sector undertake to validate possible strategies?

Most crucially, of course, the sector must ask itself how it will drive and communicate the impact that merits donor support in the first place.

This is precisely the sort of strategic thinking that is emerging from the Funders Collaboration on Leadership (FCL),⁹ for example. We need more of this, structurally embedded in how we manage the sector collectively.

FCL's substantive agenda is focused on:

- Restoring trust in the voluntary sector.
- Sharing foresight information and preparing the sector for the future.
- Improving the standard of governance by informing and skilling trustees.
- Developing a new leadership style for our sector.

The charity sector needs these questions answered - continually.

It is the final suggestion of this work that the charity sector should explore new ways to co-ordinate its future pathfinding by leveraging the particular strengths of existing sector influence hubs such as IoF, NCVO, CAF and ACEVO, building on the excellent work of the Understanding Charities Group, while taking it further still into more ambitious and innovative storytelling.

It is to be hoped that the Commission recognises and promotes the case for better co-ordination within its overall conclusions. Innovation-led and innovation-enabling communication is now vital across all channels, based on substantive sector-wide change.

Precisely how this licence to innovate is ultimately achieved is a topic for further, concerted work.

Links across the Commission projects

The detailed description of thinking in ‘the approach’ should hopefully have made it clear that influencing the media context is inseparable from changing behaviour as a sector.

Only by respecting supporters and beneficiaries equally and bringing them into open and transparent dialogue will we create consistently positive experiences that meet their highest expectations.

To this extent, this project’s conclusions are bound up with a general drive to mobilise supporters as advocates; to use language that is meaningful to them and to the media, and to refine the impact of charities’ work through contested dialogue, rather than relying on formal, linear, and sometimes misleading reporting.

All the Commission’s work pertaining to measurement, language and engagement are thus relevant to this effort, particularly the findings of Project 11 – as is the work by Ben Russell on the value of storytelling in impact-communication and by David Ainsworth and his team on fundraising investment (Project 20).

Appendix 1: Case study

The Children's Society's Ambassador Programme is a particularly successful effort at supporter engagement.

It mobilises volunteer speakers and ambassadors, treating them like employees, and connecting them as peers within a peer-to-peer community.

The society invites both house-to-house collector organisers, church-liaison volunteers and other supporters to exclusive get-togethers that serve not only as a thank you for all their efforts, but also as a means for them to connect with each other and to reinforce their proselytisation on behalf of the cause.

The ambassador receives formal training and then passes on that training at diocese level. They will often hear from the charity CEO, Matthew Read, and from project leaders doing work on the ground at training and supporter events.

They then 'upskill' each other using tools such as SharePoint intranet and learn how to use tools such as social media, as well as discovering early information about the charity's campaigns and finding ideas and even slide templates for speaking. In addition, they receive training in understanding how to build their own Children's Society network into local businesses.

Crucially, they increasingly become a "listening force" for the charity to gauge the state of the parishioners' willingness and ability to support it. These volunteers are line-managed like regular employees and receive whatever dedicated training is most appropriate for them whenever possible.

Finally, they are invited to engage in policy thinking and in generating ways to link storytelling and impact management.

Appendix 2: Research sources

1. Charity Commission Surveys: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/public-trust-and-confidence-in-charities-2016>
2. nfpSynergy: <http://nfpsynergy.net/free-report/blueprint-restoring-sector>
3. CAF: 'Public Attitudes and qualitative research' (Private briefing)
4. Britain Thinks: 'Literature Review Summary' (NCVO internal documentation)
5. NPC: 'Mind the Gap' (<http://www.thinknpc.org/publications/mind-the-gap/>)
6. Understanding Charities Group: 'Theory of Change' and 'Sector Narrative'. (Private briefings)
7. <http://www.copperdigital.co.uk/blog/the-way-ahead-impact-2-0/>
8. <https://storify.com/howardlake/olive-cooke-and-the-fu>
9. http://www.cloresocialleadership.org.uk/funders_collab
10. <https://www.civilsociety.co.uk/news/the-term-charity-is-unhelpful-british-red-cross-chief-executive-says.html>

Appendix 3: Methodology

This project was reviewed in detail by Mario Ambrosi, Head of Policy and Communications at Anchor, provider of older people's care and housing. The critique was undertaken in his role as the Chair of the Public Relations Consultants Association (PRCA) Charities Group.

A number of key opinion leaders and experts in the charity sector were interviewed for the project:

- Sector Bodies:
- Chloe Stables - NCVO
- Giselle Green - NCVO
- Sarah Atkinson - Charity Commission
- Susan Pinckney - CAF
- Ben Russell - CAF
- Simon Ward - CAF
- Dan Fluskey - IoF
- Mike Smith - IoF

Opinion Leaders:

- Joe Saxton - nfpSynergy
- Carol Rawlings - Unison (ex RSPB Trustee)
- Vicky Browning - CharityComms
- Howard Lake - UK Fundraising
- Morag Fleming - Fundraising Consultant
- David Ainsworth - CivilSociety.co.uk
- Kirsty Marrins - consultant

Charities:

- Emily Petty - Children's Society
- Richard Turner - ex-SolarAid

In addition, feedback clinics were held at both CharityComms' Conference and IoF conference events, with input and feedback from approximately 40 charity fundraisers and communications professionals.

Finally, email correspondence was undertaken with:

- Sue Wixley - NPC
- Tris Lumley - NPC
- Julius Honor - ex-Bond (now Contentious)
- Matthew Sherrington - Independent