

The Ethical Dimension of Fundraising in the Homelessness Sector

Laura Watson, Brisbane Youth Service

Is there ever truly an ethical way of presenting someone's suffering and misfortunes?

When speaking for others, sharing and 'benefiting' from someone's own words, what ethical guideposts should we navigate by?

There is ongoing debate regarding the appropriate representation of recipients in charity campaign materials that are intended to accurately define and represent social problems while also maximising fundraising success. Discomfort at the use of potentially exploitative images and narratives lay at the heart of this debate. It is not uncommon for those working closely with vulnerable people to be concerned about the use of their clients' personal stories for fundraising purposes. Even where a person is happy to have their experiences shared, it can still make others feel uncomfortable.

The issue for professionals tasked with both accurately depicting the issues around homelessness (or other social issues) and generating sufficient philanthropic sentiment towards those in need, is that a person's decision to make a gift is, above all else, an emotional one. The proof is in the science. Our brains are biologically wired to process the concrete — that is, people, not statistics. People give to people not to organisations or projects. While we understand and value statistics to measure outcomes and success, they may not touch on our emotions enough to make us want to give. Therefore, if you are not targeting donors on an emotional level then you are not raising as much money as you could, and in turn, doing a disservice to those whom your

organisation exists to serve. Research has shown that people donate more when they can identify with one person in need as opposed to reading huge abstract numbers of the overall scope of the problem.¹

People connect with a cause and identify with individuals through storytelling — it is the single most powerful communications tool we have available. Stories make our cause relatable, tangible and touching.² So, how do we tell great stories in a way that does not exploit the hardships experienced by vulnerable client groups within the homelessness sector?

We need to ask ourselves, not only whether a communication strategy 'works' for fundraising, but also whether we are empowering someone by helping them tell their story, rather than objectifying and further marginalising them on a public scale. As charities are often the prime mobilisers of the understanding of many social issues, it is important for our narratives to enhance rather than damage the public's understanding of the issues around homelessness, and their perceived ability to make a difference in the lives of those who are at risk or experiencing homelessness.

One UK study explores the views of young people experiencing homelessness regarding the related images and stories that appeared in major charity campaigns aimed at raising money to fund homelessness services.³ The study found that the young people, insofar as it does not affect the financial bottom line, would prefer the use of storytelling techniques that explain how

recipients come to be in a position of need and how they can turn their lives around. The study discovered that they prefer the use of images and narrative that elicit feelings of empathy rather than merely sympathy, and they hope for marketing that generates a generous response as a result of recognition of common humanity rather than through emotions such as guilt or pity.⁴

Maybe then, the challenge for fundraisers in the sector is to evoke emotion in donors without necessarily centering a campaign message on the most distressing and upsetting aspects of the lives of those we support. It is about artfully weaving positive elements of hope, courage and resilience into the stories we share with our supporters. Compelling, authentic storytelling and providing donors with an insight into the lives of those in which they hope to have an impact is crucial to maximising fundraising success. Being able to do so in a respectful way that protects people's dignity is the key to remaining on the right side of that fine line between telling a good story and exploiting the hardships and adversities of a vulnerable client group.

Endnotes

1. Kogut T and Ritov I 2005, 'The 'identified victim' effect: an identified group, or just a single individual?', *Journal of Behavioural Decision Making*, vol.18, no.3, pp.157–167.
2. Network for Good 2014, *Storytelling for Nonprofits*, Network for Good, Washington DC, (eBook) p.3.
3. Breeze B and Dean J 2012, 'Pictures of me: user views on their representation in homelessness fundraising appeals', *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing*, vol.17, pp.132–143.
4. *ibid.*