

CHAPTER 39

THE IMPORTANCE AND ART OF ARTICULATING THANKS: LESSONS FROM NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS (NGOS)

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Thanking helps organisations to build relationships. In particular, charities need to thank as they build up coalitions of interest around issues, and as, in many cases, they raise income. So what can be learned from some professional thankers, and scholars, in the NGO sector?

You'll learn:

- The importance of thanks in interpersonal communications and NGO communications
- What we can learn from NGO sector best practice and guidance
- A framework for thanking built on NGO research

The importance of thanks

"Gratitude is the most exquisite form of courtesy" - Jacques Maritain

In interpersonal communications, thanking is an important social lubricant. As psychologists Anthony Arhens and Courtney Forbes observe: "expressions of gratitude are woven into the social fabric of our lives" [1]. For example, children are taught to thank, there are etiquettes of writing letters of thanks [2], and authors testify appreciation in acknowledgements.

NGO communicators and marketers can seek to engage their stakeholders' emotions when harnessing support. Negative emotions like fear and guilt [3] are sometimes used. However, guilt has been used to the point of 'compassion fatigue' [4]. Furthermore, negative imagery has been criticised for being an emotional 'abuse' [5].

Positive emotions like love [6] and gratitude can also be expressed to enrol support. Appreciation is a form of gratitude. Its most common articulation is "thank you", observes Katherine Kelly [7].

In the context of relationship management in the fundraising arena, Kelly [7], identifies reciprocity as a key strategy for stewardship. She argues that 'At the applied level, reciprocity simply means that organisations

show gratitude to those who support them’.

Thanking has long been associated with fundraising. Thanking donors helps build organisation-donor relationships [8], secure repeat donations [8] [7] [3] and retain donor interest [7]. The motivation of volunteers through thanks has also been noted [9] [3].

Authors additionally highlight the importance of NGOs thanking more stakeholders than donors – from staff to beneficiaries. Recognition and appreciation fosters stakeholders’ loyalty and motivation [10]. Support can be political, moral, through the media, voluntary or fundraising, notes Westman Wilson [9].

What we can learn from the NGO sector

The importance of thanking is one lesson that comes from the NGO sector. This is documented through the advice of NGO scholars. It is also evident from some NGOs’ communications.

Thanking and not thanking have impact. ‘The two most important words in a fundraiser’s vocabulary’, states Victoria Canning [3], ‘are “thank you”’. Significantly, Merchant et al [8] found that thanking donors produces positive emotions and that contrastingly, not thanking donors prompts negative emotions. Hence, when appreciation is expected, not thanking is detrimental to relationships.

NGO narratives include thanks. Thanks are communicated on social media and videos, in publications, correspondence and face-to-face communications, and on websites and artefacts.

For example, thanking is a pronounced theme in Non Profit Organisations’ (NPO) tweets in the UK and US. In a content analysis of over 2,400 tweets, from 50 top ranking charities in nfpSynergy’s UK’s ‘Social Media League Table’ [11], Garsten and de Quincey [12] found that the most common words (apart from small words like the articles ‘a’ and ‘the’) related to gratitude.



Figure 1 Word cloud depicting the most frequent words that appeared in over 2,400 charity tweets [12]

The word cloud depicts the most frequent words used in the charities' tweets; the larger the font, the more times the word has been used. In total, "thanks" and "thank" were used 459 times, representing 20% of all the tweets.

The importance of thanks in American NPO tweets is also evident. For instance, Kristen Lovejoy and Gregory Saxton [13] identified thanks as part of relationship building tweets in their analysis. They identified messages of thanks in 13% of the 4,655 tweets that they examined from 73 NPOs.

Framework for the art of thanking based on NGO literature

We get insights into how to thank from literature about NGO communications and marketing. We learn that thanks should be specific, immediate and personalized, as represented in our framework below.

'SIP' Markers of Quality Thanks in NGO Literature

SPECIFIC

- Appreciation of **what** exactly has warranted the thanks

IMMEDIATE

- Timely thanks convey gratitude: **when**

PERSONAL

- Acknowledgement of the person being thanked: **who**

Figure 2 The SIP framework for quality thanking

The specifics of what is appreciated

Thanks should be *specific* to show 'fulsome' and 'genuine' gratitude [10]. For instance, a fundraiser could be acknowledged for the 'long hours' they spent with 'a collecting tin on windy Grosvenor Street' rather than in a general way that does not indicate an understanding of the effort made.

An ability to identify others' endeavours requires empathy. For, as psychologist Barbara Fredrickson observes, gratitude 'requires the capacity to empathize with others' [14].

Timely, personalised thanks

Thanks should also be prompt [10] [9] [7]. Tardy appreciation can look like an 'afterthought' [10]. As Canning (1999) reflects, 'immediate and personal gestures of thanks cannot be bettered' [3].

Appreciation needs to be *personalised* [3] [7].

This relates to individuals being addressed in recognition. Personalisation might take the form of communicating through a bespoke, rather than a mass, email, using @replies on Twitter, or naming benefactors on plaques or in publications. It also concerns a specific person expressing the thanks.

For instance, a Chief Executive handwriting a letter of thanks rather than sending a typed template of thanks. An outstanding example of personalised thanks is of charity: water's personalised videos of thanks to its supporters [15] [16].

Conclusion

Giving thanks is a characteristic of NGO communications. Best practice and research shows that giving thanks is important. Nevertheless, to communicate genuine appreciation, the way that thanks is articulated needs care too. Our SIP framework provides a guide to the art of thanking based on current literature from NGOs. Be precise about what you are giving thanks for; express gratitude quickly, and in a personal way.

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