

Charity Marketing: a blood sport?

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2009-3-27

I was at a lunch for charity marketing people a few months ago where one press officer was bragging about the power of their latest very expensive TV advert. He was thrilled by the journalists' reaction at a preview showing:

"We had one woman in tears and the guy from the Mirror couldn't even sit through it all" said the delighted public relations officer from a leading children's charity. Now the advertising watchdog the ASA [has warned](#) that the do-gooders are getting out of hand with record complaints from the public, up from 577 to nearly 1,500 this year.

This makes the average news journalist look like a prim Victorian school-mistress who wouldn't say boo to the proverbial. [As I have said before](#), we in Western newsrooms probably don't show enough reality because we are so worried at causing offence. The charities seem to positively welcome upsetting people if it gets them attention.

But are charities right to go for shock tactics?

The charity sector has always been highly competitive because there are simply too many UK and International organisations chasing too few donations. At the smaller end of the market it is particularly crowded because there are so many well-intentioned but tiny charities set up and run by one person or a handful of friends. It is a recipe for duplication and waste.

At the top end things have become much more professional over the last 20 years with charity marketing departments having little to distinguish them from City or Corporate PR divisions. But here's the interesting ethical communications point. Does shock work?

In the short-term [Barnados'](#) searing TV advert of this winter worked. It caused most of the increase in complaints but it put their brand on the media map and into the public consciousness. It showed (an attractive blonde) woman's vicious cycle in crime and drugs through domestic abuse and poverty. I am a bit ambivalent about that particular film. I thought it was too cinematic and too calculating. It certainly cost a fortune to put together. But I am sure it had impact about a very important social problem. However, will that impact last? what will be the legacy?



We've been here before.

During the 60s and 70s international charities tried to shock us with imagery of starving African. It made us reach for our wallets but after a while we became desensitised. And it left the impression with Western publics that all Africans are emaciated victims and useless.

So the charities changed their publicity to uplifting images of smiling people being helped to dig wells and educate their children. The NGOs got more political and convinced us with a mixture of celebrity concerts and reasoned argument, that we could all 'Make Poverty History'.

We all went to hear Bono (well, OK, I couldn't go that far) and signed the petitions and lobbied our MPs. But Poverty is not History. The NGOs and the Governments did not deliver.

Oxfam has tried new methods of persuasion that are more subtle such as their [Little Old Lady And the Monster Of Injustice cartoon \(Be Humankind\)](#). These try to get people hooked to the idea of engagement and then to give money. Polis is conducting a long term research project with Oxfam to see how effective these new tools and tactics can be. One bit of evidence will be to see who turns out for this weekend's [Put People First](#) march in London. A Polis researcher will be there.

I suspect that there will always be a pendulum swing between shock and more subtle campaigning strategies. But I do think that in an age of social networking, citizen creativity and increasing scepticism on the part of the public, it will pay NGOs in the long-term to treat their messaging as seriously as they do their actual charitable work.

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