SOFII Opinion Piece

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Dislocation, dislocation…

by George Smith

No one is spared e-mails these days. Be you ever eminent or senior, most of your business messages will now come in this form. I recently winced when I saw an e-missive being sent by a young fundraiser to a prominent sponsor. And how did the missive start?

'Hi, George!' (I use my own name to protect the innocent).

And, when the zestful young professional was advised that this was probably not the way to talk to people, let alone eminent ones, this was the reply.

'But that's the way you start e-mails.'

That's the way you start e-mails. It's a familiar verbal construction these days. As in: that's the way you print on the envelope; that's the way you design the coupon; that's the way you write the letter; that's the way you fold the leaflet. Welcome to the Age of Received Wisdom. Say hello to the new God of Deference.

It didn't use to be like this. Fundraisers used to try to build on experience with new and startling displays of originality and creative flourish. They exploited the power and breadth of the English language and managed to express themselves with urgency, courtesy, passion and intelligence. Innocent days, I grant you, and far less congested days in terms of competition. But they were still days when a charity house mailing could generate a 30 per cent response. And when you could get a better than two per cent response from cold lists, making that mailing actually profitable in itself rather than forming part of an ersatz equation that seems to offer 1.125 ROI in year four, all things being equal – which they never are.

Such simplicities… now fall foul of the new need for pomposity

This used to be such a simple business. Your communications always sought to explain a need, to make the point that we privileged people should help less privileged people. If you were healthy, well-fed, well-housed, then do something for cancer patients, the hungry, the homeless. Say please. Say thank you. Treat people as adults. Give them a sense of achievement.

Such simplicities, though they have underpinned do-gooding for centuries, now fall foul of the new need for pomposity and the new and cerebrally-terrifying craving for conformity – a world in which the only prizes will go to those who look, sound and act familiar. You only have to look at your television schedules to see how far and how quickly we have tumbled into this world. Can you see any programme there tonight that is not a derivative of something you have seen before?

We are of course governed now by focus groups, that academically shabby method by which we find out what people think. In other words, we ask silly questions and we get useless answers. It must be twenty years since I attended a presentation of focus group findings for my then client, Greenpeace. We were told that Friends of the Earth would always outdo us because they were 'cuddly' (I remember the word well). Greenpeace, on the other hand were 'mad, bad and dangerous to know' and really should enter the mainstream by taking on more domestic issues and being altogether more reasonable. Two weeks after I listened to this gibberish, Greenpeace activists invaded the Brent Spar oil rig. Membership soared overnight.

The apparent science with which we surround our fundraising is indeed shabby. But our use of language underlines the extent to which we have stopped thinking. What do we call people who give us money? Supporters. What do we call them if they don't give us money again? Non-respondents. What do we call them if they don't give us money for a long time? Lapseds. How do we describe this process of apparent decline? Attrition.

Every single one of these sloppy constructs is mendacious. Someone who gives you money has almost certainly done it impetuously. Many of them will not remember your name in a week's time. To talk of these good people as 'supporters' is absurd. And, by the time these good people get to be 'non-respondents' or 'lapseds', we are implying a series of thoughtful, sequential decisions by that original donor. It is nothing of the sort of course. We sent them a number of boring formulaic mailing packs and they threw them away. Attrition, my arse!

A high profile charity apparently now boasts a Medium Gifts Officer

But then our language is increasingly tribal, incomprehensible to those outside our charmed circle. I imagine that if you picked up a copy of most trade papers – 'Garage Trade Monthly', perhaps, or even 'Marketing Week', their contents would be mostly understood by a lay audience. This story is about tyre prices at wholesale, this one is about a new advertising campaign. Joe Public could cope with the technical terms.

Go to the charity trade press and Joe's brow would quickly furrow. '*Fears grow over the sustainability of funding for the commission*', says one week's headline. '*New-look Futurebuilders sets out on investment roadshow* is the headline the week after. Plunder the job ads (now good for half the magazine) and you will bump into a Knowledge Development Manager, a Human Resources and Governance Support Manager and a Partnerships and Philanthropy Assistant Manager. Read the news pages and you will be told of Hubs.

But then we are suddenly The Third Sector, a form of words that has always suggested to me a menace from a galaxy far away (Episode Eight: The Empire versus the Third Sector). And the Third Sector doesn't just use a tribal dialect. It awards itself for strange tasks. Who will win the award for 'Best Use of Face to Face' or 'Best Donor Development Campaign'? Both are currently on offer. So are amazing job titles – a high profile charity apparently now boasts a Medium Gifts Officer. Let's hope she doesn't sign letters with that title.

This is an unprecedented dislocation between charities and the general public. People want us to be small, hard-working, cost-conscious organisations using every penny we give them to do good. A naïve perception, perhaps, but one that still persuades millions of people to give us money. The distance between that perception, that wonderful and decent trust, is now vast and growing vaster.

Try explaining to an ordinary donor the arithmetic of a 40 per cent fundraising cost. Try explaining why charities pay £100 to recruit a direct debit on the street. Try explaining the finances of exotic event fundraising. Try explaining the financially lamentable performance of charity shops.

This latter is close to my heart. I knew and worked with a bloke called Joe Mitty who dreamed up the whole idea of such shops for Oxfam in the nineteen-fifties. Everything was donated, all staff were volunteers and all premises were rent-free. And the subsequent income was a real contribution to Oxfam's work overseas.

'Ah, he said, 'but it keeps the brand on the High Street.'

Again, to recall such simple days is to suggest a wide-eyed nostalgia for a world long lost. Perhaps, but I would still have difficulty explaining to those good people who take stuff into shops just how little they are achieving. I once discussed this with the chief executive of a top ten charity. The annual report showed shops turnover of £18 million and costs of £16 million. I dared suggest that this was a little less than impressive, given that most of the goods were donated and most of the staff are volunteers. 'Ah," he said, 'but it keeps the brand on the High Street.'

It doesn't matter that I find this reply meretricious and the idea simply self-serving. It does matter that the ordinary donor would be totally mystified by it. 'Why am I bagging up all this stuff and taking it down to the charity shop?' she would say. Why indeed?

I write this at a time when it is reported that statutory charity income has apparently overtaken voluntary income. In other words Government through its various agencies now gives more money to charities than ordinary people do. There's a wonderful daftness to statements like these – the Government's money, after all, is yours and mine. It is the same money from the same source as our personal donations.

But something important has happened when many of our senior charities are now happy to be Government contractors, for that situation will never now be reversed.

These charities no longer belong to their individual donors; they are and forever will be outsourced Government departments.

More dislocation then. It is not just the alien new techniques of language and method deployed by charities. It is their very status, their very reason for being, that is now barely understood by the general public.

We will write 'lapsed' mailings and talk of Dorothy Donor

In a more rational world than we currently have available, we could legislate for the changes that have happened over the last twenty years or so. We could redefine a registered charity as something small, local and run by volunteers. We could reclassify hundreds of larger national charities as statutory agencies. We could still give privileged tax status to membership organisations. We could restore understanding and integrity to a sector that is fast bailing out such qualities.

It won't happen of course. We will continue to play with our current toolkit. We will mount surveys and get on the 'Today' programme. We will write 'lapsed' mailings. We will defend the various sub-trades of the fundraising and pour scorn on other sub-trades. We will talk of Dorothy Donor and now apparently of 'ordinary vanilla' adults. We will continue to rationalise the presence of the brand on the High Street. We shall become ever more anal.

And as the gibberish level rises, so will fundraising response decline. Dislocation matters, for it severs the cord between belief and achievement. We should take no pride in the fact that this has never happened before in the whole of human history.

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'A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks. It is rather the same thing that is happening to the English language. It becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts.'

More on why it pays to write right, from George Orwell