

2.7. CDE project 6. The use and misuse of emotion.

Going over the top: why emotional memories matter, for fundraisers.

Tucked away in the dense text of Joseph LeDoux's seminal book *The Emotional Brain* you'll find, if you dig, the following amazing and potentially very valuable fact.

'A strong emotional experience stays, and influences later behaviour.'

Joseph LeDoux,
The Emotional Brain,

Often it's a particular image, smell, sight, or sound that can trigger this strong emotional experience. Is this important for fundraisers and indeed, any other kind of communicator? I think so. It's a priceless nugget of information, exactly what fundraisers ought to do. Though unless fundraisers mix emotion with transparent integrity, as Alan Clayton suggests in the introduction, donors may be less than willingly receptive to it.

Emotion in fundraising is both central and inevitable. In the face of our need to raise funds to tackle the world's weightiest problems, to remedy the dramatic human issues that charities tackle day in, day out from child and animal cruelty, life-limiting diseases, environmental destruction, wars and disasters, grinding poverty and overwhelming adversity in all its forms it is simply not possible for normal people to respond to these issues and causes without feeling moved by even nigh overwhelmed by emotion. Indeed, it's the emotional response not their logical analysis that compels donors to respond. Though our sector has yet to realise it, logical rational analysis is more likely to cause donors to stop giving rather than encourage them to start. Which is why we have to tell our stories so well, so engagingly, with power and passion that moves people to action. Comfortable people, we should know, tend to do nothing.

The word emotion literally means 'to take action'. It comes from the Latin 'e-movere' meaning 'take action, move toward something.'

What are emotions?

Here are a few insights culled from various books about the brain.

- Emotions are a biological function of the nervous system. Most emotional activity occurs subconsciously.
- So emotions happen to us. They're not ours to command.
- Yet it's emotion, much more than reason, that drives our actions.
- Emotions are hard to fake.
- Thinking and feeling are not the same thing.
- Until recently emotions were seen by scientists as 'too complex'.
- Most research on the emotional brain has been done on animals.
- A strong emotional experience stays and influences later behaviour.
- We still have much to learn about how the brain responds to stories.

As we've seen, the penultimate point above is really important – a breakthrough realisation of four-star importance. For me, this was the biggest finding from the hours I spent wrestling with these tomes – the realisation that there is potential for some kind of emotional imprint inside our brains that can be recalled later at will, or prompted involuntarily by a carefully planted signal or stimulus. Imagine! If a strong emotional experience stays and influences later behaviour this could have huge implications for emotional storytellers. It explains why some campaigns and causes resonate so powerfully with our publics and how the emotions associated with them can be reawakened instantaneously by words and pictures, often from the slenderest suggestion.

Could this be why certain images influence us so powerfully, for example, the child pictured in *The Observer*, in the introduction, or the eyes of a child awaiting sponsorship? Or the queues of starving children, such as those filmed and described so movingly by Mohamed Amin and Michael Buerk at the time of the Ethiopian emergency in the mid 1980s, which led to the phenomenon of Band Aid/Live Aid? Or that extraordinary final scene in the final episode of the hit BBC television series *Blackadder*, when the funniest programme on our screens suddenly was not funny at all?

Going over the top

If you've not seen the series I apologise, but I also envy you because you're in for a treat. All four series in the *Blackadder* saga are priceless. But the final



scene of the final episode is a curious departure because all of a sudden the atmosphere changes and in an instant the audience that earlier was laughing heartily is suddenly fearful, nervous, terrified and finally reduced to tears. It happens as the last survivors of the cast that had entertained us for so long assemble in a trench in some unnamed section of the Western Front, for the final push. For successive generations

similar scenes have become a shared emotional memory in the aftermath of that bloodbath known as The Great War. Quietly but indelibly they've been imprinted in our minds. Grey men huddled together in the pre-dawn silence, the damp muddy walls, the ghostly no-man's land, the blank, hopeless faces, the terrible wait for that inescapable whistle, the clatter up ladders and the sickening lurch up and over amid falling comrades as bullets cut into bodies and shells explode all around. Going over the top. Unspeakable hell. We can't help but picture it, imagine it, live it. It's the awful anticipation of that whistle that's burned most vividly into the memories of those who were not there, that and the futility, the inevitability, the pointless waste. As Lieutenant George turned to Captain Blackadder to say, 'Golly cap, I'm scared,' that emotional memory kicked in and the entire watching nation was transported in an instant to a quite different emotional place.

Thanks to the near universal power of that memory simply, skilfully and wordlessly conveyed in the climax of that final episode from the Blackadder comedy series, viewers everywhere could see just how poignant, tragic and suddenly unfunny that final scene was.

Such is the power of imprinting emotional memories.

Recommended reading:

The Emotional Brain, Joseph LeDoux (Touchstone, USA, 1998).

Descartes' Error, Antonio Damasio (Vintage Books, UK, 2006).

Rough Guide to the Brain, Barry J Gibb (Rough Guides, UK, 2007).

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