

Enhancing the ways we use language

Project 01. The use and misuse of language

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The original brief

So often people in business inadvertently use language inappropriately, whether as insider speak, jargon, acronyms or just with insufficient thought, consideration or respect. This project will share good practices plus examples of common misuses to help fundraisers use language appropriately so they can swiftly yet significantly improve the donor experience.

Summary guidance

Why think about language?

The language charities use to communicate with supporters, and about them, strongly influences supporters' feelings about fundraising, about individual charities and about the sector as a whole. Communication with supporters is entirely made up of words and images. Together, words and images are at the core of what charities do and how they work. And yet, across the sector, the nature and power of images – the vividness, the ethics, straight-to-camera gaze, etc. – is scrutinised in much more depth than the nature and power of words.

Often, when language is talked about and thought about, it is in relation to the persuasiveness of appeals. But charities communicate with supporters in lots of ways, from the face-to-face fundraising pitch to the 'Contact us' webpage, from the newsletter to the phone call, and from the email sign-off to the annual report. To date, the level of attention most organisations pay to their language use has not matched up to the role it plays in their relationships with supporters.

The principles outlined below, and detailed more extensively and with examples in the full project document, offer simple ways of developing language use to improve supporters' experiences of communications and of charities more broadly.

Nine key strategies to enhance the ways we use language

1. Rethink language to reflect, respect and engage with the views and feelings of supporters.

The words we use reflect the way we think. Charities can develop their use of language to better focus on, respect and ingrain the values, views and feelings of supporters. The most effective way of achieving this is by fundamentally reorienting language to more directly reflect supporters' perspectives and interests. Charities can embed this approach at all levels of the

organisation. Consider the implications of department names, and how they can be reconfigured to reflect and instill a supporter-centric approach.

For example, a department name such as ‘Donor Acquisition and Retention’ reflects a fairly de-humanising approach to supporters. It seems to prioritise supporters’ monetary value in a cold and clinical way. Something like ‘Supporter Development Team’, on the other hand, recognises the supportive nature and value of an individual’s relationship with the charity beyond the financial transaction, and suggests that there are options in the ways the supporter’s relationship with the charity can evolve (rather than them simply being ‘retained’).

Do a thorough ‘orientation check’ of all internal and external language. Wherever language could be more supporter-centric, recast it to align with and reaffirm supporters’ viewpoints and interests.

This is more than just semantics: language use reflects and reinforces attitudes and behaviour. Ensuring your organisation’s language expresses a supporter-centric approach is a key step in ingraining support-centric behaviour. Most of the recommendations made by this project stem from this essential principle.

2. Talk less about the charity and more about the cause, the work, the beneficiaries and the supporters.

Too often, the charity itself takes centre stage, dominating too many sentences through too much talk about ‘us’ and what ‘we’ do or have done. Lots of evidence suggests that supporters are primarily interested in the cause and in the people, animals or things at the heart of the impact. Let supporters hear from and about these people and things: these should be the main focus of communications and should take up the most words, either as the topic or the speaker. The charity itself is important – it is the charity that the supporter develops a relationship with – but the cause and impact tend to be of more interest and personal relevance.

The wealth of data on this issue is convincing, but you can do your own supporter surveys and background and foreground different people and things according to their feedback. Generally, though, it is good practice to avoid accidental (or deliberate!) organisational egocentricity.

3. Communicate authentic content with honesty.

Authentic, first-hand reports can be very powerful and can offer supporters a real connection with the cause. Sometimes charities use invented case studies, stories and quotes. Though this is sometimes for good reasons, it can make readers suspicious of being manipulated and can undermine the credibility of a message. In the current context, this is a particularly risky strategy.

Where fictitious examples are necessary, transparency about this is crucial to avoid alienating supporters and to prevent further damage to the sector’s reputation. An honest, open explanation and justification is easy to include, and it can even help communicate some of the problems at the heart to the cause. Use real stories where you can, and be transparent about any invention.

4. Communicate values, and do it consistently.

Evidence suggests that supporters feel more positively towards a charity, and feel more satisfied by its communications, if the charity clearly communicates its values, ethos and identity. Develop a coherent ‘voice’ for your organisation. Generate ready-to-use phrases expressing core propositions, mission statements and standard descriptors. Create guidance on a ‘house

style' with examples of tone of voice. Use every communication with supporters as an opportunity to reflect and reaffirm your values.

5. Subvert expectations.

The formula of the charity appeal is so familiar to supporters that many feel they don't even need to open the envelope, or the email, to know pretty much exactly what's inside. Of course, the formula hasn't arisen over the years simply through custom or accident: trial and error has allowed the sector to hone in on some basic features and structures which work well. However, familiarity breeds boredom and disengagement. Charities need to surprise supporters, to grab and keep their attention, with unusual, innovative communications.

Charities can productively exploit the conventions of the sector's communication styles, and the norms of their own organisation's specific tone of voice, by occasionally, tactically and playfully deviating from them. Several charities have had great success with innovative product names, mail formats and campaign settings and styles. Adding some more creative and attention-grabbing messaging in amongst the more conventional communications can surprise and delight supporters, reignite interest in the cause and reawaken allegiance to an organisation.

6. Use inclusive, accessible language and avoid jargon.

Ensure the language of mass communications is simple and jargon-free. Using long words and complex sentence structures can sound impressive, but it tends to unnecessarily cloud meaning. Short, simple words, sentences and paragraphs are the most effective means of getting the message across to the most people. Even in more conventionally formal kinds of communications, like annual reports, data protection information, and details of how to make a complaint, accessible language conveys meaning more easily.

In any text which is made available to public audiences, it's also a good idea to avoid using internal jargon (such as 'acquisition', 'product offering', 'upgraded', etc. within fundraising). Jargon is convenient for efficient communication within an organisation: it is not designed for public communications, and it is often impersonal and obscure. If the public forms even just a small part of the audience for a text, make sure the language is totally jargon-free.

Likewise, avoid expressions which might be hard for some members of the public to understand. Metaphors - even ones which have become part of everyday expression, like 'on the same page' and 'change your mind' - can be confusing for those for whom English is an additional language. Keep language as simple and literal as possible.

7. Invite feedback and turn it into dialogue.

Most charity communications are one-way, talking *at* or *to* supporters, with no space or invitation for a response beyond a donation. The act of inviting feedback, input and response is crucial for a healthy, well-functioning and informed communicative relationship. How can a charity really know what works for its supporters without explicitly and regularly inviting supporters to communicate with the charity? There are many ways of effectively and efficiently building an invitation for dialogue into communications. The simple act of asking for supporters' views helps to convey respect for those supporters and enhance their relationship with the charity.

Asking for feedback is the first step. Receiving and processing the response is the second. Third comes explicitly acknowledging that response, and communicating back in turn, addressing the topics and issues raised. Thank supporters for their comments. Take up their topics and use their language. Demonstrate that you're listening and that you care about and

value their input and views. Develop a genuine dialogue with supporters to learn precious insights, enhance their experience and strengthen their relationship with the organisation.

8. Make contact permissions options work for supporters.

The permissions statement is a contentious area. Public concern about use of personal data, and about receiving lots of unwanted communications, has been a big part of recent criticism of the sector. Permissions statements can feel fraught with tensions. These agreements, though, can be used as a constructive means of developing the supporter-charity relationship. Careful wording and management of permissions statements can turn them into tools for developing trust, showing respect for supporters' preferences, and explaining the ethos and rationale of the charity's communications.

Each option should be explained in clear, simple language, enabling supporters to make informed choices that meet their needs and shape their expectations. Permissions statements should also include details of the kinds of communications a supporter can expect through any particular channel, the advantages of each kind of communication, and how often those communications are likely to be received. These simple steps can make all the difference to a supporter's satisfaction with future communications, and turn the 'opt-in' into a message about shared values, choice and mutual respect.

9. Test your communications to find out what works best for your charity and your supporters.

The charity sector excels in effectively testing inserts and images. Language is just as testable, using many of the same, simple methods. Lots of different elements of language are worth testing in different communicative contexts, including the use of an opening question, the phrasing and placement of the call to action, etc. A lot of assumptions about language in charity communications lack sufficient evidence, and many common principles need to be adapted to specific contexts (i.e., individual charities, different channels of communication such as email or letter, etc.) to be effective. Through careful testing with different supporter groups, charities can really understand what works well for their charity, with their supporters, and why.

A final word

Language use may just be one part of the supporter experience, but it is a hugely significant part. Very little of the communication between charities and supporters is *not* dependent on words. If a charity's language use is careless or ill-considered, it can drastically undermine the effectiveness of the charity's work. Language is too central to the supporter-charity relationship to ignore.

The principles outlined here are the essentials of good practice. These principles guide you through a re-examination and reconfiguration of core elements of communications to enhance supporters' experiences. Each of these principles can be taken far beyond the basic outline provided by this project for even greater effectiveness, but this summary provides a strong foundation from which to start.

The approach

Context

This project gathers, shares, and seeks to develop good practice. It proposes nine evidence-based recommendations, each designed to help charities develop language and communication practices to swiftly, simply and significantly improve the supporter experience. The recommendations are illustrated through case studies demonstrating ways in which ideas such as these are already making a positive difference within the sector. The recommendations and their explanations are intended to provide inspiration and indicative models which can be taken up, explored, applied and adapted to different contexts.

Summary methodology

This guidance was developed on the basis of insights gained through two main methods:

1. A series of research interviews with senior figures in fundraising, supporter engagement and communications consultancy services across the charity sector.
2. Research investigating and reviewing the methods and conclusions of relevant academic and sector publications (e.g. reports, surveys, studies, experiments, and articles) related to issues of language use in charity communications.

1. Rethink language to reflect, respect and engage with the views and feelings of supporters.

Language reflects attitudes, beliefs, relationships and cultures of behaviour. The values, views and feelings of supporters are at the heart of all charitable giving and its impact. Charities can better focus on, respect and ingrain the views and values of supporters by fundamentally reorienting the language used to communicate with and about them.

How many people do you know who give to charity and would say ‘I donate to charity’ or would describe themselves as ‘donors’? Businesses and companies giving to charity might formally and publicly use words like ‘donate’ and ‘give a donation’. People, though, in most contexts, use the words ‘give’ or ‘support’.¹

This isn’t just a matter of semantics. The words we use reflect the way we think – our views and beliefs about things and relationships.² The act of ‘donating’ is usually associated with giving money,³ and to refer to someone as a ‘donor’ is to refer to them primarily in terms of that transactional relationship. The word ‘give’ has broader associations – we ‘give’ all sorts of things.⁴ The word ‘support’ is broader still: a person can support a charity in many ways, for example, through volunteering, raising awareness, and so on. While the word ‘give’ moves further away from a focus on monetary transaction, the word ‘support’ moves yet further away from a transaction altogether, as it incorporates the meanings ‘give assistance, encouragement or approval to’.⁵ ‘Supporters’ puts an emphasis on personal approval, assistance and collegiality, in comparison to the more transaction-focused ‘donors’, and can more fully encompass the broader role and value of supporters within charities.

There is an important link between use of dehumanising *terms* to refer to supporters (e.g. prospects, mid-value donors, etc.) and insensitive *behaviours* towards them, such as lack of consideration of possible changes in personal circumstances, or general lack of consideration of the human being – the person – behind the terminology.

A simple, sensible and sensitive practice is to use terms to talk *about* your supporters which you would feel comfortable using in talking *to* them, and which you would feel comfortable being used to refer to or address you or a member of your family. One means of helping to instill this practice is to imagine having a supporter present in the meeting at which you might ordinarily use these terms – or, even better, have one person in the meeting adopt the role of a supporter,

¹ The phrase ‘give to charity’ occurs nine times more often than the phrase ‘donate to charity’ in the British National Corpus, a 100 million word collection of samples of written and spoken language designed to represent a wide cross-section of British English from the latter part of the 20th century (phrase search performed using the ‘Phrases in English’ search tool).

² Turner, R. C. (1991), ‘Metaphors fund raisers live by: Language and reality in fund raising’, in *Taking fund raising seriously: Advancing the profession and practice of raising money*, eds D. F. Burlingame and L. J. Hulse (San Francisco: Jossey Bass Publishers).

³ The British National Corpus described in footnote 1 can be indicative of associations. Within this corpus, the phrases ‘donate money’ and ‘donate some money’ occur 13 times more often than ‘donate time’ and ‘donate some time’, and also 13 times more often than ‘donate goods’ and ‘donate some goods’.

⁴ In the British National Corpus, the phrases ‘give time’ and ‘give some time’ occur almost as often as the phrases ‘give money’ and ‘give some money’ (the latter occur only 1.14 times more often).

⁵ Oxford English Dictionary.

and consider and feed back on the language and approach of the meeting from that perspective. It's a great way of staying mindful of supporters' viewpoints and experiences, and of keeping language, and attitudes and approaches to communication with supporters, human and respectful.

Shifting from dehumanising and profit-prioritising habits of expression to more supporter-centric language can carry a kind of 'cognitive cost' initially: it may take more effort, as any adjustment often does. You also might end up with longer, potentially more awkward terms of reference. The crux of the matter is, though, that this is not simply about swapping one set of terms for another to be more politically correct: language both reflects and influences beliefs and behaviours.

Just as the way charities refer to supporters reflects and communicates values, so too does the way charities refer to roles within their organisations. Compare 'Supporter Experience Team' and 'Donor Stewardship Team': 'experience' focuses more on the supporters' feelings about their interactions with the charity, and gives less of a sense of preclusion of choice, in comparison to 'stewardship', which suggests a priority of channeling supporters along a pre-set path (a 'steward' manages, administers, controls and directs).⁶

Likewise, consider 'Supporter Team' and 'Donor Acquisition and Retention Team'. If you had lots of money to give, how would you feel about being approached by a 'Major Prospect Fundraiser'? How might a business feel about a 'Corporate Donor Cultivation Officer' vs. a 'Philanthropy Partnership Advisor'? Would you rather be approached by someone who sees you as a good 'prospect' for boosting an organisation's funds, or by someone who sees you as a potential 'partner', offering a collaborative relationship and some help for you to achieve your personal philanthropic goals?⁷

Researcher Russell N. James recently surveyed 3188 people in America to test 63 job titles in four charitable contexts: a charitable bequest gift, a gift of stock, a gift of real estate, and a charitable gift annuity. People were asked which person they would prefer to contact to discuss each gift option, based on their job titles. He found that institution-focused job titles performed worst, in particular job titles which involve the word 'development'. James' study concludes that if some of an organisation's job titles are institution-focused, reflecting institutional priorities over and above supporters' priorities—if there is a risk that the job titles which appear in letters, emails, on webpages, etc. might be off-putting to potential supporters—then reviewing these job titles and re-orienting them towards supporters' perspectives and priorities could be really beneficial.⁸

⁶ Oxford English Dictionary.

⁷ With thanks to Jonathan Andrews for this observation, drawn from his experience as a corporate partnership consultant.

⁸ James, R. N. (2016), 'Testing the effectiveness of fundraiser job titles in charitable bequest and complex gift planning', *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*. doi:10.1002/nml.21231. With thanks to Ken Burnett for drawing my attention to this article.

Case study: Save the Children's supporter focus

For several years, Save the Children has been developing and embedding a new strategy in their approach to supporters, moving away from classic stewardship towards a focus on the experiences of their supporters. Save the Children challenged the terminology they applied to their supporters. This involved reconsidering the terms and distinctions involved in the single category system that supporters are traditionally governed by, recognising that a supporter might be, or might want to be, both an 'individual giver' and a 'campaigner', for example. Save the Children enhanced the ways in which they offered choice in kinds of involvement with the charity, and improved the ways in which communications with a supporter reflected and responded to their preferences. They also looked at the ways they used terms such as 'supporter' and 'campaigner', reconsidering what it meant to identify and label a person according to a particular interaction with the charity, rather than recognising him or her as a person, first and foremost, who once or more had chosen to contribute to the cause.

The strategy is part of an overall programme to become more supporter-centric and to make supporters more visible and integrated within the organisation. Being a fairly recent development, data gathering on its impact upon supporter satisfaction is ongoing, but the strategy has positively impacted upon communication with supporters and internal cultures of behaviour. For example, there is now a lead senior role dedicated to overseeing, integrating and improving the holistic supporter experience and changing communications planning to start with the supporter, rather than with individual campaigns and activities.

This kind of rethinking works at every level of language use, from department names to phrasing thank you letters. Compare the following:

Thank you for your donation.
Thank you for your gift.
Thank you for making a difference.
Thank you for helping to build Tania's school.
Thank you for making the decision to help save the bees.

As we move down the list, the emphasis moves further away from a focus on the money donated and towards the conscious generosity, impact and agency of the supporter.

Lots of elements of language use, internal to an organisation and external, can be reworked to better reflect and respond to the priorities and perspectives of supporters. Most of the recommendations in this project derive from this essential fundamental principle.

2. Talk less about the charity and more about the cause, the work, the beneficiaries and the supporters.

Many charities have found that supporters prefer messages from individual beneficiaries, or individual workers at the forefront of the impact (a clinician or nurse, a refugee centre manager, etc.) in comparison to messages from whole organisations or senior managerial figures (e.g. a Head of Humanitarian Support). Named, and ideally pictured, people who are most directly involved in delivering solutions to beneficiaries show the ‘human face’ of the work of the charity and provide readers with an identifiable connection. Hearing from someone with first-hand experience of the issues can create more real and more powerful insights and experiences for the supporters, offering a window onto the difference they can make. It is usually the cause that a supporter cares about; the organisation is secondary, chosen as a means of helping to address that cause, as suggested by evidence gathered in a study by Sargeant and Lee (2004).⁹ In the same study, supporters strongly reported that the beneficiaries were very important to them.¹⁰ It makes sense, then, for supporters to primarily hear from people at the heart of the issues and the impact.

Case study: Cancer Research UK

Cancer Research UK has in the past sent direct mail signed by the ‘Head of Fundraising’. More recently, direct mail has been written by a Cancer Research UK clinician and has included a piece written by a cancer survivor. Both pieces of writing are in the first person, and are full of personal views and first-hand experiences. The names of both writers are given, and they’re both pictured in vibrant photos, in which they’re looking directly at the camera. These letters connect more with supporters, as shown by good response rates.

Just as many supporters want to hear directly from people at the front-line, many also say in surveys that they want to hear about the difference they are making, and that this enhances their trust in the charity.¹¹ The Narrative Project (funded by Arthritis Research UK, MS Society, the NCVO and CharityComms, 2015/16) found, through focus groups, that emphasising the impact and agency of the supporter is really important to the supporter-charity relationship.¹² Compare the following:

⁹ See Sargeant, A. & Lee, A. (2004), ‘Improving public trust in the voluntary sector: An empirical analysis’, *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing*, vol. 7, issue 1, pp. 68-83: see p. 73 particularly.

¹⁰ See p. 76 of the same article.

¹¹ See Sargeant, A. (2016), *Relationship fundraising: Where do we go from here? Vol. 1 – Review of theory from relationship marketing*. Plymouth: Centre for Sustainable Philanthropy, Plymouth University: see p. 10 particularly.

¹² For more information on the Narrative Project, see <http://blogs.ncvo.org.uk/2016/07/21/whats-next-on-public-trust-and-confidence-in-charities/>

We supply the clinic with essential medical equipment, helping thousands of local villagers.

With your help, we supply the clinic with essential medical equipment, helping thousands of local villagers.

Your support enables us to supply the clinic with essential medical equipment, helping thousands of local villagers.

You help to supply the clinic with essential medical equipment, helping thousands of local villagers.

Together, our supporters supply the clinic with essential medical equipment, helping thousands of local villagers.

You supply the clinic with essential medical equipment, helping thousands of local villagers.

The sentences progressively shift from putting the emphasis on the organisation's actions to focusing on the supporter's role and showing supporters the direct impact they are having.

Likewise, different kinds of thank you messages can seem to prioritise and emphasise the role of the organisation over the supporter. Think about the differences between the sentences "We want to say thank you." and "Thank you." The first sentence puts 'we', the anonymous staff at the organisation, first, both in terms of word order and emphasis, swiftly followed by what we 'want', stressing the desires of the organisation. The actual words 'thank you' trail along behind the organisation and its wants. It's a subtle effect, but the act of thanking is accidentally backgrounded, along with, in contrast, what the *supporter* might want (for example, to get different kinds of messages, or indeed not to be contacted). The potency of the 'thank you' is dramatically dulled.

Word order is more significant than it may seem. There is a lot of linguistic data, gathered over several decades of research, which proves that word order powerfully influences what a reader will pay attention to, take in, and remember.¹³ While it is important to foreground the role of the organisation in some situations, it is always worth checking communications for what might be called inappropriate organisational egocentricity. In other words, where possible, stay out of the spotlight, and focus it on what supporters most want to see.

To illustrate the issue a little more, here is some sample copy, combining real sentences from two Christmas appeal letters, each of which involved a degree of inappropriate organisational egocentricity. The examples have been combined to provide a realistic sample without making reference to specific organisations.

¹³ See empirical research summarised and developed in Sanford, A. J., & Emmott, C. (2012), *Mind, brain and narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, especially chapters 4, 'Attention in text: Foregrounding and rhetorical focussing', and 5, 'Rhetorical focussing and depth of processing', pp. 72-131.

Help us to bring some Christmas joy to those who need it most this year. We are asking friends, supporters and everyone with an interest in helping vulnerable elderly people to send us a special gift this Christmas.

Many of the elderly in our community are isolated, without family and friends to share Christmas with. By sending messages of friendliness and warmth, we can bring them the spirit of Christmas.

In the first two sentences of this copy, the organisation is foregrounded – it’s presented as the main ‘doer’ of good and even as the immediate receiver of the ‘gift’. The purpose of the second sentence seems partly to be to explain and justify the ‘ask’, but its phrasing puts the primary emphasis on the actions of the organisation. Only in the third sentence do the people at the heart of the cause – the beneficiaries – really come to the fore. The ‘we’ at the end of the fourth sentence could also include both the organisation and the supporters, giving some suggestion of the effect the supporter can have with the organisation, but the supporter’s role and impact could be expressed and emphasised much more clearly. This version of the copy seems to imply that the organisation will be acting with or without the supporter. The supporter may feel less of a sense of urgency, as well as less of a hope of impact, than could otherwise be evoked.

Of course, in some messages and some contexts it is entirely appropriate and more effective to focus on the actions and achievements of the organisation – for example, in parts of reports to trustees. There is no ‘one size fits all’ for communications, even within one organisation, never mind across different organisations. When communicating with supporters, though, and particularly when asking or thanking, foregrounding the cause, the beneficiaries, front-line workers and the role and impact of the supporter seems to be both more desired and more effective. Think of your audience and what they want to know and feel, and keep everything else out of the way.

3. Communicate authentic content with honesty.

As mentioned in the previous point, evidence suggests supporters prefer to receive messages from front-line workers rather than head office staff, and like to hear about – and, if possible, hear *from* – real beneficiaries. Many charities have been offering this kind of ‘direct access’ in their communications with supporters for years. Authentic first-hand reports can be very powerful and can offer supporters a real connection with the cause.

Case study: The authenticity of UNICEF’s ambassadors

UNICEF has several celebrity and high-profile ambassadors to raise awareness and reach new supporters: celebrities can provide a direct window on the cause, mediated through the personal experience of someone familiar and popular. When UNICEF’s celebrity ambassadors give TV or magazine interviews, or post on social media, UNICEF guides them with information so they have the latest updates to hand, encouraging and enabling the ambassador to use their own language and speak authentically about their own experiences and views.

However, some charities, for efficiency, to protect anonymity or maintain confidentiality, or because of difficulty accessing real stories, have used fictitious people, names, quotes or testimonies in their communications with supporters as representations of actual case studies. For some supporters this is understandable and entirely acceptable. Problems can arise, though, if organisations do not make it sufficiently clear when and why they are using fictitious people and examples.

Several studies in the UK in 2016 revealed a decrease in public trust in charities, and a rising suspicion and wariness of fundraising practices.¹⁴ Researchers June Cotte, Robin Coulter and Melissa Moore have found significant evidence suggesting that when the credibility of an appeal is problematic, the appeal does not merely fail to inspire a donation – it actually inspires negative feelings about both the appeal and the charity it came from.¹⁵ In the post-2015 context of heightened skepticism about the charity sector, sensitivity to issues of credibility is similarly heightened. In this climate, flawed credibility potentially impacts upon perceptions of not just the specific charity involved, but the charity sector more broadly.¹⁶

¹⁴ For example, Charity Commission. (2016), *Public Trust and Confidence in Charities* report. Research conducted by Populus on behalf of the Charity Commission.

¹⁵ Cotte, J., Coulter, R. A. & Moore, M. (2005), ‘Enhancing and disrupting guilt: The role of ad credibility and perceived manipulative intent’, *Journal of Business Research*, vol. 58, issue 3, pp. 361-368.

¹⁶ Hibbert, S. (2016), ‘Charity communications: Shaping donor perceptions and giving’, in *The Routledge Companion to Philanthropy*, eds T. Jung, S. D. Phillips, and J. Harrow (London, Routledge), pp. 102-115: p. 102).

Case study: Misleading copy recycling

In a cold direct mail letter received in 2012, the opening words were written in the first person and attributed to particular child at risk. The child was named and pictured (looking directly to camera), and the words included phrases like ‘Will you help me?’ and ‘I need your help’. The main section of the letter described the child’s situation. No specific signatory was given – the letter seemed to be by and from the organisation as a whole.

A few months later, a second direct mail letter was received from the same charity. The exact same opening ‘quote’ was used, and much of the same text in the main section of the letter was identical to the previous letter. This time, though, the ‘quote’ was attributed to a different child – a different name and image was used – and the letter ended using the first person and was signed by a named individual, a senior figure in the charity, as if it was this person who wrote the letter.

There are obvious reasons why a charity might re-use copy. If a letter has achieved great response rates, it can seem nonsensical to alter it. It is also costly to create new copy all the time. That said, if an appeal has not worked to persuade one recipient the first time, sending it to the same person again, with the same copy but a different photo and signatory, is unlikely to do anything other than raise their suspicions about the authenticity of it all. Where it *is* necessary to invent and/or re-attribute examples, honesty and transparency about this, and about why it is necessary, are critically important.

4. Communicate values, and do it consistently.

The degree to which a brand shares the values of its consumers is a significant determiner of customer loyalty and satisfaction.¹⁷ Exactly the same dynamic has been found between charities and their supporters.¹⁸ Evidence suggests that a supporter will feel more positively towards a charity, and feel more satisfied by its communications, if the charity and the supporter share some values.¹⁹

Of course, in order for a supporter to be able to recognise a charity as having shared values, the charity must have and express some values in the first place. A study by Sargeant and Woodliffe found that “the extent to which individuals believe that they have deepened their knowledge of the organisation through the communications they receive” will “impact positively” on the individual’s relationship with the organisation.²⁰ The *Relationship Fundraising* review proposes that supporters’ trust in and loyalty to a charity “may be enhanced by [...] making it clear what values the organisation espouses, [...] communicating not only the content of service provision to beneficiaries, but also the style, manner or ethos underpinning that delivery.”²¹ This suggests that supporters will feel more positively towards a charity, and feel more satisfied by its communications, if the charity clearly communicates its values, ethos and identity. This may in part be because this allows charities to better manage, and therefore better meet, supporters’ expectations.²²

¹⁷ See, for example, Jamal, A., & Goode, M. M. H. (2001), ‘Consumer and brands: A study of the impact of self-image congruence on brand preference and satisfaction’. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, vol. 19, pp. 482-492; Sirgy M. J., Grewal, D., Mangleburg, T. F., Park, J., Chon, K., Claiborne, C. B., & Berkman, H. (1997), ‘Assessing the predictive validity of two methods of measuring self-image congruence’, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, vol. 25, pp. 229-241; Sirgy, M. J., Johar, J., Samli, A., & Claiborne, C. B. (1991), ‘Self-congruity versus functional congruity: Predictors of consumer behavior’, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, vol. 19, pp. 363-375.

¹⁸ Bennett, R. (2009), ‘Factors influencing donation switching behaviour among charity supporters: An empirical investigation’, *Journal of Customer Behaviour*, vol. 8, issue 4, pp. 329-345; MacMillan, K., Money, K., Money, A. and Downing, S. (2005), ‘Relationship marketing in the not-for-profit sector: An extension and application of the commitment-trust theory’, *Journal of Business Research*, vol. 58, pp. 806-818; Sargeant, A. and Woodliffe, L. (2007), ‘Building donor loyalty: The antecedents and tole of commitment in the context of charity giving’, *Journal of Nonprofit and Public Sector Marketing*, vol. 18, issue 2, pp.47-68.

¹⁹ Hibbert, S. (2016), ‘Charity communications: Shaping donor perceptions and giving’, in *The Routledge Companion to Philanthropy*, eds T. Jung, S. D. Phillips, and J. Harrow (London, Routledge), pp.102-115.

²⁰ Sargeant and Woodliffe study referenced in footnote 18 above, this conclusion from the study being summarised in Sargeant, A. (2016), *Relationship fundraising: Where do we go from here? Vol. 1*, Plymouth: Centre for Sustainable Philanthropy, Plymouth University. pp. 21-22.

²¹ Sargeant, A. (2016), *Relationship fundraising: Where do we go from here? Vol. 1*, Plymouth: Centre for Sustainable Philanthropy, Plymouth University, p. 20.

²² nfpSynergy’s ‘Brand Awareness Monitor’ reveals the level of public familiarity with a charity’s organisational identity, and can indicate the relative strength of that organisational identity in shaping public perceptions of the charity (in comparison to other factors, such as transitory media stories).

Case study: Perfect pitch: Linking voice and values

'Perfect pitch: Linking voices and values' is an invaluable guide on communicating values. It is written by Sarah Fitzgerald (2015) and published by CharityComms and Self Communications. The full guide is free to download at <http://www.charitycomms.org.uk/articles/pitch-perfect-linking-voice-and-values>. The guide includes advice on how to develop a coherent 'voice' (in the commercial sector, known as the 'brand voice') for the organisation's communications. An organisation's voice reflects its values and identity, and engages people in its mission.

The 'Perfect Pitch' guide explains that key elements of an organisation's voice can include:

- its **core proposition**. This should draw on the organisation's values, mission, long term strategy and personality. The guide offers Girlguiding's proposition as an example: "We are, we can, we do".
- a **strapline**. This encapsulates and communicates the core proposition. It's the public-facing version of the core proposition, designed to combine with the organisation's name to embody the essence of the organisation in a memorable, engaging way.
- **standard descriptors**. These are ready-to-use statements expressing the organisation's functions, vision, impact, or values, etc. These can both communicate important aspects of the organisation's identity externally, and guide colleagues within the organisation on the priorities for communications. These can be in the form of a list of statements or a short paragraph. The guide offers the following, from the Blue Cross, as an example of an impact- and mission-focused standard descriptor: "We've been dedicated to the health and happiness of pets since 1897. Abandoned or unwanted, ill or injured – we do what's needed to give every pet a healthy life in a happy home. We're a charity, so the more help you give us, the more help we can give pets."
- **tone of voice**. This guidance covers principles on the register of the organisation's language, appropriate styles for different communication channels and audiences, etc. These principles might include something like 'be direct', with examples of how to use active verb forms and simple, literal language to do so.

Citizens Advice, Mind and World Vision are included as illustrative examples of how an organisational 'voice' has been developed and launched successfully within these charities, enhancing public perceptions and enabling greater effectiveness.

Case study: The 'About us' page

The 'About us' page on a website can provide great opportunities for the communication of the charity's values and key priorities. However, many charities' 'About us' pages consist of lengthy text about the history of the charity or its founders, with values and mission statements featuring quite far down the page, if at all.

Consider why someone might want to read an 'About us' page. What kind of information might they be looking for? Why? In what level of detail? Study after study reveals that it's the cause that brings a supporter to a charity. It's the cause that the supporter identifies with and develops a personal attachment to. The cause should dominate the 'About us' page. The organisation - the 'us' of the 'About us' - should filter through the content, while the content - mission statements, value statements and narratives of impact - should focus on the cause.

Other details that sometimes appear on 'About us' pages - the bio of the CEO, the history of the organisation, etc. - might be appropriate if these factors are closely related to the organisation's unique identity, but their interest value should be tested with readers (supporters and non-supporters). Anything which appears on an 'About us' page more to satisfy organisational egocentricity than to satisfy supporter curiosity should be cut.

One example of a great 'About us' page is that of the Sumatran Orangutan Society (<https://www.orangutans-sos.org/who-we-are/>). Though it's doing the job of an 'About us' page, it's titled 'Who we are'. Three simple sentences summarise the mission, the problem, the urgency of action, and then re-state and re-stress the mission. The implication is pretty clear: the organisation IS the mission. The cause is what they are all about. Readers can scroll down to find five images - four of orangutans and one of the team busy at work in Sumatra. Each image accompanies a hyperlink to the website's other key pages: 'Vision and Mission', 'Impact', 'Partners', 'Supporters' and 'Team', inviting the reader to click to 'Read More'. The 'Donate' and 'Subscribe' buttons are always visible at the top of the screen, following the scrolling. The page offers a short, simple message with the mission at its core, and offers the reader an interactive choice about reading more. It's straight-forward, effective and engaging.

Pages like this can really help supporters understand and identify with the vision and values of a charity. Don't, though, let the existence of an 'About us' page encourage the belief that articulation of a charity's organisational identity can be relegated to this page alone. As suggested by the evidence described above, and indeed by each of the Sumatran Orangutan Society's web pages, a charity's identity and values belong - directly or indirectly - in every message.

5. Subvert expectations.

Having a clear and distinct identity, as described in recommendation 4, also enables some playfulness with the parameters of that identity. Supporters report weariness about the repetitive, predictable and formulaic nature of charity appeals.²³ The norms and conventions of particular kinds of charity communications (direct mail, TV advertisement, etc.) and of particular *channels* of communication (email, telephone, etc.) can and should be deviated from occasionally, to keep supporters interested and engaged.²⁴ A dominant ‘formula’ actually offers a lot of scope to exceed and challenge expectations, creating ‘surprise and delight’.²⁵

Case study: OXFAM’s ‘Pile of poo’

One of Oxfam’s online gifts is manure. Branded as ‘Manure’, it ranked roughly 20th out of Oxfam’s 39 most popular online gifts, in terms of sales volume. Repackaged as a ‘Pile of poo’, Oxfam more than tripled its sales volume and saw it become one of the most high profile gifts in 2015.

The ‘Pile of poo’ is successful because it is playful, it alliterates, it appeals to a certain sense of humour, it’s light-heartedly childish, and it subverts expectations of serious and traditional tone.

Case study: The NSPCC’s ‘Talking PANTS’ campaign

The NSPCC’s ‘Talking PANTS’ campaign is designed to inform children about their rights to not be touched in particular areas of their bodies, and to facilitate conversations between parents and children about such issues. The campaign involves an animated video of a dinosaur called Pantosaurus, with a song about ‘The underwear rule’ (there are five key things to remember, beginning with letters P, A, N, T, and S), and an interactive webpage including cartoon pants (see <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/keeping-children-safe/underwear-rule/>). Though the NSPCC’s data gathering is ongoing, initial feedback (from spontaneous mentions in open-ended response feedback, and from a study with supporters and non-supporters) suggests that the Talking PANTS campaign has been hugely successful in engaging parents and children.

²³ Bennett, R. (2009), ‘Factors influencing donation switching behaviour among charity supporters: An empirical investigation’, *Journal of Customer Behaviour*, vol. 8, issue 4, pp.329-345.

²⁴ Schank, R. C. & Abelson, R. (1977), *Scripts, plans, goals and understanding*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

²⁵ Berman, B. (2005), ‘How to delight your customers’, *California Management Review*, vol. 48, issue 1, pp. 129-151.

Case study: Depaul UK's 'There's another side to the story' awareness raising campaign.

In 2015 the youth homelessness charity Depaul UK ran a campaign with Publicis London in which they placed posters on street corners. One side of the poster was readable on one side of the building and the other side readable round the corner on the other side of the building. The text on left side of the poster reflected traditional stereotypes of youth homelessness, but the text as a whole – reading both sides together – communicated the positive experience and impact of volunteering with the charity as a host. The careful arrangement and 3D nature of the text made the reader act out the process of ‘turning the corner’, the theme of the message. The innovative campaign featured on TV, radio and in over 70 blogs, and the number of enquiries about volunteering increased by 6100% on the previous month.



6. Use inclusive, accessible language and avoid jargon.

As the National Literacy Trust explains, “around 16 per cent, or 5.1 million adults in England, can be described as ‘functionally illiterate’. They would not pass an English GCSE and have literacy levels at or below those expected of an 11-year-old.”²⁶

To engage and appeal to as many people as possible, communications need to be accessible to the widest possible range of people. To achieve this, communications needs to be pitched at an appropriate level for the audience and channel.

In written communication with trustees, corporate partners and philanthropists, formal, sophisticated expression is the norm. Even in these contexts, though, complex expression is often actually unnecessary, and unhelpful. And in the context of mass messaging, complexity is catastrophic. A significant proportion of the British public have low literacy levels, are not native English speakers, or are dyslexic. Literacy levels aside, most people don’t have the time, attention or will to read dense language.

When communicating with wide audiences, the writing needs to be simple. Check your copy against a few key questions:

- Are most of the words only one or two syllables long?
- Are sentences mostly short, without too many clauses?
- When there are two or three clauses in a sentence, is it obvious which one is the main clause (with the most important information in), and is the sentence easy to make sense of?
- If the message is to be spoken (in a telephone call, for example,) does it avoid long, complex sentences entirely (which are hard to follow just by listening)?
- Is written text broken up into short paragraphs?
- Is the copy free of the jargon typical of internal communications (like ‘lapsed’ and ‘individual giver’)?
- Is the copy free of culturally-specific idioms (like ‘for a rainy day’ and ‘all hands on deck’ – sayings grounded in British culture)?
- Is the copy free of metaphors (even conventional ones) which might be hard for learners of English as an additional language to understand? (Consider how a reader trying to interpret a phrase like ‘change your mind’ in a literal way could be left very confused!) This is especially important for communication with groups likely to include many non-native speakers of English.

Take care not to automatically drift into a more complex and formal style when developing copy for what we might feel are more formal topics, such as information about use of personal data, or information about how to make a complaint and how it will be addressed. Likewise, even if the primary readership of a document is not supporters or the general public (as in the case of Trustee reports), if the document is made available to supporters, consider either providing an accessible summary version, or avoiding the conventional formal and complex style of these documents when writing the original, to ensure it is accessible to a wide audience.

²⁶ National Literacy Trust, *Adult Literacy*,
http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/adult_literacy/illiterate_adults_in_england

Case study: Annual Reports – Keech Hospice Care 2015

Annual Reports are increasingly made available to the public on charities’ websites, but most are not written with public audiences in mind. Even the executive summaries are often overtly targeted at audiences familiar with the organisation’s infrastructure, strategies, key performance indicators and so on. Lack of transparency about organisational operations, spending and impact has been a significant source of the growing public mistrust of the sector (as evidenced in the Charity Commission’s ‘Public trust and confidence in charities’ report, 2016). An opportunity exists to create accessible, ‘plain English’ versions of annual reports – or even just of executive summaries - and to raise the profile of these reports on websites and point supporters towards them.

Keech Hospice Care’s 2015 annual report is a great example (see <https://www.keech.org.uk/about/annual-reports>). Keech Hospice Care prioritised accessibility, explanations and inspiration, and focused selectively on key aspects of their care rather than presenting comprehensive coverage of operations. The report is jargon-free, includes a pictorial summary of the charity’s work, and is accompanied by a narrative animation with a voice over (available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IaPPzJ456-o>). The charity’s service users, service providers and supporters reported finding the report engaging, and the animation has been viewed over 10 000 times online.

By making the information contained in annual reports easy to read and accessible to the public, charities can both improve the transparency of their operations and be seen to be doing so, helping to address public perceptions around accountability and improving supporter trust and satisfaction.

Many guide books offer great advice on writing charity communications copy (for example, George Smith’s *Tiny Essentials of Writing for Fundraising*). There are also some simple ways to test the relative ‘readability’ of communications copy. The Flesch Readability Formula,²⁷ which measures reading ease using a basic 100 point scale, is widely popular and used in lots of word processing programmes. According to Flesch, mass communications should aim for a score of between 60 and 100. The scoring is based on a formula measuring average word length (in syllables) and sentence length (in words). Something written in ‘plain English’ (scoring 60-70, easy for 13-15 year olds to understand) has an average sentence length of fewer than 20 words, with most words just one or two syllables long. A really good, free online test tool, measuring readability according to a range of different formulas, is available at <http://www.webpagefx.com/tools/read-able/>.²⁸ While these formulas are not flawless, they can be good indicators. They work best alongside the more ‘human’ method of simply asking for feedback from people of different ages and cultural backgrounds.

²⁷ Rudolph Flesch’s readability formula is described at <http://www.readabilityformulas.com/flesch-reading-ease-readability-formula.php>

²⁸ WebpageFX, *Readability Test Tool*, <http://www.webpagefx.com/tools/read-able/>

Case study: Charity research publications - The Children's Society 'The Good Childhood Report' 2016

'The Good Childhood Report' is a report of a detailed study of children's well-being, undertaken by the Children's Society in partnership with the University of York. The Children's Society has gone to extensive efforts to make this research accessible to the general public. An online, interactive version of the report is viewable on an attractive web page (see <http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/research/the-good-childhood-report>). It contains simple, clear statements, neat, engaging infographics, short summaries and headlines with hyperlinks expanding sections to provide fuller information, and the option to download the formal report - a different, fuller, much more academic and detailed document. The two versions are offered via different mediums (interactive webpage vs. document), targeted at different audiences and serve different purposes. The two combined offer full and free access to the information and therefore maximise its value to the wider community.

Case study: Direct mail appeals

A common problem within direct mail appeals is an inconsistency of accessibility. Letters will often start out well, with simple, engaging language, such as a short question using predominantly one-syllable words, e.g. ‘What will keep you warm this Christmas?’ This simple style may dominate the letter, but often more formal, complex phrasing will creep in here and there. This sometimes happens when the letter starts to describe what the charity does, or what the charity’s values are. Long-held and deep-rooted associations between credibility and intelligence or formality can lead copy writers to think that a letter’s style must be formal and sophisticated to be convincing. Suddenly, multi-clause sentences full of complex language take over.

Ken Burnett cites an example of this kind of sentence on his blog: “*£3.00 a month helps us empower and build the capacity of local partner organisations to run locally-informed campaigns which create local, regional, national and international grass roots movements for political, economic and cultural change in a sustainable manner.*” (*‘Communication and the English Language’*, 2014).

This sentence is too long. It tries to cram in too much information. The main clause (and main point) is essentially ‘£3.00 a month helps us [do x]’. But the ‘x’, the impact, is described in great detail, through a lengthy, trailing subordinate clause so full of different processes and relationships that most readers are likely to get very confused very quickly. I read all of this and ended up not at all clear on what the impact actually is – what the £3.00 will achieve. The sentence seems designed to provide detail and transparency about processes, to emphasise local partnerships, to convey significant impact, and to stress sustainability as a campaign priority. By trying to do too many things, it ultimately achieves none of them. Let one sentence say one thing.

The sentence also uses long, polysyllabic words and complex phrases when short and simple words and phrases would do. Compare ‘empower and build the capacity of’ with the word ‘help’ as a possible alternative, for example.

Unnecessarily complex language risks at best boring supporters, and at worst confusing and alienating them. Neither scenario offers a satisfying experience, or an effective appeal. While it may feel counterintuitive at times, within communications with supporters, accessibility must be the priority.

7. Invite feedback and turn it into dialogue.

The views of supporters are invaluable to charities, and yet most charity communications are still one-way. Often, the only form of response a charity seems interested in is a direct debit. Feedback, though, offers precious insights into supporters' personal views and ideas, and is crucial to the development of a relationship and a sense of connection.²⁹ Fostering dialogue also helps to create a sense of collaborative teamwork in tackling the cause, reduce a sense of 'them' and 'us', and develop a sense of identification between the supporter and the charity. Feedback and dialogue, though, first requires an explicit, appealing invitation and a simple way for supporters to offer their thoughts.

Social media has created new contexts for dialogue and direct response. Daniel Newman writes in *Forbes* magazine that social media is the new primary tool through which organisations should “focus on engaging your audience; asking them for their opinions, comments, and ideas on how you could make things better for them. [...] On] social media platforms, the main focus should be on listening to the customer.”³⁰

This listening should extend beyond social media though. Whatever your medium, every communication is an opportunity to engage supporters – to *explicitly ask for* their input and their opinions. A dedicated space for input demonstrates the charity's real interest in supporters' views. The invitation also encourages supporters to reflection on their own opinions, raising supporters' conscious awareness of their feelings about the cause and organisation. Each of these elements of the invitation for feedback powerfully enhances supporter satisfaction.

Case study: The supporters' voice at UNICEF

UNICEF has used a range of methods to ask for and access supporter views. These include:

- SMS surveys asking for feedback on the telephone call the supporter just received
- Online surveys eliciting feedback on the experience of using the website (navigability, etc.)
- Feedback invited by mailings
- Detailed reviews completed by corporate partners
- Supporter diaries, providing a wealth of qualitative data
- Monitoring calls received or made on behalf of UNICEF, gathering unsolicited feedback on matters supporters raise (specific campaigns, etc.)

²⁹ MacQuillin, I. Sargeant, A. & Shang, J. (2016), *Relationship fundraising: Where do we go from here? Vol. 2 – Review of theory from social psychology*. Plymouth: Centre for Sustainable Philanthropy, Plymouth University, p. 20; Hibbert, S. (2016), 'Charity communications: Shaping donor perceptions and giving', in *The Routledge Companion to Philanthropy*, eds T. Jung, S. D. Phillips, & J. Harrow (London, Routledge), pp. 102-115: p. 110.

³⁰ Newman, D. (2016), 'Social media is no longer a marketing channel, it's a customer experience channel', *Forbes*, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/danielnewman/2016/01/12/social-media-is-no-longer-a-marketing-channel-its-a-customer-experience-channel/#1ccbefaf4967>

Talking *with*, rather than just *at*, supporters, though, is only achieved through genuine dialogue - through listening, acknowledging and responding to supporters' input. Take up supporters' topics, talk about the things that interest them, and reflect back the language they use and the values they express. This reinforces the connection between a charity and its supporters and creates a deeper exchange.

Case study: SolarAid's simple questions

SolarAid has an open text box on its web donation page, headed with the request 'Please tell us why you're supporting the solar revolution?'. On its fundraising page, underneath a few suggestions about ways to fundraise, is the question 'What do you want to do?'. There's another open text box there too, through which you can 'Tell us your fundraising plans'. These simple questions and spaces provide an opportunity for supporters to communicate with the charity, and to think about and express their personal choices and views.

A strategy for a) explicitly inviting feedback, b) processing feedback, and also c) acting on feedback, and d) turning feedback into dialogue, is crucial for authentic, two-way communications. Real dialogue requires careful resourcing and management, but the rewards for supporters, charities and the sector as a whole can be significant.

Case study: The Children's Society acts on supporter feedback

The Children's Society held a conference in 2012 for key supporters, through which the organisation gathered crucial feedback. At this conference, supporters said that they wanted more information about how their donations were spent and what difference they made. In response, the charity introduced a mobile and web-based solution through which supporters of a local project would receive immediate and specific thank you messages relating to donations, along with updates about the project from a local project volunteer. The initiative was funded by the Innovation in Giving Fund run by Nesta, and was reported in *The Guardian*.

Case study: Friends of the Earth engages with supporter concerns

In 2015, Friends of the Earth wrote to 52000 of its supporters by mail, and 67000 by email, and asked them “Are we getting it right?” Notably, the letter was not written in response to feedback received from supporters specifically about the charity’s behaviour, but rather in response to general public disquiet about fundraising in the summer of 2015. FoE knew that their supporters would be concerned and might want to share their views, and so the charity took a proactive step to reach out. The letter focused on ways in which FoE contacted supporters, and explicitly asked for feedback. It provided a large open text box for this feedback. The charity received over 2000 responses, a mere 10% of which were negative. Unsolicited donations were also given along with the responses. This letter has since been celebrated as a great example of eliciting supporter responses.

What gets talked about less, though, is the way the charity responded. FoE didn’t just ask: they responded to feedback. As far as possible (that is, as far as resources allowed), FoE replied to feedback individually, and made a particular effort to do so in the case of negative feedback. This ensured as many supporters as possibly knew that their feedback was being genuinely acknowledged and considered. FoE also issued high profile acknowledgements and thanks in mass communications, to reach as many of the respondents as possible and stress the seriousness with which they were taking the responses.

As reported in *Third Sector* (22.9.15), Joe Jenkins, then the interim chief executive at FoE, emphasised that primary purpose of the letter was to connect with supporters and respond to their feedback, rather than to fundraise. “I’m cautious not to frame this as a fundraising appeal, or to give the impression that our motivation was to generate a financial response,” he said. “Every additional, spontaneous gift that we’ve received has been fantastic, and I’m really chuffed the cash appeal that followed was successful, but I’m most proud of the engagement we achieved through authentic dialogue with our supporters.”

FoE reported, at the Institute of Fundraising convention 2016, that two of the key lessons they learned from the process were the need to co-ordinate communication strategies across departments, and the need to have a plan in place for how to process and reply to large numbers of responses, including open text field responses.

8. Make contact permissions options work for supporters.

Contact permissions statements are a contentious area. A lot of recent criticism of the charity sector is about use of personal data and supporters feeling bombarded by uninvited communications. There are ways of wording and managing contact permissions statements so that they actually serve to strengthen the supporter-charity relationship, though, and work to better meet supporters' needs. These statements can be a really useful tool to demonstrate respect for supporters' preferences, provide the supporter with agency over the supporter-charity relationship, and explain the charity's wish to inform and thanks supporters, etc. The contact permissions statement is a collaborative agreement: it creates trust and sets out mutual expectations. In more ways than one, the 'opt-in' (or 'opt-out', depending on which route the charity takes), can be a linchpin of communications. Cutting edge work by *fast.MAP* strongly suggests that, with care, opt-in statements can work constructively for both charities and supporters.³¹

Opt-in statements about future communications often look something like this:

- I am happy to receive emails: YES/NO
- I am happy to receive texts: YES/NO
- I am happy to receive mail: YES/NO
- I am happy to be contacted by phone: YES/NO

Clarity is essential in opt-in statements, to avoid the supporter giving consent unintentionally, or meaning to give consent but accidentally not doing so (and the negative experiences that arise from both). Clarity requires plain English, simple phrasing and appropriate levels of detail. Explaining the benefits and disadvantages of each option, both for the supporter and for the charity, allows the supporter to make an informed choice in relation to the needs and preferences of both, and to feel empowered in doing so. Exactly the same principles apply to both opt-in and opt-out contact permissions statements here. The examples above are clear in

“Are you happy to hear about the impact of your support via a free monthly text message? You can opt out at any time. YES/NO”

the sense that they use simple language, but they lack clarity in the sense of explaining exactly what is being asked for. A charity which has developed more nuanced opt-in statements might ask questions like this:

³¹ Cole, D. (2016), *A guide to creating charity permission statements*, published by *fast.MAP* and the Institute of Fundraising.

Case study: Opting in in the face-to-face fundraising scenario

fast.MAP's research indicates that opt-in statements generate different responses depending on factors such as the channel through which the opt-in choices are offered, the order of the opt-in options within a list, the age of the respondent, and the wording of the opt-in. The last factor – the wording – in fact needs to be adapted according to each of the prior factors. Here the relationship between the channel factor and the context of the communication is key.

Within on-street fundraising, leading agencies report that the opt-in is often part of the last stage of the interaction. The fundraiser's priority is appealing to the supporter enough to secure a regular direct debit income for the charity. The contact permissions can feel very much secondary, so they might be given much less attention. The opt-in questions also, inevitably, extend the interaction and delay the supporter longer, so risk frustration. The formality and legalistic language of the average opt-in is very different to the friendly informality of the conversation so far, which risks suddenly alienating the supporter, and jolting them out of any emotional connection with the cause. Charities need to adapt their opt-in statements for face-to-face scenarios and face-to-face fundraisers need to be very aware of the importance of opt-in statements, if charities and supporters are going to have any chance of hearing what they want to hear from each other.

This explains precisely what the charity would like to communicate through this specific channel, and how often, and clarifies that the supporter can opt out again later. This kind of opt-in statement is much more detailed and transparent, conveys respect for the supporter's wishes and is much more likely to get a positive response, thereby fostering a truly consensual communicative relationship.

9. Test your communications to find out what works best for your charity and your supporters.

Banners, logos, photos and inserts are tested with rigour across the sector. Some aspects of language use are tested too, but often only key propositions, email subject lines and the like. A lot of beliefs about charity copy writing have been inherited over the years, filtered down from practices which might not really fit your specific charity or work with the kinds of communication channels you use. It is worth checking and challenging some of these inherited assumptions about language and communications, and finding out how relevant and valid they are for your charity. There are lots of simple ways to test communications copy which can really improve understanding of what works for your supporters and what does not.

Lots of charities test new copy against a 'control' text - one which has worked well before. Testing one email against a control email and finding the former out-performs the latter, in terms of responses generated, does tell us that one email is better than the other, but it doesn't tell us why. It doesn't reveal the particular strengths of one email over another, because it doesn't identify which features actually make it work. Looking at some of the features which differ in the two versions, or exploring responses in a bit more detail with focus groups, will give us some clues. This is a great first step in testing, but you can go further. On the basis of those clues, you can develop more nuanced versions of the email, isolating and varying particular features in a controlled way. *These* versions are worth testing with a second round of focus groups. This will give you insights so much richer than the first stage of testing - insights which you can draw on again and again in the future.

Features which can be usefully tested include:

- The way the supporter is addressed (e.g. ‘Hi Sally’ vs. ‘Dear Mrs. Sally Shore’).
- Use of ‘will’ vs. ‘can’ (as in, ‘Your gift will change lives’ vs. ‘Your gift can change lives’).
- The length of a personal narrative.
- The inclusion of a negative or positive ending to a personal narrative.
- Register (the relative formality of the text).
- Repetition of the call to action (how many times, at what points, with what changes in wording?)
- The placement of first-hand quotes (embedded within a paragraph? Just before the close?)
- Different speakers (e.g. a surgeon vs. a nurse).
- Foregrounding the role of the charity vs. foregrounding the role of the supporter (e.g. ‘We are building three new schools’ vs. ‘You’re helping to build three new schools’).

Case study: Testing at UNICEF

UNICEF have recently comprehensively tested a newly developed Supporter Welcome programme. Starting from a number of hypotheses, born out of significant data analysis, they generated a set of materials. These materials were carefully tested with audiences, and the results revealed that some of the initial hypotheses did not stand to be true. On the basis of these new insights, the materials were revised and a more effective Supporter Welcome programme was developed to create greater supporter satisfaction. Results are still being gathered but initial insights are positive.

UNICEF have also tested communications such as Direct Response TV through use of focus groups, asking participants to feed back on what they did and didn’t like. UNICEF have also isolated and tested individual elements such as ask values, forms of personalisation, length of copy, inserts and images, measuring value and/or number of responses, and have tested email subject lines and web copy through click through rates. These tests have enabled UNICEF to continually improve the effectiveness and appeal of their communications.

Comparing the effectiveness of versions in which features like these are varied will show you how you can make language work best for your message and your cause. These tests are immeasurably more valuable than simply testing one version against a control text. The kinds of insights these tests give you, about subtle but crucial differences in effectiveness, can reveal many ways of enhancing current and future communications exponentially. Going beyond the ‘control copy vs. version b’ lets you find out what really works best in your charity and for your supporters.

Appendix 1. Case studies

Most of the case studies are examples of current practice drawn from information in the public domain (such as websites) or from research interviews with charities. Any information within these case studies which was not already in the public domain has been shared with the kind permission of those charities involved.

1. Rethink language to reflect, respect and engage with the views and feelings of supporters.

Case study: Save the Children's supporter focus

2. Talk less about the charity and more about the cause, the work, the beneficiaries and the supporters.

Case study: Cancer Research UK

3. Communicate authentic content with honesty.

Case study: The authenticity of UNICEF's ambassadors

Case study: Misleading copy recycling

4. Communicate values, and do it consistently.

Case study: Perfect pitch: Linking voice and values,

<http://www.charitycomms.org.uk/articles/pitch-perfect-linking-voice-and-values>

*Case study: The 'About us' page; the Sumatran Orangutan Society, <https://www.orangutans-sos.org/who-we-are> **

5. Subvert expectations.

Case study: OXFAM's 'Pile of poo'

Case study: The NSPCC's 'Talking PANTS' campaign,

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/keeping-children-safe/underwear-rule/>

Case study: Depaul UK's 'There's another side to the story' awareness raising campaign,

<http://publicis.london/made/corners/>, <https://uk.depaulcharity.org/our-work/our-campaigns>

6. Use inclusive, accessible language, and void jargon.

Case study: Annual Reports - Keech Hospice Care 2105, see

<https://www.keech.org.uk/about/annual-reports> * *

Case study: Charity research publications - The Children's Society 'The Good Childhood Report' 2016, <http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/research/the-good-childhood-report>

Case study: Direct mail appeals

7. Invite feedback and turn it into dialogue.

Case study: The supporter's voice at UNICEF

Case study: SolarAid's simple questions

Case study: The Children's Society acts on supporter feedback

Case study: Friends of the Earth engages with supporter concerns

8. Make contact permissions options work for supporters.

Case study: Opting in in the face-to-face fundraising scenario

9. Test your communications to find out what works best for your charity and your supporters.

Case study: Testing at UNICEF

* with thanks to Matthew Sherrington for this point; **with thanks to Chris Washington-Sare for the example

Appendix 2. Research sources

Alongside research interviews with various senior figures in fundraising, supporter engagement, and charity consultancy services, the following documents and sources were used.

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Appendix 3. Methodology

The research methods used in this project include:

A series of research interviews with senior figures in fundraising, supporter engagement and consultancy services across the charity sector. The objectives of these interviews were to:

- facilitate development of a clear, cross-sector picture of charities' thinking around language use and approaches to testing;
- elicit concerns about use and testing of language;
- reveal contextual constraints which impact upon use of language within charity communications with and about supporters (and in turn impact upon charities' ability to adopt particular good practice recommendations);
- identify gaps in sector knowledge and confidence around language use and testing;
- explore potential 'quick wins' in the development of language use and testing;
- discover examples of sector-leading practice.

A review of charity consultancy/advisory blogs and published commentary.

A review of sector research hosted online by the Institute of Fundraising, the Charity Commission, the NCVO, Third Sector, nfpSynergy, SOFII and fast.MAP.

A review of charities' websites, charities' mass media messages and sample direct mail, email and telephone communications.

A review of relevant academic publications, as detailed in Appendix 2.

A review of relevant empirical studies of the views and behavior of people who do and do not donate to charity (including studies described within the academic publications listed above, and including qualitative and quantitative data gathered by individual charities and organisations such as the Charity Commission through ROI measurement, split-testing, surveys and focus groups).

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The project recommendations were reviewed by Ken Burnett and Matthew Sherrington.