

Why fundraising needs to come to its senses

Traditional methods of fundraising are no longer sufficient to capture the hearts and minds of donors, argues Branding and Fundraising Consultant James Hammond. But, he suggests, there is a way to generate a deeper donor loyalty – and it's all to do with sensory perception

'Sensory branding' is a term that's gaining immense popularity in the commercial sector. The idea that engaging customers on an emotional level through sensory experiences is not just a fanciful theory. Major advances in knowledge about how the brain works reveal that customer loyalty can be strengthened by creating emotional customer experiences using the full spectrum of senses.

Charities can benefit immensely from this approach. After all, pushing emotional buttons is something in which charities should be experts. However, most charities aren't making the most of the sensory opportunities available.

So, I've been 'on the circuit' in the charity sector, presenting to various fundraisers the outline of sensory branding and how it can help improve donor giving, donor retention and raising awareness. It's been tough going. For some 'traditional' fundraisers, the whole notion of exploiting the senses is simply...well...nonsense.

They're missing out big time. Emotions, as any neuroscientist will tell you, are the responses to external stimuli we experience. These experiences arrive at our brain through at least five senses – sight, sound, touch, taste and smell. So, for example, we might hear some music which recalls a pleasant memory, see a picture which triggers laughter, or feel contented simply by enjoying some food or drink.

It's not rocket science to suggest that the more senses in which we engage donors, the more likely we are to deepen their emotional ties to our charity –

and hopefully increase their financial support. However, most organisations utilise only one sense – that of *sight* – to drive their fundraising. Donor mailings, websites, advertisements – all geared around a one-dimensional approach, which means four other vital senses are being ignored. Some charities do include sound in their fundraising campaigns, but this is usually restricted to a soundtrack in a television campaign (if your charity is in that league) or a few soundbites on the website.

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Smell is the most under-utilised sense of all. So I ask fundraisers a simple question: 'What does your organisation smell like?' And that's when the trouble begins. I spot some attendees donning their verbal knuckledusters as they get ready to dismiss such a seemingly banal question. At my recent Institute of Fundraising National Convention presentation, one delegate (you know who you are) arrogantly exclaimed: 'We're not a donor-led charity, and we've better things to do with our time and money than wonder what we smell like.' (Isn't a 'non-donor-led charity' something of an oxymoron?) Cue the next disgruntled fundraiser, a chap from a spinal injuries charity who

shouts out, 'We're a small charity and I've got enough on my plate trying to find new supporters. How can what we smell like possibly increase our donor base? It's ridiculous.'

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It would seem that neither fundraiser knows anything about how the brain works. According to research, 75 percent of our emotions are triggered by aromas and smells. Casino operators in the US have discovered that scenting the area around slot machines with a particular aroma can generate as much as a 45 percent increase in business. Singapore Airlines created a special fragrance for their airline cabin crew which is also incorporated in the hot face towels handed out to passengers. It's not the seating, comfort or food that gets top marks in their customer satisfaction surveys, it's the smell.

Museums have also benefited from using specific smells to convey historical environments. Employees can gain from the use of appropriate smells, too. Studies have highlighted how, for instance, the smell of peppermint in an office environment can increase employee alertness, performance and attitudes.

How can sensory branding work for fundraisers? Consider, when preparing the next donor mailing, how many senses can be incorporated. Can something in the 'ask' depict the sounds, smells or even the taste of the cause you care about, on top of

the visual elements? For instance, if you're a charity involved in food aid to the third world, how can you depict the sounds and smells of poverty? If your work is with nature conservation, can donors experience the smell of a tree, or the sound of wildlife? There are unlimited ways in which you can engage your donors in a deeper emotional experience. All it takes is a little innovation and some creativity. And it needn't be expensive.

Of course, sensory branding isn't restricted to mailings. It should permeate every donor touchpoint of the organisation. I ask the question, 'Why do charity shops smell bad?' and await another bout of verbals from attendees.

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Yes, I know that overworked volunteer staff are knee-deep in donated parcels of smelly clothes. But has anyone ever wondered what would happen if, in the shop (or shops), there was one particular air freshener that could be associated with that charity's brand?

And what about when donors call your organisation, or pop into your offices? What do they hear? What do they see? What feelings are evoked? Is there a consistent multi-sensory experience?

To be fair, some in the audience take the message on board with enthusiasm. They are unblinkered, willing to explore new ways of fundraising with an open mind. They understand that

donors are as brand-aware when it comes to choosing which charity to support as they are in selecting their next pair of trainers.

The fact is, sensory branding is one of the most powerful fundraising tools a charity can possess.

No doubt there'll always be scoffers who'll dismiss it as 'irrelevant psychobabble.' It's pointless trying to explain to them that if five musical notes can help create a global brand for Intel, sounds might be a useful

addition to the fundraising toolbox. Or that to touch a leaf is emotionally stronger than just reading about it. It's far easier for them to compile a one-dimensional fundraising element whilst complaining about how hard it is to fundraise in today's crowded charity market.

Nevertheless, I intend to carry on evangelising about sensory branding despite the resistance. Because when it comes to engaging donors emotionally, I know it makes perfect sense. ■

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