Comments

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The subject for this issue's Comments section is the challenges facing charity advertisers. I have asked two eminently qualified individuals to discuss this subject, and I hope that you will find them as insightful as I have.

The first commentary is from Professor Roger Bennett at London Metropolitan University. Roger suggests that academic literature is mistakenly still focusing on measuring the effectiveness of charity advertising as compared with other more conventional media. He suggests that the real need is for the development of measures that can be effectively used to enhance the efficacy of online fundraising. The real focus for charity advertisers should now be the nature of the charity's website and the nature of the visitation experience. The key is to convert the charity website browser to an online donor.

The other commentary, by Christopher Greenwood, Joint Managing Director for nfpSynergy, a London-based charity consultancy, certainly agrees with Roger that work is needed on the nature of and triggers for online giving, but he laments the fact that limited budgets really keep most charity advertisers from doing any meaningful advertising research. Christopher suggests that only a handful of UK charities are doing any significant advertising research. The real problem is that charity marketing departments have insufficient budgets to allow meaningful research. This becomes the more pressing issue for charity marketers.

As always, we hope that you will find these essays both informative and valuable. We welcome your comments at ijacomments@warc.com.

Research into charity advertising needs a new direction
Roger Bennett

A large amount of charity advertising is world class, as evidenced by charitable organisations regularly receiving international awards for advertising excellence. Charities such as Oxfam, the RSPCA and the Salvation Army are routinely listed in, for example, the IPA Advertising Effectiveness Awards, the Chip Shop Awards, and the *Guardian* Media Group's annual prizes for advertising creativity. Unfortunately, however, the advertising activities of these award-winning (and

other) charities (and the very substantial research effort and investment that goes into them) are in my view increasingly irrelevant. This is because the typical top-500 fundraising charity in Britain, Australia, the US and in several other western countries now obtains around 15% of its annual income via online giving (Professional Fundraising 2006), and the percentage is growing year by year.

In Britain, for example, online credit card donations processed through the UK Charities Aid Foundation rose from £65.5 million in 2002 to £325.6 million in 2006 (Professional Fundraising 2006). In the US, online giving was worth $4.5 billion (£2.21 billion) in 2005, representing between 10% and 15% of the donor incomes of most US charities (NFG 2006). A survey of 1090 randomly selected UK internet users carried out in 2006 found that 7% of the sample had donated to a charity online over the previous 12 months (Professional Fundraising 2006), equating to 1.8 million donations by internet users in the population as a whole. It is known, moreover, that the average value of online donations is consistently higher than for offline donations (NFG 2006). Indeed, Harrison-Walker and Williamson (2000, p. 251) found that people typically gave 15–20% more when using a credit card than when writing a cheque. Disaster and famine relief appeals in particular are known to entice large numbers of first-time visitors to charity websites, enabling them to raise millions in periods of just a few weeks (Gomes & Knowles 2001). In the US, internet donations for tsunami relief in 2004 accounted for more than a third of the total amount raised. Half of all the donations received following Hurricane Katrina in 2005 were given online (NFG 2006).

What all this means, of course, is that concern with improving 'traditional' charity advertising techniques needs to be replaced by the systemic development of measures for enhancing the efficacy of online fundraising. This is not happening, alas, and it is obvious from recent academic literature in the field that charity advertising research continues to be dominated by the study of advertising effectiveness in relation to 'conventional' media.

Successful online fundraising requires specific approaches and methods that (with a few ad hoc exceptions) have *not* been subjected to rigorous academic investigation. Huge amounts of attention have been devoted to the impacts of certain forms of imagery (especially emotive imagery) that appear in charity advertisements in newspapers, cinema and on TV; but research into the consequences of various *genres* of imagery shown on charity websites has (in the academic literature at least) been sparse. Equally, vast amounts of time and money have been spent on donor market segmentation in the context of direct marketing (usually vis-à-vis mailshots), but not in relation to online giving. Researchers have devised an impressive array of devices for analysing attention and recall levels for charity messages communicated via print and broadcast media, but few such devices for use with charity websites. Likewise,

whereas advertising research has frequently addressed issues connected with the employment of celebrity endorsements during campaigns, the same issues have not been dealt with in web page contexts. Charities are fortunate in that, often, they can easily procure celebrities to endorse their activities (sometimes free of charge), and pictures of and stories about these celebrities commonly appear on websites. So where is the academic research concerning how a celebrity endorsement should be framed within a web page? How can a celebrity's message best be integrated with collateral information about a charity's mission in a manner that stimulates online giving? Another matter that has been widely researched in general but not in online situations is the utility of portraying members of various ethnic and cultural groups in particular manners. Where are the studies that examine this question from a charity website perspective? Extensive research has been conducted into the effects of humour, sex and irony in print and broadcast media advertisements, but not into their inclusion in the websites of fundraising charities. The same comment applies to the use of fear arousal as a means of online fundraising.

A plethora of issues apply to the (critically) important matter of *impulsive* online donating. Within 'bricks and mortar' retail environments, impulsive *purchases* are known to account for up to half of all transactions. By analogy, impulsive donations to charities made by people who browse charity websites might therefore be worth a great deal of money, given that the internet can turn the impulse to help a charity into an actual donation within seconds (NFG 2006). What is the incidence of impulsive online giving among internet users? What is the typical profile of individuals who are likely to donate impulsively online? Are innately impulsive people more inclined than others to give impulsively via the internet? Research into impulsive purchasing has discovered certain variables that exert significant influences on impulsive decisions to buy products. Are these variables also relevant to impulsive online donation behaviour? How can web page layouts be varied to stimulate online impulsive giving? In particular, what are the best website 'atmospheres' for stimulating impulse donations, high-value donations or donations simultaneously accompanied by a longer-term financial commitment on the giver's part?

A new agenda for charity advertising research

There is, to say the least, a great deal that advertising researchers need to find out in the online fundraising domain. Online donations (impulsive or otherwise) can only occur *after* a prospective giver has entered a charity's website. Research is necessary therefore into the configurations of offline advertising media that are best for inducing people to visit a site. How effective is the practice of directly emailing lists of individuals bought from other charities as a method for encouraging the recipients to click onto a charity's home page? What

website designs are most suitable for inducing online donations from various types of online giver and how often should web page designs be changed to prevent donor attention fatigue? The effects of advertisement flighting and pulsing have been studied in great detail in offline media contexts, yet very little (if anything) is known about the impacts of flighting and pulsing where online fundraising is concerned. Another important question is the extent to which the switch from traditional giving methods to online donations might cannibalise from the former to the latter, resulting thereby in little net financial gain. How can donor channel cannibalisation (see Bennett 2006) be avoided?

Serious challenges confront advertising researchers who wish to address these issues, and many practical problems are involved. Browsers' reactions to various web page designs have to be recorded in real time, implying the need for laboratory-based research at the institutional level. This is expensive, and few universities have the spare computer laboratories, PCs and other resources required. Online donor surveys completed after browsers have perused certain websites *might* be possible, but response rates will normally be low, data protection issues will arise and experimentation with differing website designs can be difficult. Questionnaires must, in these circumstances, be very short; meaning that the debate on the acceptability of single-item measurement of constructs needs to be urgently revisited. In

summary, a whole new world of advertising research needs to be explored and codified, with fresh techniques, new approaches, new research methodologies and, above all, radical new thinking.

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Roger is the author of many books and a large number of journal articles on various aspects of marketing and business management. His current research interests concern the marketing communications of non-profit organisations, focusing particularly on the advertising imagery used by fundraising charities.

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