

How should you engage with the next generation of donors?

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During this last decade I have worked with several well-established Christian charities whose fundraising teams share a common concern about their aging donor bases and the fact that they are not attracting enough younger donors (*e.g. donors in their 40s or 50s*) through their communications.

Some of my clients are charities that have been around for a long time, with recognizable names and wonderful track records. But, most of their support is coming from individuals in their 70s and 80s rather than from younger donors. So, what is the problem here?

Is it simply that younger donors are more likely to be interested in supporting charities, or causes that are doing something 'new' to address age old problems of material or spiritual poverty? Or, is it that well-established charities are communicating in ways that are not attractive to the next generation of donors?

My answer would be 'Yes' to both these questions. As our research on '*Why Christians Give*' and other opinions in the third sector show, the age of '*passive giving*', where the donor trusts the charity and hopes that they are doing a good job is coming to an end.

In my opinion, the next generation of donors is genuinely seeking to be more '*mission-connected*' with the charities they support. They want to do something new to bring about lasting changes in the world. And, what's more, they want to see measurable outcomes in return for their giving.

How should your charity respond to the aspirations and expectations of the new generation of donors? What should you do to engage with them effectively?

Here are some ideas that you might wish to consider. Some of our clients are doing these things already and getting better results.

1. Re-evaluate your mission and re-position your charity's work in ways that will appeal to the next generation of donors.

Many charities, including many Christian mission agencies, are continuing to do the same work they have always done and they wrongly assume that the next generation of donors understand what they are about and will take an interest in it. This might not be the case despite the fact that the charity is being effective in its mission.

So, if you want to engage with the new generation of donors now is the time to go back to your roots. Think about it: What was the need/s your charity was set up to address? Has that need/s changed over the years? What does the need/s look like now? How can your response to the need expressed in words the new generation donors will understand and be inspired by?

What made your past donors fall in love with your work in the first place? Write down those reasons and reflect on them. Are they enough to make new donors fall in love with your work today?

How is your charity changing lives? What reasons for giving can be found in the stories of your charity's work?

Your next newsletter, appeal, e-update or campaign should focus on how to explain the critical importance of your charity's mission, instead of assuming that potential donors already understand this or see supporting your work as their priority.

2. Start talking about your charity's mission in new ways.

Your messages to your target audiences (*e.g. potential donors, new donors, lapsed donors, potential major donors, etc*) may not be as clear and succinct as they should be. If you need an outsider to evaluate your communications give us a call on: **0777 558 2696** and we would be happy to review your communications and strengthen your messages.

Perhaps your charity's communications routinely include jargon or insider language that can keep potential donors out, instead of inviting them in.

For example, take a look at a few editions of the *teartimes* magazine. They contain many good examples of talking about a charity's mission in new ways. *Tearfund* is talking about its 'traditional' mission of fighting poverty in new ways by emphasizing the role that local churches play in this process, by showing how beneficiaries' lives have been impacted over time and by inviting its supporters to live simply in their contexts and be generous, etc.

3. Learn to think, talk and write like your donors.

The fact of the matter is that the majority of your donors are likely to have something in common with each other – their beliefs, their values, their lifestyles, or aspirations. Do you know what these things are? If the answer is no, why not commission some market research to find out what your donors value and how they see your work.

We can help your charity to set goals for the research project and carry out the research for you. You can use these findings to shape up your fundraising plans and the content of your communications pieces.

If you already know what your donors have in common, make a list and determine what steps you would take if you were to start from scratch persuading a potential donor that a gift to fulfill your mission can make a lasting change in the world.

By starting to look at your charity's mission from the donor's point of view, in a way that shows how the donor's values can be fulfilled by supporting your charity's work, you will be able to attract new donors and make friends for life.

4. Encourage and equip younger donors to 'tell their friends' about your charity's work

My research on Christian giving showed that evangelical donors in the 45 – 54 and 55 – 64 age groups are most likely to be prompted to give to a charity because a friend recommended their work. The good news is that these are the younger donors you want to attract so why not invite and equip some supporters from these age groups to host an event in their church, speak at a community gathering, etc to raise awareness and funds on your behalf.

Compassion UK is doing this well through its new church partnership initiative. Get hold of a copy of their promotional church pack and note how *Compassion* is not targeting church leaders but individuals in the congregation, asking them to 'tell their friends' about its work and invite them to sponsor children through *Compassion*.

5. Show your next generation of donors that your charity's transparent

In an age when trust in public institutions, including churches and charities, is eroding fast it is important to be financially transparent. Our research on Christian giving shows that the majority of Christian donors, especially major donors are likely to consider '*transparency about how a charity spends their money*' as a top motivating factor for donating. So, if you are looking to engage with new potential major donors and keep those who are already giving involved how are you going to communicate financial transparency to them?

Some charities are trying to promote transparency by including a pie chart in their websites showing how a gift of £1 is distributed. Others are sending out special annual reports to major donors and including financial information in their newsletters and magazines.

Determine the messages you want to send out to your donors about how the charity is making a difference with their gifts and be consistent in sending those messages out using all communications channels.

6. Make giving easy and convenient for the next generation of donors.

Does your charity ask donors to affix a stamp in the reply envelope to save costs to the charity? Do you write to donors to let you know whether they want to be thanked for their gifts or not? Do you ask a church representative to call your charity again if they are looking for some information for their church or do you get their number and call them back?

The list of these questions can go on and on... all of them highlighting one issues: the charity wanting to make it more easy and convenient for itself rather than for donors.

The fact of the matter is that most next generation donors, unlike their parents, are not likely to have any stamps about. So, accept their gift and say to them 'the stamp is not a big deal.'

Also, most next generation donors, unlike a minority group of 80+ year olds, want to be thanked for their gifts. A thank you letter or email also helps to assure them that the gift was needed and will be put to good use.

The church missions representative who does not get a call back from your charity is likely to go and ask another charity to speak at their church because he or she need to fill in a slot in their programme and will do what is convenient for them not for you.

So, if you are trying to engage with young donors make sure that you are offering them convinient ways to give and not the other way around.