

AGENT PROVOCATEUR

Fundraising has taken such a battering recently that it is easy to forget why we do it. The solution, says **JAY KENNEDY**, is to focus on the ‘B’ word

Beneficiaries. Where have they been?

From the Fundraising Regulator and the Fundraising Preference Service, to the Charities (Protection and Social Investment) Act, to the Information Commissioner’s latest pontifications about data protection – you have to search hard to find any consideration of what these debates mean for the people that charities help.

We’ve been consumed by details of legal structures, codes of practice, income targets, governance, reputations, and “donor care” (or lack thereof). Important issues, for sure. I’m not denying or excusing the problems or bad practice. But ultimately this is second-order stuff.

Why the hell are we doing all this, after all? Why do we have charities? Or fundraisers? Why are we direct mailing, knocking on doors, standing outside in the cold waving buckets, ringing people on the phone? Why are we trying to set up legacies, win in-kind support from companies, and navigate the labyrinth of new tech for fundraising potential?

To read much of the press and hear so many politicians speak, you’d think this was all just some vast and illegal conspiracy to harass people, rather than fundamentally important, life-saving activity that keeps our society from collapsing.

Charities aren’t doing it so they can keep people employed, or stay in business, or grow bigger, or boost their brand, or maximise ROI, or any of that stuff. Or, rather, they shouldn’t be. Losing sight of what actually matters has certainly been part of the problem.



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They are doing it so they can help people! Or trees, or Mother Earth, or even the poor bleeding donkeys (bless ‘em). They’re doing it so that Jane, a child who was sexually abused by her stepfather, can get some counselling so she doesn’t kill herself aged 13. It’s so Edith, a 92-year-old widow, has a few hours of human contact at the social club every week. So Muhammad, a Syrian refugee, has a chance to rebuild his life after losing everything. So Gareth, a disabled man in a rural Wales, gets a lift on the community transport bus to the doctor’s surgery. They’re doing it so that we can have clean air, music, sports, poetry. The list goes on.

Listening to our politicians, press, and

even plenty of charity folk, you could be forgiven for thinking that the most important thing wasn’t the people we exist for. It’s all the rest of the froth about systems, processes and standards. But they’re only a means to an end.

Pissed off yet? Here comes the heresy: we’re colluding in it. We’ve allowed the wrong things to take priority. Charities do NOT exist to benefit donors. Financial donors may be vital to plenty of charities, but not all or even a majority. Of course donors, beneficiaries, supporters, trustees and volunteers may in many cases be one and the same people. But the conceptual distinction is critical.

Donors are another means to the end. They are not the point of charity. The act of giving should be a sacred one, honoured with commensurate respect. But giving isn’t all about money.

Charity isn’t a popularity contest, either. If it were, half of the sector might as well pack it in. Charities must deliver public benefit, not satisfy public opinion. It’s a crucial distinction that so many people fail to understand. Charities are accountable, broadly, to the public via the law and their own charitable objects, which define their activities. But charity law is primarily there to support beneficiaries above all, not “the public” writ large.

In 2017, let’s all stop and take a moment to think: what’s all this really about? Have we got our priorities right, or have we lost sight of the most important thing? Let’s refocus on the “B” word. If we do, then the “F” word will be “fantastic”, not, well, the other one. ■

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