

Successful fundraising for unpopular causes

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This article asks why some charitable causes are seen as unpopular, and identifies five practices that enable apparently unpopular charities to raise significant funds.

How do donors choose between charities? Why are certain causes unpopular? How do some charities in unpopular cause areas fundraise successfully, and what can other charities learn from their example?

Philanthropy in the UK is not evenly distributed according to objective perceptions of charities' worthiness – charities in unpopular cause areas have achieved fundraising success. Donors' decisions to give are heavily influenced by subjective personal experience and taste, and successful fundraising charities create an organisational culture of philanthropy, effectively frame their cause and its beneficiaries, and proactively influence public perception of their work.

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Background & Context



- **Eight core mechanisms drive overall giving:** awareness of need, being asked, tax-effectiveness/benefits-in-kind, altruism, reputational benefits, psychological benefits, personal values, and proof of a charity's efficacy. However, **these mechanisms don't fully explain why donors choose one cause over another.**
- Many factors may influence the choice of cause: a donor's tastes, life experiences, perception of a charity's competence, desire to make a distinctive personal impact, and political learnings. **The biggest driver of choice between charities is whether a charity makes an effective ask.**
- **Charities' organisational behaviour may affect their apparent popularity** (crowding out theory). Charities may appear popular because lack of statutory funding obliges them to invest in fundraising, whilst others may appear unpopular because non-philanthropic income meets their identified needs or because they view themselves as unpopular and ask too little or not at all.
- **Social norms and donors' personal experiences influence a cause's popularity** (the social construction of sympathy). Donors are more likely to give to 'in-groups' they consider 'deserving' of sympathy and less likely to give to less 'deserving' 'out-groups'.

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Academic articles on philanthropy through a practitioner lens

Takeaways

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Learnings



- **Unpopularity is not in itself a barrier to fundraising success** – Research by the authors in 2016 (and updated in 2020) identified the 10 most unpopular causes in UK media coverage from 1994 to 2014. In each cause area, 10 fundraising charities were identified as successful and examined.
- **These successful organisations demonstrate 3 levels of good practice in asking:**
 1. **Organisational** – Cultivating a culture of philanthropy in which most people view philanthropy as critical, act as ambassadors, promote philanthropy and can articulate a case for giving.
 2. **Donor** – Compelling **storytelling** to connect donors and beneficiaries, educate donors about wider societal issues and minimise perceptions of beneficiaries' culpability.
 3. **Societal** – Influencing **mass media** to shape public opinion. Social media has helped to redistribute some influence to charities with fewer resource and traditional media power.
- **Practical lessons for charities – 5 good asking practices:**
 1. **Asking** is the single biggest factor affecting giving.
 2. To frame your cause effectively, capture donors' **sympathies** and appeal to their personal giving preferences.
 3. Illustrate your cause with the right **images** (taking care not to reinforce negative stereotypes of beneficiaries).
 4. Empower your whole community to ask and **advocate**: employees, volunteers, beneficiaries, donors, celebrities.
 5. Raise your cause's profile and influence public opinion through calculated **marketing**, including social media campaigns.

Three case examples of unpopular causes achieving success



Focus: Mental health

Deliberately instilling a culture of philanthropy more than doubled income: £10.4m in 2015 to £26.4m in 2020.



Focus: Parents in prison

Focusing on the children as beneficiaries helped to double their income (2017-2019).

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Working to protect children

Focus: Child abusers & those at risk of abusing

2019 social media campaign 'It's time we talked about it' correlated with 40% increase in income.

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