

**‘You can try to press different emotional buttons’: The conflicts and strategies of eliciting emotions for fundraisers**

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# **‘You can try to press different emotional buttons’: The conflicts and strategies of eliciting emotions for fundraisers**

## **Abstract**

In a competitive climate in which charities must increasingly rely on fundraising with the public, emotions such as hope, guilt, and fear are powerful tools that can be used strategically to secure donations or participation. This paper explores data from interviews with 23 fundraisers and voluntary sector workers, managers and officials, to argue that decisions around how, why and when to invest in the elicitation of emotion in fundraising are often difficult and conflicted, with some identifying a battle between ethics and effectiveness. We identify three key levels of conflict that must be negotiated: at the level of the charity sector, where the emotional ethics particularly of larger charities have been met with some resistance from the public and press; at the level of the organisation itself, where the ethics of representation are often a subject of conflict between fundraising and other departments such as policy; and finally at the experiential level of individual fundraisers themselves, who report being routinely internally conflicted around the rights and wrongs of using emotion in their work. A strategic approach to eliciting emotion emerges in the data as a useful way to address some of these areas of conflict, with fundraisers making careful 'balancing' decisions about how and with whom to mobilise certain emotions at specific times.

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## **Running Head**

The conflicts and strategies of eliciting emotions for fundraisers

## **Keywords**

conflict, emotions, fundraisers, fundraising, guilt

## **Introduction**

Charity is inherently emotional work. Vast numbers of nonprofit and voluntary sector organisations exist to tackle the most appalling social and individual suffering. Fundraisers are presented by some as an overly virtuous figures - 'moral trainers' (O'Neill, 1994) acting as midwives to virtue and generosity, helping move money from those who have a surplus of it, to those who need it. Appealing to emotion sits at the heart of this process: as Martin Campbell (2012) put it in a blog for the Institute of Fundraising, 'It doesn't matter which, be it concern, worry, fear, affection or love, emotions are at the heart of our charitable giving, and are the essential starting point for engaging with our donors.'

This article presents findings from interviews with 23 fundraisers, fundraising managers, and voluntary sector workers to argue that decisions around how, why and when to invest in the elicitation of emotion in fundraising are often difficult and conflicted in a battle between questions of ethics and effectiveness. Interviewee concerns around the role of emotion in fundraising can be understood at the macro-level of the voluntary sector, at the meso-level of the organisation a fundraiser works for and at the experiential micro-level of individual fundraisers themselves. The ethics of emotion and the strategic practice of how fundraisers

and fundraising organisations negotiate utilising emotion is revealed, corresponding with MacQuillan's (2016a) model of balances between concern for donors and beneficiaries, with fundraisers making careful decisions about how and with whom to mobilise certain emotions at specific times, but ultimately with little certainty about how to balance competing ethical and practical interests, beyond analysing and being led by the context of individual situations.

The article will start with a brief overview of the research in this field, before describing the methods employed in the study, and presenting the findings, broken down in the macro, meso and micro structure as explained above. It will conclude by reflecting on the overlap and distinctions between the research debates and 'on the ground' practice of fundraising professionals and the new attention on fundraising codes of practice in the UK.

### **Emotions and the Practice of Fundraisers**

It is beyond the purview of this paper to comprehensively document what 'emotion' means in its many contexts, but broadly we can refer to Cabanac's (2002: 76) definition that emotion is 'any mental experience with high intensity and high hedonicity [pleasure and/or displeasure]'. Writing about 'positive' or 'negative' emotions is ultimately a simplification because individuals interpret emotional messages differently, have varying levels as to what they would class as a 'high intensity' response, and, within fundraising, one fundraising output can contain both negative and positive emotional messages (Dogra, 2007). Some will see even the simple word 'donate' in dichotomous ways: from an opportunity to solve a problem, to another begging letter. However, there is a colloquial understanding of emotion as a fundraising issue that charitable organisations experience endlessly (MacQuillan, 2016b). In this article, we want to focus on what fundraisers think about the role of emotion in their work. Fundraisers frequently choose to use a comprehensive gamut of emotional approaches, from evoking nostalgic memories among potential donors (Merchant and Ford, 2008) to

asking celebrities to suffer on screen for good causes (Lim and Moufahim, 2015). Emotions play an important role in donation decisions (Kelly, 1998; Tindall and Waters, 2010), and, as social beings, donors will have different interpretations as to what constitutes 'rational' behaviour in a giving situation than will fundraisers (Breeze, 2013). Therefore fundraisers need to be strategic in how they elicit emotional responses. Bennett (2015) found that fundraising adverts that are emotional and affective have the potential to generate mixed emotions in the general public, with a complex and often unpredictable set of negative and positive emotional response. Therefore he surmises, perhaps unsurprisingly, fundraisers need to craft advertisements which arouse 'desirable' emotions and avoid evoking 'undesirable' ones.

Fundraisers also have to make choices about balancing emotional appeals, with more logical-rational appeals based on presenting an overview of need. In his content analysis of direct mail fundraising, Ritzenhein (1998) finds that fundraisers are more likely to rely on emotional arguments than logical arguments. Furthermore, over 60 percent of the emotion-centred materials did not provide any supporting statistics, examples or testimonies, whereas only 25 percent of the logic-centred appeals failed to include these. Instead, emotional appeals centred on stressing beliefs and attitudes, persuasive or demonstrative language, or on showing gratitude to potential donors.

In terms of 'what works', Chang (2011: 605) found that 'guilt appeals' can be more persuasive than non-guilt appeals, although the influence is complex and contingent on the products that are marketed and the size of the donation. Similarly Chang and Lee (2010: 212), in an experiment examining the effectiveness of the framing of child poverty framing, showed that negative framing is effective and that 'framing a charitable message negatively leads to higher persuasion than framing it positively'. Slightly conversely however, Kerkhof and Kuiper (2008: 170) found that when fundraising materials featured positive information

regarding the attainment of a campaign's goal, donations were increased. Merchant, Ford and Sargeant (2010), in their analysis of the emotional processes involved when potential donors experience a fundraising appeal, found evidence to support a particular journey: that after exposure to a 'problem statement' in an appeal, potential donors feel negative emotions, followed by positive emotions when they are given the opportunity to help solve the problem through making a contribution. These positive emotions can be built on by voluntary organisations by giving donors feedback on the charity's work, in turn improving the likelihood to give again. Therefore, the relationships that fundraisers make with donors, a cornerstone of their professional practice, is bound up with decisions about stressing emotional messages. Tindall and Waters' (2012) research showed that fundraisers found that fundraiser-donor relationships which relied on 'emotional manipulation' may exclude detailed dialogues and conversations, lack insight into the true motivations for donors, and resultantly may stifle successful fundraising when compared to those which utilised detailed two-way dialogues. Pressing emotional buttons therefore can be seen as a risky shortcut for fundraisers, but with obvious potential rewards: there is evidence that fundraising campaigns for disability issues are often successful in raising donations when using the dependence of people with disabilities to elicit feelings of sympathy, guilt and pity in potential donors (Sargeant and Woodliffe, 2007: 282).

As this summary of the literature suggests, arousing or eliciting such emotions can be problematic ethically. In research on the accuracy of images used in homelessness fundraising appeals, Breeze and Dean (2012a; 2012b) found homeless participants felt misrepresented by stereotypical images, but were willing to accept these portrayals if donations were maximised as a result. This balance between accuracy and meeting fundraising targets is a concern and constant struggle for fundraisers: naturally the achievement of both would be preferable, but as one fundraising expert said in response, 'It is

incredibly lucky if you can find a creative, or team of creatives, who can combine the two principles, especially as normally in the charity sector there are limited funds, timescales and staff' (Breeze and Dean, 2012a: 36). This suggests that in making decisions about how to utilise emotions in fundraising materials, fundraisers face professional choices, which they address through their own trained judgement, but also mundane and practical elements, which are the often forgotten limitations of any job.

## **Methods**

Much of the research on the role of emotions in fundraising, such as that discussed above, seeks to test the efficacy of various fundraising messages with potential donors. Surprisingly little academic research exists which explicitly asks fundraisers what they think about their work and the ongoing conflicts and tensions which play a role in shaping parameters for their work (see Breeze, 2017, and the other papers in this special issue). This article therefore contributes to rectifying this.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Table 1: Details of interviewees

We present data from 23 qualitative interviews conducted by the first author in 2015 and 2016 in London and Sheffield in the UK. Interviews were originally designed as a 'state of the sector' style interview, covering a wide range of topic areas. However, given ongoing newspaper stories, political controversies, and the establishment of the new Fundraising Regulator in the UK in 2015, fundraising practices, the management of emotions in communications literature, and internal wrangling over these issues emerged as a central theme in interviews.

Table 1 presents details of the interviewees, showing the varied fields interviewees worked in, including homelessness, supporting people with learning difficulties, providing alcohol and drug abuse services, and voluntary sector infrastructure organisations, among others. Table 1 also details the principal role undertaken by the interviewee at the organisation. Some worked solely as fundraisers, and several worked within or leading the communications team. Chief Executives had ultimate responsibility for fundraising undertaken by their organisations, and all had views on fundraising within their organisation and in the wider voluntary sector. Nine of the 23 interviewees were female, and all of the interviewees were white British, which the authors recognise as a limitation of the study, probably emanating from the combination of purposive and snowball sampling processes which were employed. Respondents were not asked to self-report their social class or age. The interviewee who worked for a community foundation was a major gifts officer, working predominately face to face with potential donors; all other interviewees spoke almost entirely about literature or advert-centred fundraising. This sample is not meant to be representative or provide definitive proof of what all fundraisers, or those working with fundraisers, think about their work, but rather to provide some authentic initial insight into the lived experience (Silverman, 1993; Crouch and McKenzie, 2006) of an under-examined policy and professional issue within the context of a sector under a certain amount of increased pressure.

Interviewees volunteered their time to be interviewed with no compensation, bar updates on the research as it progresses. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were recorded, before being transcribed by a professional transcription company. Interviews were first coded by a research assistant, and then by the second author of this paper using the Nvivo software program. The first stage of thematic coding gathered all data into broad themes, and the second stage focused on theming those elements coded for 'emotion', the data from which coalesced into the emergent findings discussed below.



## **Findings**

There was consensus among research participants that, while emotion is a useful and crucial tool for fundraising, it is also a realm of significant concern, contestation and conflict. The following analysis details the debates between questions of balancing ethics and effectiveness surrounding the use of emotion; identifies how conflict operates across the three related levels (sector, organisation and individual); and examines some strategies that fundraisers use to decide how, when and with whom to deploy emotion.

### ***Ethics and effectiveness***

Perhaps the first emotion that comes to mind when thinking of fundraising is that of guilt (Basil, Ridgway and Basil, 2006; Bhati and Eikenberry, 2016; Chang, 2011). Although interviewees agreed that guilt was a feature of fundraising's emotional 'toolkit', they also identified a number of other emotions including pity, anger, empathy, shock and inspiration. As one fundraising consultant explained: 'you can try to press different emotional buttons'. The idea of 'pressing buttons' is a useful one, as it suggests that emotion is seen as something of a 'quick fix', or, as another fundraiser put it, a way to 'prompt an instant response'. While some emphasised the convenience and efficiency of shocking emotional campaigns – 'they work, it's that simple' – others focused on the previously discussed unpredictability of trying to provoke emotional responses in the hope they will lead to actual gestures of support: 'you don't know what emotion somebody is experiencing...you can't govern how people will respond to how they feel'.

While the effectiveness or predictability of using emotion was one area of debate, the rights and wrongs of doing so, particularly in terms of longer term consequences for public perceptions, was perhaps more central to respondent's accounts. Given that Merchant, Ford and Sargeant (2010) found that both negative and positive emotions have a role to play in

donors' responses, fundraisers wanted to make a clear distinction between the two, with 'positive' emotions seen as a more ethical approach by many:

We just don't use [negative] visuals really, we talk about the positive side of things... "Look what we've done for this person", essentially. (Fundraiser, homelessness voluntary organisation)

It's got to be a balance of the positive and negative. The best fundraising, it's about stories, it's about inspiring. (Policy officer, voluntary sector infrastructure organisation)

I think an 'empowerment' or, "Look at what we could do together"... or, "Look at the difference you can make by supporting," is a better, positive narrative around it. (Policy officer, youth volunteering organisation)

In contrast to these perspectives, one professional fundraiser we spoke to was of the view that sending supporters positive messages about organisations' achievements 'doesn't work' because it fails to demonstrate an 'ongoing need' for support, suggesting a preference for the logical-rational approach to appeals detailed by Ritzenhein (1998). As these different views indicate, ethical questions for fundraisers and senior voluntary sector workers are never far away from the concern of effectiveness or 'what works', with the two debates often in conflict with one another (with the extra complication that effectiveness can also be an issue of ethics, where ineffective fundraising materials are a waste of donations). As another interviewee, a policy director with a national voluntary sector infrastructure body, noted, fundraising is 'the bit of the sector that is the most fraught with moral, managerial, quandaries'. These 'quandaries' we argue can be understood to operate at three levels of analysis, moving from the macro level of the wider voluntary sector, to the meso level of the voluntary organisation, and, finally, to the micro level of the individual fundraiser.

### ***Conflict at the level of the voluntary sector***

Much of the conflict surrounding the use of emotion at this level emerged from political and economic changes that have led to a greater reliance on public rather than state funding. One fundraiser noted his perception that the fundraising market has increasingly become 'more competitive and more saturated' as a result, leading to what he understood to be a more 'transactional' or 'procurement' based approach to fundraising. This perception of a competitive marketplace was coupled with feelings of suspicion from respondents towards the tactics of telephone marketing agencies or companies who use street fundraisers, derogatorily known as 'chuggers' (a portmanteau of charity and muggers). Respondents from smaller, locally-centred voluntary organisations expressed particular concern around how they feel such tactics have led to public irritation, increasing the difficulty of securing public support for charities, or, as the Chief Executive of a Sheffield charity stated:

I think there's been a lot of damage done to donations, just from the big charities, the way they've behaved.

Respondents' feelings of mistrust and suspicion towards street-funding and phone 'chuggers' encompassed some claims that workers may lack knowledge, or even be encouraged to provide misinformation. One interviewee recalled that, in her previous employment as a street and cold-calling fundraiser, she was 'trained' to use 'invasive' tactics such as eliciting guilt, questioning people's spending habits, and repeated persistence. Even though such tactics may not be directly perpetuated by charities themselves if fundraising work is outsourced, interviewees stated that charities have a 'responsibility to look into who's doing what' (policy officer, voluntary sector infrastructure organisation) and believed that organisations may need to rethink strategies which have transformed fundraising into, or made it look like, a 'mass business'. There was a perception in several interviews that such

‘mass business’ tactics were not trustworthy, and may lead to unethical and manipulative elicitations of emotion. The director of communications at a national homelessness organisation felt that recent fundraising 'scandals' in the UK (such as the death of poppy seller Olive Cooke, and allegations of breaches in data protection) have merely ‘tapped into a perception’ of fundraising as invasive, irritating, aggressive and untrustworthy. Another interviewee reflected on how these wider sector issues have framed the conflict in debates around ethics and effectiveness in emotion-centred fundraising:

As government money dissipates... I wonder if we don't have, as a sector, enough points where we step back and we think about, “Okay, well where have we now got to go from here?” *Just because something is effective, it doesn't mean it's right.* (Policy director, voluntary sector infrastructure organisation, emphasis added)

Interviewees reported that these voluntary sector level conflicts meant they needed to (re)engage with fundraising discussions concerning the 'right thing to do'. The increased need for effective fundraising as a result of wider macro decisions meant that choices around the use of emotion, such as negative framing (Chang and Lee, 2010) and 'guilt appeals' (Chang, 2011) are more effective in fundraising in the short-term. These conflicts emerge especially strongly within organisations themselves, as discussed below.

### ***Conflict at the level of the voluntary organisation***

At the meso level these conflicts continued within organisations themselves. Respondents described fundraisers and fundraising departments as under increasing pressure from the rest of the organisation to raise substantial funds quickly and reliably. At the same time, participants stated that other departments within organisations could be critical of the fundraising strategies used. As a fundraising consultant told us:

Internally, fundraisers get it in the neck from their policy wing or programme wing for oversimplification, dumbing down, not telling it how it really is.

This ‘dumbing down’ could involve debates around the ethics of how emotion was being used in fundraising. A male interviewee who ran a private fundraising firm for voluntary sector clients spoke in some detail about this issue; he imagined the response of a direct marketing fundraiser explaining the situation to the board of a voluntary organisation:

“Yes, we can give you a return of 4:1 on your money over 2 years. But we can’t talk to people about all that boring policy stuff, we have to just show them the big eyed kiddies and tell them that they’re homeless or hungry or ill or starving.”

He felt that workers in other roles in voluntary organisations have come to view fundraisers and fundraising generally not only as ‘dumbed down’ but also as the morally and ethically ‘grubby end of the organisation’. His account points to the disparity of priorities between fundraising and other sectors of the organisation:

The fundraising department are the ones saying, “We need to raise the money.” And elsewhere in the organisation they will say, “You’re stereotyping. You’re perpetuating people’s negative perceptions”

These divisions may originate in, and be perpetuated by, the organisational structure of charities in which fundraising and policy may not be adequately integrated. The fundraiser described a situation in which workers in different roles may have backgrounds, qualifications and employment trajectories that are so different as to make them ‘poles apart... from completely opposite ends of the spectrum’. Being distant from the conflicted choices within fundraising, however, also meant sector workers and commentators could be

critical of the ethics of emotion while not having to have the difficult yet necessary discussion between ‘what’s right’ and ‘what works’, or make choices in this regard.

One example of respite from conflict was provided by a female participant who had worked as a fundraiser for an international development organisation and now worked within the field of youth volunteering. Citing VSO’s (2001) guidelines on representing the developing world, she saw her approach to the potentially ethically ‘dangerous’ nature of stereotypical campaigns as supported by an established precedent in her sector (for a wider discussion of the role of established guidelines in international development, see Krause, 2014). She described how using ‘shame and guilt’ in fundraising would mean her organisation would be ‘doing ourselves a discredit’. Here, established parameters set following long standing debates on the ethics of representation can provide some release from potential conflicts around emotions in fundraising at both the level of the sector and the organisation, at least in the field of international aid.

### ***Conflict at the level of the individual fundraiser***

Questions around the use of emotion in fundraising often appeared to be ongoing, unresolved and even potentially troubling for individual fundraisers. In interviews, it was clear that a great degree of personal and reflexive internal wrestling occurred, with participants often finding it difficult to express exactly how the conflicts presented previously in this article could be adequately solved:

I don't know. Maybe... I'm torn... It's really complicated. (Policy director, voluntary sector infrastructure organisation)

I think it's a real tension that charities – it's a conundrum. There's no right or wrong, I think. (Fundraising consultant)

I do [think it's a problem], yes. I do. I suppose. But then they've got to do it, haven't they? I don't know how else they would get the money. I don't know.

(Director, Advocacy organisation)

It's exceptionally difficult. It's difficult to know what to do for the best. (Project worker, homelessness organisation)

While these extracts might seem insignificant, they do point to a notable degree of irresolution and personal conflict below the surface. In contrast to these ongoing internal conflicts some interviewees did make clear statements of ethics surrounding the ways they would use emotion in fundraising:

[Another campaign] was all about guilt... I am not interested in fundraising like that... We could make everybody feel bad, and say that, and I won't do that.

(Chief Executive, children's health charity)

I would seriously question if I wanted to go and work for a charity that only played on that one form of fundraising approach... It's just that that doesn't feel like why I joined the charity sector - to shame and guilt people into giving.

(Research director, youth volunteering organisation)

These personal values also intersect with personal professional choices in how interviewees had chosen to deploy emotion strategically, especially when working closely with high net worth donors rather than wider facing public campaigns. As a fundraiser for a homelessness organisation stated, she was able to control the targeting of emotion due to the 'close relationship' that such donors seek out with the charities they support. The interviewee described this kind of relationship in more detail in the context of a homelessness charity:

We had two long-term corporate supporters... they are local companies who were started separately by one guy here, one guy there... Basically, they say to us that if it hadn't worked out, they could have ended up homeless themselves... They can really see themselves there. So, that's kind of quite an important point about who we are going to then target with this, because I think with these visuals and video stuff, if you send it to someone like them they go, "Yes, I get that," straight away. So yes, it's all about targeting the right people.

Echoing Tindall and Waters' (2012) findings this account suggests that the knowledge that comes from a closer relationship with a supporter allows emotion to be deployed in ways that have more *knowable* outcomes, allowing 'desirable' emotions (Bennett, 2015) to be elicited and creating a less conflicted context for the use of emotion. Emotion could also be deployed strategically depending on the intention of the message, or, as a fundraising consultant put it, 'different communications have different functions', suggesting that emotional buttons could be pressed to secure an initial engagement

## **Conclusions**

Designing and operationalising fundraising appeals is difficult: there is no one guaranteed tool to raise donations, and while the literature presented here generally shows that emotionally negative appeals may be more successful in raising donations (an assertion supported by interviewees even if they were personally against such approaches), all emotions are personally interpreted and experienced. The new UK Fundraising Regulator's (2017) Code of Fundraising Practice does have some professional guidance on what is not acceptable: placing undue pressure on a person to donate, generating donations out of financial guilt or embarrassment, or sending communications which are indecent or grossly offensive, or are intended to cause distress or anxiety. (In contrast, the Association of



Fundraising Professionals (2014) Code of Ethical Standards, does not mention emotion explicitly instead focusing on causing 'harm' or 'exploiting' relationships with donors, volunteers, or clients.) But the Fundraising Regulator (2017: 24) argues that fundraisers must be able to demonstrate that the purpose of a direct mail was 'to enhance the message and/or the emotional engagement in the cause.' Terms such as 'undue pressure' are liable to be interpreted differently by potential donors: one person's 'indecent or grossly offensive' is another's 'emotional engagement'. What this article has shown is that fundraisers and those working to create, or having oversight of, fundraising campaigns in a range of voluntary organisations in the UK are aware of and live out the debate between ethics and effectiveness (Breeze and Dean, 2012a). This affects their work in different ways within the wider voluntary sector, within their organisation, and how it affects them as an individual with their own professional opinions and values. As MacQuillan (2016a: 3) discusses in detail, ethical fundraising involves a search for balance, 'balanc[ing] the duty of fundraisers to solicit support on behalf of their beneficiaries, with the right of the donor not to be subjected to undue pressure to donate.' Our research shows that individuals working in voluntary organisations are well aware of this need, and outline the conflicts which may impede this balance.

Fundraisers as a professional group are under-researched and more qualitative insight is required to explore and understand the nuance of their work. Data gathered here from qualitative interviews demonstrates that there are particular strategies that certain individuals have in place to manage these conflicts - future ethnographic research may want to examine how fundraising teams manage these choices collectively and over time to understand the temporal and network implications of using emotions to press potential donors' buttons. We are also not able to codify exactly how fundraisers and those managing or working with

fundraisers think about these issues from this data, as these boundaries are not drawn easily within this sample. Further comparative work could approach this question.

This paper has demonstrated what MacQuillan (2016b) argues in a piece for *Critical Fundraising*: these discussions persist, show no sign of going away, and can be quite adversarial. It is a pertinent contribution of this article to know that the debates within academic research on ethics and effectiveness are occurring concurrently within fundraisers' and communication directors' lived experience of managing these conflicts, and to see how these conflicts are conceptualised within organisations more widely.

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