

Four steps to success in a humanitarian appeal

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2011-11-15



Rachel Bell of Shine Communications (left) and Leigh Daynes of Plan UK (right).

Some people are exhausted by messages they receive from humanitarian NGOs. Many have become desensitized to images of distant suffering and repeated appeals for help. But, ultimately, people want to do good. So what can humanitarian NGOs do to better open the public's hearts, minds—and pockets?

Polis hosted a [panel debate](#) on this topic at LSE in partnership with Plan UK, to an audience of humanitarian professionals, academics and students. You can watch a video of the event [here](#). This report by Polis Intern Claire Manibog.

The panel featured NGO and communications practitioners, including: Brendan Gromley, Chief Executive of the [Disasters Emergency Committee](#); Lynda Thomas, Director of Fundraising at [MacMillan Cancer Support](#); Rachel Bell,

Founder of [Shine Communications](#); and Leigh Daynes, Director of Advocacy at [Plan UK](#).

The panel acknowledged that NGOs are taking a financial hit, with cancellations of direct debit donations at an all-time high in the UK. Given this challenging economic climate, the panelists proposed recommendations for how humanitarian NGOs can better communicate to their audience:

- **Keep it simple:** Stick to a clear message with the right amount of emotion. “Charities have on their side a huge amount of emotional territory,” said Leigh Daynes of Plan UK. But “consumers see through being shocked into action,” said Rachel Bell of Shine Communications. People know when they’re being manipulated and they see gruesome images as a cheap trick to elicit compassion. Instead, NGOs should focus on guiding people on an emotional journey through humanitarian issues.
- **Keep it consistent:** Integration across messages is key to success, said Lynda Thomas of MacMillan Cancer Support. That’s integration across all communications, including campaign, advocacy or fundraising messages. And visual integration is just as important—not only for consistency, but also because NGOs are communicating in an increasingly image-saturated market.
- **Include beneficiaries:** “The world is changing through citizen journalism,” noted Brendan Gormley of DEC, and donors can now more easily talk to beneficiaries because of new media. In fact, getting beneficiaries to participate in NGO communications will be increasingly key to success. Beneficiaries “can best communicate their situations and the solutions they see,” said Leigh Daynes. This is especially important in a world where NGOs perpetuate a world view of Westerner as hero, when in fact first responders in a crisis are community members.
- **Communicate with integrity:** People are increasingly choosing their brands like they choose their friends, said Rachel Bell. People choose brands that reflect their views and values, so it’s important that NGOs talk to their supporters with integrity. This is even more important given the rise of social media as a platform for “churnalism”, where people report on NGOs by sharing their views about them on social media. The public can now bring down your brand just as quickly as they can support it, so integrity is crucial.

The recommendations put forth by the panels are a starting point for understanding the challenges and opportunities NGOs face in an environment of increasing message fatigue and decreasing donations.

This topic is being further explored as part of a [research project](#) headed by LSE in partnership with Bruna Seu of



LSE's Shani Orgad - research leader

Birkbeck College (University of London) with support from the Leverhulme Trust. The three-year project looks at what project co-director Dr. Shani Orgad calls “the mysterious gap between knowledge—what people know about suffering—and how they act and react” to it.

Look out for updates on this project on the Polis blog in coming months or contact us at Polis@lse.ac.uk to be added to the research project network.

This report by Polis Intern Claire Manibog.

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