

Getting your voice heard

Insights for charity media teams in 2015

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Introduction & Methodology

From December 2014 to January 2015, we undertook 10 in-depth telephone interviews with journalists who had taken part in our bi-annual survey of journalists, the Journalists' Attitudes & Awareness Monitor. The objective of the research was to further explore the key themes that emerged from our surveys of journalists in 2014.

The following report is what they told us. Some of the findings are obvious (though worth hearing again) and some are more insightful - the good, the bad and the insightful.

Social media campaigns can be the story

When we asked journalists about the charity social media campaigns of 2014, like the Ice Bucket Challenge, there was a consensus that social media will continue to play an important part in the news agenda. One producer from ITV said:

"I think social media will be big in 2015. Anything that goes viral, they [news teams] are interested. In the past they may have been wary of covering something on social media but now they have no hesitations."

Another producer from Sky News echoed and expanded on this point, by saying that social media was now an accepted source of content for daily news:

"If we're allowed to use it [a video on social media], we'll just pull it off and use it. I think it's a fantastic way to get videos straight onto the TV. Quite often now it's good enough quality to put on the telly."

This point highlights how social media campaigns can work well for both media outlets and charities. With ever improving video recording technology available on smartphones and personal computers, it is possible for amateur recordings to be shown on television news outlets. This is good news for media outlets in the era of 24 hour news cycles, as most publically shared content on social media can be shown on the news without the need for protracted permission negotiations or fees.

This is also great news for charities, as it means photos or videos made by their supporters can be fed directly into the news cycle, without the charity having to fund expensive professional videos or photo shoots.

What is the 'magic ingredient'?

While journalists believed charity social media campaigns would continue to make the news in 2015, several mentioned reservations about charities attempting to manufacture viral campaigns. One journalist from the Leicester Mercury worried that *"People in board rooms will think 'this will be a great idea' but many of them won't be. Charities need to carefully consider what events they put out there."* The Nekominate drinking game was popular on social media in 2014, but would have hardly been an appropriate fundraising event for a charity. Some people chose to donate to WaterAid rather than take part in the Ice Bucket

Challenge, as they were uncomfortable with the amount of water wasted through the challenge. Charities need to consider whether an event is the right fit for their brand and cause before adopting it.

Another journalist from the Scottish Herald noted it may not be possible for charities to create a social media phenomenon: *"It is very hard to make something go viral. No one knows what the magic ingredient is."*

While some charities will have success with campaigns they have created, the evidence to date suggests that adopting a social media trend which is gaining momentum organically is the surest way for a charity to gain a run-away success like the #nomakeupselfie or the Ice Bucket challenge. Several journalists highlighted the need for charities to carefully consider whether a trend is an appropriate fundraiser before asking supporters to take part, as discussed above, but even those who had concerns seemed to think most social media trends were unlikely to present real risks to charity brands. One editor from Cosmopolitan magazine felt that when there was backlash against these campaigns, it tended to focus on the individuals involved 'doing it for the wrong reasons' rather than reflecting on the charities that benefited.

In 2014, our research with the general public and with journalists seemed to indicate that being associated with social media campaigns had only positive effects for charities. Following the Ice Bucket Challenge, public awareness of MND Association increased significantly. MND Association was also mentioned spontaneously by 5% of journalists as a charity that had impressed them in the past six months (no journalists had mentioned MND Association in the previous wave).

Macmillan Cancer Support attracted some negative criticism in the media for adopting the Ice Bucket Challenge as this trend was associated most strongly in the US with the ALS Association, meaning some people felt the MND Association should benefit in the UK. However, Macmillan did not receive any negative comments from journalists about it in our autumn survey. In our research with the general public, more people said they would consider donating to Macmillan after the Ice Bucket Challenge than before it, suggesting they have raised money from their association with this trend without any lasting damage to their reputation.

Reactive vs. proactive

When we asked journalists whether the period before a General Election was a good time for charities to seek media attention, the responses were somewhat mixed. Several journalists pointed out that media outlets have to be hyper-vigilant against political bias in the pre-election period, and this can make it difficult to cover issues charities work on. Several journalists also mentioned that most of the resources and energies on media outlets will be directed to election coverage, making it less likely that charity stories will get a look in.

Because of the concerns raised above, a producer from Sky News suggested it was a time for charities to be reactive:

"[Charities] have to be reactive to what is on the agenda - this isn't a good time to push your own agenda as the news is very busy. It is important to be reactive to political events by saying 'We've got someone with a view on this.'"

While charities may not be setting the news agenda in the weeks before or after a general election, journalists know that charities have the expertise and experience to speak to many issues that politicians will be debating during the period. A key task of any journalist is to bring alive the news stories of the day. This will mean finding people affected by the policies being debated in the period around the election, and charities are uniquely placed to provide these case studies.

As we've seen, the proactive approach is likely to be less effective in getting your charity coverage when there are issues dominating the political agenda. The general election was an example of this, but it will apply to periods in the coming year, such as in the context of EU referendum debates. At times when the news is less busy, journalists were encouraging charities taking a proactive approach in contacting them - the summer holidays tend to be slower for news and are a good time to push stories that might not be as appealing to journalists at a busier time of year. So long as you understand that not every story you send will work, journalists believe that the relationships you are building up are very beneficial to your charity in the long run.

Best practice in pre-election PR: Mind

"Mind Charity never cease to amaze me. They are always at the forefront of campaigns to put mental health at the top of the agenda, pushing for shorter waiting times, better access to treatments and more investment in preventative measures and early intervention." The Independent

"Campaigns that challenge UK government policy e.g. on funding of mental health services" The Times

Mind was recognized by many journalists this wave for their integrated PR and policy campaigns. Mind's innovative campaigning in Westminster involved people with experience of mental illnesses serving as campaigners for Mind's 2015 election manifesto. These 'Voices of Mind' received campaigning and media training from Mind, and in return agreed to a significant time commitment involving media appearances and meeting with MPs and policy makers. This campaign has been hugely successful in raising mental health up the political agenda. As a result, the main political parties have been discussing mental health as a pre-election campaign issue for months, resulting in increased media coverage of mental health issues.

Mind's joined up PR and policy work shows the benefits of integrated working between media and policy teams. The excellent work the manifesto campaign led to increase media coverage, which in turn helped to keep the momentum of the policy work going.

Understanding journalists' preferences

The best stories are about people

Journalists need real people to bring alive the news stories of the day. As a producer from Sky News said: *"For journalists, it's easy to find a MP or other professional to cover in a story, but it is hard to reach people affected by a particular story. The gateway to those people are charities."*

Charities are uniquely placed to connect their beneficiaries who want to tell their stories with journalists who can provide them with a platform to do so. Whether the story is about a new cancer treatment or changes to housing benefits, a quote from a person who is 'living the story' gives the media coverage additional impact.

As the 'gateway' to affected people, charities must always ensure that the privacy and dignity of vulnerable people is protected. However, in many cases it may be that media access, when done in a sensitive way with the assistance of a charity, may have an empowering effect on the interviewee by allowing them to be heard. Where possible, the real life experiences of people can bring alive the issues that charities grapple with on a daily basis, and raise the profile of both the issue and the organisation.

Best practice in case studies: Macmillan Cancer Support

"Always pitch stories that work well with our brands and would speak to our readers. Information that we need to include on the campaigns is always clearly laid out from the beginning. Case studies seem well prepared for the interview process." Chat & Pick Me Up! Magazines

"Good case studies, interesting reports." The Scotsman/Scotland on Sunday

In our Autumn survey of journalists, 13% of journalists named Macmillan Cancer Support as a charity that had impressed them. Macmillan is held up as an example of excellence by many journalists for the case studies they provide. Macmillan has a dedicated page of their website listing people available to speak about their experience of cancer, displaying the breadth of case studies they have available at any given time. The variety of case studies Macmillan recruits means they can tailor the offer they make to specific media outlets by including a case study which will 'speak' to the audience of that outlet, as the quote above puts it.

Journalists' top complaints

Relevance

In our bi-annual survey of journalists, a common complaint that journalists have is that charities often pitch them stories which are not relevant to them. This came up again in our

interviews with journalists, and highlighted that it is important for charities to consider the multiple ways in which a story may or may not be relevant for a particular media outlet or journalist. Below are three key questions a media officer should ask themselves before sending a press release to a journalist:

1. Is this story right for the outlet's audience?

If there is a media outlet you particularly want to work with, it is well worth investing some time in understanding the key demographics of their audience. An editor at Cosmopolitan explained that many charities fail to understand their audience when pitching:

"It has to appeal to our audience. Our audience is 18-35 female. They are pre-marriage, pre-children. So we tend not to cover things relating to children. Issues have to relate to this group, such as eating disorders or domestic violence. For every story, we have to think 'What is the reader getting out of it?' The story can be worthy, but if it is not relevant, it is no good."

Every media outlet, whether a monthly magazine or nightly news programme, has core demographics they need to appeal to. Understanding which outlets are reaching your supporters (or potential supporters) is a key way to finding media partners.

The best way to understand a journalist's audience is to ask the journalist. As the editor above put it: *"Trust we know our audience."* If a journalist tells you your story is not the right fit for their audience, accept that, but also use the conversation as a chance to find out about the kinds of stories they may be interested in the future.

One way of ensuring that your story is relevant to the journalists' audience is by using CharityComm's AskCharity service. It is a service that links journalists with charity media teams; journalists use it to find case studies and spokespeople from charities, and charities use it to increase their contact base and coverage.

2. Is this story in the right geographical region?

It may sound obvious, but a journalist from the Scottish Herald we interviewed said he receives a lot of stories which only apply to England. Make sure your story is region appropriate before you send it. Even better, go one step further and include relevant local statistics or case studies. This bespoke approach is more time and resource intensive, but will ensure wider regional coverage for your story.

3. Am I sending it to the best person?

The feedback from journalists is that they are sometimes sent stories outside their area of coverage. It is important to consider where each story is likely to be covered. If you work for a cancer organisation, you may send most of your stories to the health correspondent at a regional paper. However, if your latest story is about a new befriending team your organisation has set up for people undergoing treatment, this story may fall within the social affairs remit. This problem is best solved by building relationships with journalists and by researching what they have written about in the past. A journalist is more likely to work with you if you start the conversation with 'I saw your story on ... and I think you'd be interested in ...' as opposed to 'Are you interested in this?'

Good internal communication is essential for good professional etiquette

In our bi-annual survey of journalists, another common faux pas is sending the same press release multiple times. Clogging up a busy journalist's inbox will not endear your organisation to your media partners. The best way to avoid this pitfall is to ensure you have strong communication within your media team, and throughout your organisation. This will ensure there is no duplication, with multiple colleagues emailing or contacting the journalist with the same story.

It is also important to let everyone handling a particular story in your organisation know what you have agreed with different media outlets. An editor from Cosmopolitan mentioned an unfortunate incident with a charity where she had been guaranteed an exclusive, only to have the charity give the story to a rival publication as well. The editor believed this issue had occurred not through malice, but because of a lack of communication within the media team. Misunderstandings of this kind can have serious consequences for your organisation's reputation with journalists. Good communication within your organisation is the only way to ensure it is seen as professional and reliable to the media.

Conclusion

Most of the journalists we spoke to were keen to emphasise that they thought charity media teams were doing great work. One editor said: *"I am generally impressed with charity PRs. They are passionate in a way other PRs aren't."*

The third sector has become increasingly professionalised over the past decade. Charity media teams now attract highly experienced PR professionals who are keen to put their skills to work for causes they care about. The combination of talent and passion within the third sector leaves a positive impression on most of the journalists who work with the sector, as the quote above demonstrates.

While charity media teams are frequently lauded by journalists for their excellence, every year in our surveys journalists cite examples of some charities missing the mark, by pitching stories that lack relevance or display a lack of internal communication. This feedback obliges us (even when it may appear like common sense) to remind everyone working in the sector of the importance of getting the basics right by accurately targeting your stories, communicating internally so multiple people within your team are not contacting the same journalists, and providing case studies.

The increasingly digital, 24-hour media world is a rapidly changing place which presents new challenges and opportunities for charity media professionals. Social media is a constantly evolving sphere, where charities must continue to experiment. Charities must have both proactive and reactive approaches to the news, being willing to set the news agenda at certain times, and respond to the news at others. Innovators within the sector such as Mind have showcased the value of campaigns that are integrated across the work of the policy, PR and digital teams for maximum impact.

We look forward to seeing continued innovation and excellence from charities' media teams this year and beyond.

Journalists' Attitudes and Awareness Monitor (JAAM)

Our research with journalists allows charities to evaluate their current media work and collate the evidence to build a successful media strategy in the future. Using direct feedback from their journalists who they work with, as well as the most influential journalists covering the charity sector, our research will tell our clients where their media team's strengths are, where they need to improve and how they can do it.

The sample is made up of 150 journalists recommended by the charities who take part in the research, making the findings very relevant to our clients. We run the research twice a year, in spring and autumn.

About nfpSynergy

nfpSynergy is a research consultancy that aims to provide the ideas, the insights and the information to help non-profits thrive.

We have over a decade of experience working exclusively with charities, helping them develop evidence-based strategies and get the best for their beneficiaries. The organisations we work with represent all sizes and areas of the sector and we have worked with four in five of the top 50 fundraising charities in the UK.

We run cost effective, syndicated tracking surveys of stakeholder attitudes towards charities and non-profit organisations. The audiences we reach include the general public, young people, journalists, politicians and health professionals. We also work with charities on bespoke projects, providing quantitative, qualitative and desk research services.

In addition, we work to benefit the wider sector by creating and distributing regular free reports, presentations and research on the issues that charities face.



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