

THE IMPORTANCE AND ART OF ARTICULATING THANKS: LESSONS FROM NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS (NGOS)

Dr Nicky Garsten, Dr Ed de Quincey and Professor Ian Bruce

Thanking helps organisations to build relationships. In particular, charities need to thank as they build up coalitions of interest around issues, and as, in many cases, they raise income. So what can be learned from some professional thankers, and scholars, in the NGO sector?

You'll learn:

- The importance of thanks in interpersonal communications and NGO communications
- What we can learn from NGO sector best practice and guidance
- A framework for thanking built on NGO research

The importance of thanks

"Gratitude is the most exquisite form of courtesy" - Jacques Maritain

In interpersonal communications, thanking is an important social lubricant. As psychologists Anthony Arhens and Courtney Forbes observe: "expressions of gratitude are woven into the social fabric of our lives" [1]. For example, children are taught to thank, there are etiquettes of writing letters of thanks [2], and authors testify appreciation in acknowledgements.

NGO communicators and marketers can seek to engage their stakeholders' emotions when harnessing support. Negative emotions like fear and guilt [3] are sometimes used. However, guilt has been used to the point of 'compassion fatigue' [4]. Furthermore, negative imagery has been criticised for being an emotional 'abuse' [5].

Positive emotions like love [6] and gratitude can also be expressed to enrol support. Appreciation is a form of gratitude. Its most common articulation is "thank you", observes Katherine Kelly [7].

In the context of relationship management in the fundraising arena, Kelly [7], identifies reciprocity as a key strategy for stewardship. She argues that 'At the applied level, reciprocity simply means that organisations

The word cloud depicts the most frequent words used in the charities' tweets; the larger the font, the more times the word has been used. In total, "thanks" and "thank" were used 459 times, representing 20% of all the tweets.

The importance of thanks in American NPO tweets is also evident. For instance, Kristen Lovejoy and Gregory Saxton [13] identified thanks as part of relationship building tweets in their analysis. They identified messages of thanks in 13% of the 4,655 tweets that they examined from 73 NPOs.

Framework for the art of thanking based on NGO literature

We get insights into how to thank from literature about NGO communications and marketing. We learn that thanks should be specific, immediate and personalized, as represented in our framework below.

'SIP' Markers of Quality Thanks in NGO Literature

SPECIFIC

- Appreciation of **what** exactly has warranted the thanks

IMMEDIATE

- Timely thanks convey gratitude: **when**

PERSONAL

- Acknowledgement of the person being thanked: **who**

Figure 2 The SIP framework for quality thanking

The specifics of what is appreciated

Thanks should be *specific* to show 'fulsome' and 'genuine' gratitude [10]. For instance, a fundraiser could be acknowledged for the 'long hours' they spent with 'a collecting tin on windy Grosvenor Street' rather than in a general way that does not indicate an understanding of the effort made.

An ability to identify others' endeavours requires empathy. For, as psychologist Barbara Fredrickson observes, gratitude 'requires the capacity to empathize with others' [14].

Timely, personalised thanks

Thanks should also be prompt [10] [9] [7]. Tardy appreciation can look like an 'afterthought' [10]. As Canning (1999) reflects, 'immediate and personal gestures of thanks cannot be bettered' [3].

Appreciation needs to be *personalised* [3] [7].

This relates to individuals being addressed in recognition. Personalisation might take the form of communicating through a bespoke, rather than a mass, email, using @replies on Twitter, or naming benefactors on plaques or in publications. It also concerns a specific person expressing the thanks.

For instance, a Chief Executive handwriting a letter of thanks rather than sending a typed template of thanks. An outstanding example of personalised thanks is of charity: water's personalised videos of thanks to its supporters [15] [16].

Conclusion

Giving thanks is a characteristic of NGO communications. Best practice and research shows that giving thanks is important. Nevertheless, to communicate genuine appreciation, the way that thanks is articulated needs care too. Our SIP framework provides a guide to the art of thanking based on current literature from NGOs. Be precise about what you are giving thanks for; express gratitude quickly, and in a personal way.

Sources

[1] Arhens, A. and Forbes, C. (2014), 'Gratitude'. In (eds) Michele M. Tugade; Michelle N. Shiota; Leslie D. Kirby, *Handbook of Positive Emotions*. New York, Guildford Press: 342-361.

[2] Pilato, Donna, About Home, 'The Do's and Don'ts of How to Write Thank You Letters'.
URL: <http://entertaining.about.com/cs/etiquette/a/thankyou.htm>. Accessed 4th August, 2016.

[3] Canning, V. (1999) *A Practical Guide to Fundraising and Public Relations*. London: ICSA.

[4] Brill, P. and Marrocco, C. (2012), 'Not-for-profit public relations'. In A. Theaker, *The Public Relations Handbook*. London: Routledge

[5] Cartmell, M. (2011). 'Aid agencies criticised for overuse of negative imagery to gain public support'. *PR Week*. 15 November. URL: <http://www.prweek.com/article/1104332/aid-agencies-criticised-overuse-negative-imagery-gain-public-support#BQrR6kVF8Gh64VPX.99> Accessed 3 August 2016.

- [6] Guéguen, N., Jacob, C., and Charles-Sire, V. (2011) 'The effect of the word "Loving" on compliance to a fundraising request: evidence from a French field study'. *International Journal of Nonprofit Voluntary Sector Marketing* 16. pp371-380.
- [7] Kelly, K. (2001) 'Stewardship: The Fifth Step in the Public Relations Process'. In (ed.) R. Heath *Handbook of Public Relations*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- [8] Merchant, A., Ford, B., and Sargeant, A. (2010) "'Don't forget to say thank you': The effect of an acknowledgement on donor relationships". *Journal of Marketing Management*. 26 (7-8). pp593-611.
- [9] Westman Wilson, E., (2001) *Building credibility, the foundation for fundraising*. London: ITDG
- [10] Bruce, I. (2011) *Charity Marketing: Delivering income, services and campaigns*. 4th edn. London: ICSA.
- [11] Murphy and Larking, (2011) The researchers manually checked and identified sixty-three twitter accounts of these fifty charities in November 2011. The main national account of all the charities that had them was included. The reason for there being a higher number of twitter accounts than charities is because some charities have an international/national account. The tweets were collected over one week. 2,241 tweets were posted by the 63 accounts.
<http://nfpsynergy.net/social-media-league-table>
- [12] Garsten, N. and de Quincey, E. (2012) 'Tweeting Credibility and Thankfulness An Exploratory Study of Charity Twitter Accounts in the UK'. Presentation at 5th EUPRERA Spring Symposium: Web 2.0 in Governmental and NGO Communication in Europe. Berlin, February 17th.
- [13] Lovejoy, Kristen and Saxton, Gregory D. (2012) 'Information, Community, and Action: How Nonprofit Organizations Use Social Media'. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, Vol. 17, No. 3, pp. 337-353. Available at SSRN:
<http://ssrn.com/abstract=2039815>
- [14] Fredrickson, B.L. (2004) 'Gratitude, Like Other Positive Emotions, Broadens and Builds' *The Psychology of Gratitude*. R. A. Emmons; and M. E. McCullough. Oxford, OUP: 147-166.
- [15] Kanter, Beth (2011) Beth's Blog, 'Charity:Water Sends Personal Video of Thank Yous'.
URL: <http://www.bethkanter.org/say-thanks/>. Accessed 4 August, 2016.
- [16] charity: water (2011) charity: water turns five years old and we want to thank you. Video.
URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eCSvXMTe1oY>. Accessed 4 August 2016



Dr Nicky Garsten is Programme Director of the BA (hons) in PR and Communications at the University of Greenwich. She is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts. Prior to attaining her PhD at SOAS, she was an Associate Director at MS&L, a top 5 global PR consultancy within the Publicis Groupe.

Twitter: **@GreenwichNickyG**

Online: **<https://www.linkedin.com/in/nicky-garsten-phd-733248b>**



Dr Ed de Quincey is a Lecturer in the School of Computing and Mathematics at Keele University, a Visiting Researcher at the eCentre at the University of Greenwich and a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. He has worked in the area of online human behaviour for 13 years, looking into the usability and impact of websites as well as uses of the information that they collect. He is currently studying how health issues can be identified via social media usage as well as investigating the use of Learning Analytics to support teaching and learning.

Twitter: **@eddequincey**

Online: **<https://www.keele.ac.uk/scm/staff/academic/eddequincey/>**



Professor Ian Bruce CBE, is Founder and President, Centre for Charity Effectiveness at Cass Business School of City University London. Professor Bruce is also Vice President of RNIB (Royal National Institute of Blind People). His book *Charity Marketing* is in its fourth edition. He founded and is currently Chair of the Chartered Institute of Marketing's Charity Special Interest Group. Previously he was Director General of RNIB; Chief Executive of Volunteering England; Assistant Chief Executive of the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham; Assistant Chief Executive of Age Concern England; and a marketing manager with Unilever.

Online: [http://bunhill.city.ac.uk/research/cassexperts.nsf/\(smarturl\)/I.Bruce](http://bunhill.city.ac.uk/research/cassexperts.nsf/(smarturl)/I.Bruce)