Charities And The NFP Sector: Understanding Their Special Research Needs

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Wednesday, 25 February 2009
Last Updated Wednesday, 25 February 2009

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The idea for this article came from members of the Independent Consultants Group (www.indepconsultants.co.uk), a network of 300+ mainly UK based individual or small partnership market researchers.

Our members work for a very wide range of charities and not-for-profit organisations, and this sector has needs that experienced consultants are especially well placed to meet.

Our project work enables us to make a number of general statements about the special requirements of this sector and how clients deal with them. We start with the general observations, and then describe 3 project examples which illustrate real-life implications.

The most obvious characteristic of the sector is to do with internal structure, culture and staffing. Organisations will, more often than in other sectors, have modest numbers of staff who fill a range of roles.

Managers report to a board of trustees tasked with seeing the very best return on expenditure. Staff can be especially passionate about their work, and often the cause of the organisation will have a connection with their personal lives.

Many are committed to giving the best of their own skills, expertise andÂ professionalism and drawing on professional support in order to maximise the difference that supporters can make to their cause. Market research can be an important support in providing a solid foundation and clear direction for marketing and communications strategies.

We have found that clients from the charities and NFP sector are all the more likely to seek research solutions and partnerships that demonstrate the following:

Leadership seniority.
Although some charities are regular buyers of research, most will regard a project as an occasional and major event, and will look for broad strategic direction by stretching projects across several topic areas. Consequently client organisations often require project leaders who can be completely self-contained. Many will have very little spare capacity to manage their supplier relationships, as staff are working flat out on internal projects.

Such pressures are all the more likely to lead clients to look for project leaders who can apply wisdom and creativity, and thinking â€˜outside the briefâ€™. Results need to be interpreted as clear and actionable outputs, which are achievable and affordable. Debriefs will often be to the senior management team â€“ as structures are flat and the project likely to be of major importance. This needs researchers who have a mature, commercial view of the world.

Projects often need to be communicated across a range of stakeholders, to include management, staff and volunteers, and sponsors. Independent researchers are ideally placed to meet these challenges; most have 20+ years experience of the research business, and are full members of the Market Research Society.

Â â€˜(The independent consultant) was quick to get to grips with the key issues and devise a comprehensive programme of research to match our budget.Â Excellent written and verbal presentations to various stakeholder groups enabled us to get strong support for the strategic direction the research helped to identifyâ€™
Valerie Caldwell, The National Gardens Scheme

Empathy and passion.
Clients are often very close to their causes and find it essential to work with people who can share this passion. Independent consultants tend to be senior researchers, who at least know about and sometimes have first hand experience of client organisations through their personal involvement.

They can therefore readily share and understand the relevant cause.

These organisations often deal with emotive and difficult areas of care and support, and so the maturity of the project leader â€“ especially for qualitative research â€“ is all the more important. Many such organisations rely on large numbers of volunteers. This factor also requires a sensitive touch when requesting their research input, and when communicating results that impact on well-established ways of working.

Demonstration of value.
All clients want value, but in this sector budgets can be quite modest and the requirement to demonstrate useful outputs all the stronger. We see clients looking for far more than reasonable cost.

Great value requires carefully thought out, balanced recommendations, which in turn rely upon a substantial input of senior-level thinking time. Experienced independent consultants are ideally placed to deliver such thinking, and to be flexible with the resource they provide:

â€˜The value of the ICG is that it provides both credibility and access to a group of freelance researchers, who often offer more experience, increased flexibility and greater cost-effectiveness than a full service agency. Importantly, working with independent consultants is not about doing things cheaply, it is about maximising value â€“ flexibility enables us to utilise our in-house market research experience to the full and to pay for a service that really adds value to what we doâ€™
Christine Hillman, World Vision

Minimising costs.
Independent consultants by definition have more modest overheads and the ability to shop around for fieldwork, data and other services that large organisations may be required to source in house.

But apart from careful supplier selection there are many other ways of helping these clients to keep a lid on project costs. One is to look at ways of jointly funding market-level studies across several clients. It is also probable that one can â€˜buyâ€™ services at a lower cost than is otherwise the case â€“ as long as you ask.

For example, fieldwork discounts are often available for charities. When conducting qualitative work, volunteers and supporters involved with the charity will not expect smart venues or catering, and our experience is that they are typically willing to forego more usual attendance payments to gain their involvement.

Whilst the above list is not exhaustive and always applicable, the themes are evident in many projects, as these 3 examples illustrate:

Help the Aged & Age Concern are two well-known charities that fight for the rights of all older people in society.
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The two charities came together to fund research to investigate evidence of discrimination in the markets for motor and travel insurance, as experienced by older people. A solid evidence base was required which demonstrated in depth the behaviour, successes, challenges and frustrations that customers faced.

Because this was a complex project culminating in a high-profile published report, it benefitted from the joint leadership of two senior consultants as a â€˜virtual teamâ€™ to provide the specialist expertise required for both parts of the project. Catherine Millican (CM Insight) and Andrew Smith Research handled the qualitative and quantitative elements, but as important were able to jointly discuss and define the main survey items and report direction.

Evidence of substance and depth was provided by combining a comprehensive programme of individual and group discussions with an innovative â€˜mystery shoppingâ€™ exercise. The latter involved recruiting a sample of those aged 65-85 and a control sample aged 30-49.Â Respondents made real-life insurance quote requests through different channels, and gave interviews before and after the event.

The project delivered substantial evidence of age discrimination, both in terms of offering services at all and in the pricing of insurance. Quotations from our mystery customer team provided powerful illustrations. We also uncovered age-related concerns about internet-only access to some products, and in the way suppliers talk to customers. Wide ranging recommendations were published, aimed at the insurance industry and Government.

â€˜Faced with a challenging brief and timescale they conducted invaluable independent research which has provided data central to the ongoing debate on age discrimination in respect of goods and servicesâ€™
Ian Nowell, Age Concern England

Save the Children presents its mission (see www.savethechildren.org.uk) as follows:
â€˜Weâ€™re the worldâ€™s independent childrenâ€™s charity. Weâ€™re outraged that millions of children are still denied prop
food, education and protection. Weâ€™re working flat out to get every child their rights and weâ€™re determined to make furthe
faster changes. How many? How fast? Itâ€™s up to youâ€™

Save the Children recognised that, although it was working on numerous life-changing projects here and across the world, its supporter base was in danger of fading, as too few people knew what it is all about. It wanted people to understand the essence of what Save the Children does and how their support can help make a real difference.

Save the Children wanted to get to the root of why and how people give to charity and what they want from a relationship with a charity. This insight was to be used to inform a new brand campaign and Mango Research Ltd (a two-director

research consultancy) was one agency invited to respond to its research brief.

Four stages of research were commissioned across the campaign development period, with one of the two Mango directors working as the key contact for Save the Children and delivering much of the programme. Mango also drew on its strategic partnerships with experienced independent research providers to be able to supply specific areas of expertise. One example was a desk research module managed by Peter Goudge (FMRS).

The new brand campaign involves expressions of the issues (THEY), Save the Children actions (WE) and a challenge to support (YOU). This magazine insert is one illustration:
For Mango, the partnership was an ideal opportunity to make a real difference to the lives of children and their communities across the world through our professional skills. We were tasked to look for the potential triggers and motivations to drive a fresh branding approach that could awaken new interest in and support for Save the Children. In one leg of the research, children were asked for their own thoughts and views of the problems facing children across the world, to help ensure we didnâ€™t lose sight of what the research was all about.

For Save the Children, the partnership offered flexibility, understanding of the organisation and brand and a personal relationship enabling a smooth process from brief through to delivery of usable outputs.

â€˜I found working with Mango to be a great experience. Over the various research projects we felt Mango had a really strong understanding of our organisation, brand and what we wanted to achieve through the research. Mango was flexible to tight timeframes and able to work in partnership with us to . . .generate usable outputs. It was a real two-way relationshipâ€™
Justin Wylie, Save the Children

Save the Children is now rolling out its bold challenge to the UK â€“ look out for the new campaign on TV, at railway stations, in magazines and papers and you may even get one of these through your door!

CARE is a well established mainstream Christian charity providing resources and helping to bring Christian insight and experience to matters of public policy and practical caring initiatives. CARE is represented in the UK Parliaments and Assemblies at the EU in Brussels and at the UN in Geneva and New York.

CAREâ€™s aim is to see the transformation of society into one that has a greater respect for the sanctity and value of human life from fertilisation to its natural end. It seeks to pursue its aim by engaging in the political process.

The work of CARE is entirely funded by donations from individuals in the UK. However, little was known about supportersâ€™ motivations. Research was commissioned to define the demographic profile of supporters and to examine their perceptions of CARE and its work.

It was important to establish the core areas of concern for CARE supporters and to compare these to CAREâ€™s own priorities, to arrive at a meaningful understanding of supporter expectations and motivations.

CARE commissioned Sue Garner, an independent research consultant, whose company Oulton-Lee Research Ltd. operates mainly in the not-for-profit sector. Sue is also a trained counsellor and works extensively in the area of pregnancy crisis counselling and post-abortion care and was therefore able to empathise with the aims of CARE as an organisation.

CARE benefited from having a close liaison with their researcher, since all communication was to and from one person, who was known to the organisation. It was also beneficial to work with a consultant who had extensive experience of working with many other similar organisations.

Two key findings came from the research.
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The first was that, although CARE was concerned with a number of political and social issues such as euthanasia, pornography, human trafficking, media standards, education and abortion, the issue of abortion had by far the highest level of personal concern among CARE supporters. Since 2007 marked the 40th Anniversary of the 1967 Abortion Act, CARE linked this anniversary to campaigning on the issue. Moreover, there has been a recent flurry of activity relating to the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill currently going through Parliament.Â CARE provided its supporters with the necessary information to motivate them to write to MPs across the country, and the response has been overwhelming.

Secondly, there was evidence that many CARE supporters had reached information overload and, although they wanted to support CARE because they agreed with its aims, they did not require the level of mailings and information that they were being sent. As a result â€œCARE for Busy Peopleâ€•, a summarised version of political debate and social comment, was devised.

Overall, this research helped CARE to focus its activities and resources and optimise its outputs to achieve maximum

effectiveness.

â€˜We chose Sue to carry out our research for us mainly because of her reputation for doing similar projects for other organisations like our own. However, we were also keen to have the kind of personal service an independent like Sue can bring; in addition, the competitive pricing of an independent was an important consideration for us.â€™
Nola Leach, Chief Executive, CARE

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