



# The relationship fundraiser

This year Ken Burnett celebrates his 30th year of working within fundraising. In recognition of both this commitment and the impact he has had on the sector, he has been named as the winner of the *PF* Outstanding Contribution Award 2007

IN 1977 A BRIGHT, ENERGETIC 26 year-old man went for an interview at a small, recently-formed international aid agency called Action in Distress. The role in question was that of UK director, a seemingly senior position for someone so young and with no previous experience of working within an NGO.

Yet halfway through the interview, the founder of the organisation stood up, enthusiastically declared that this was the person he'd been looking for and with that walked out of the room, leaving behind a bewildered interviewee, exasperated staff and a queue of disappointed other hopefuls.

This somewhat eccentric interviewer was none other than Cecil Jackson Cole, who in 1942 had also founded Oxfam and in 1961 Help the Aged. The man he had just discovered was Ken Burnett, who was to go on to not only build the charity into one of the most successful UK NGOs but was also to become one of the most widely recognised and respected figures within the fundraising community.

*"It may seem obvious that if you build a genuine relationship with donors they will support you for longer. But in 1992 Ken showed us the way"*

Burnett began life in the Scottish Highlands back in 1951 as the fourth of five children born to a business man and his wife. Despite "hating school" he went on to work at the Bank of Scotland where he passed his Institute of Banker's exams. Then, aged 18, he hitched his way to London where Carnaby Street was enjoying the dizzy heights of the swinging 60s.

After a short stint at the Chartered Bank Burnett discovered the world of publishing, and after 10 months at Cornmarket Press, he and a group of its directors formed a new company called New Opportunity Press.

"We were all working incredibly hard as it was a very competitive environment," says Burnett. "But it didn't seem to be all that socially useful. I had this misguided and naïve idea that you should be able to go home at 5.30pm and feel good about what you had done so I started looking for charity jobs."

It was his wife Marie, who he had met at Cornmarket Press, who chanced across the job vacancy at Action in Distress.

"I was hugely unqualified and quite amazed when I got the interview," reflects Burnett. "But I was lucky enough to cross paths with Cecil Jackson Cole who wasn't interested in traditional staff. He wanted an entrepreneur and felt that I had the right mix of capitalism, drive and energy. He was also looking for young people as he had the bizarre idea that it should be a charity run by young people for young people."

"I was also very fortunate that not only was I able to work very closely with him but also Harold Sumption, who founded the International Fundraising Congress and Sir Leslie Kirkley, former director of Oxfam, who were on the Action in Distress Board and were charged with making sure I would succeed."

And so it was that from a small, dilapidated office on Oxford Street, London, Burnett and his team set about growing what was to eventually become ActionAid.

The charity's initial objectives had been to help young people with drug problems. It wasn't until 1975 and a trip to America where Jackson Cole had discovered the concept of child sponsorship that it really began to focus on international aid. By the time Burnett started at the charity, it had a small number of sponsors mainly sourced via advertising in the religious press.

"But then Harold Sumption told me about this thing called direct mail which was being used in America. I knew a bit about it from the publishing world and so we started to lay out a creative and adventurous strategy for sponsorship recruitment and emergency disaster appeals."

In fact, this sophisticated strategy, which saw the introduction of the UK's first ever insert leaflet with a built-in reply form and envelope, was incredibly successful; so much so that in just a few years ActionAid grew from being an organisation that was struggling to generate £1m a year to one of the top 20 charities in terms of voluntary income.

But while the hard work was paying dividends for the organisation, Burnett was burning himself out and after

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two years he decided to take time out to recuperate. Following a year travelling around Africa with Marie he returned to the UK to the offer of the role of fundraising and communications director at ActionAid, which he agreed to do for three years, the final year of which he worked part time while setting up Burnett Associates with Marie. This was to become the biggest direct marketing agency working specifically for the charity sector, but it wasn't all plain sailing...

"By now I had a reputation for effectiveness and so

started working for the NSPCC and National Children's Home. I immediately fell flat on my face," he recalls. "I thought I had been a very successful fundraiser but what I had failed to realise was my success was down to the product not me as a fundraiser."

Despite this initial hurdle, Burnett Associates went on to thrive and was responsible for many fundraising innovations including the first pen pack, survey pack, recyclable mailings and even sparking Greenpeace's foray into the world of face-to-face fundraising. It was also hugely influential in the promotion of monthly giving, legacy marketing and the development of techniques used to build donor relationships, and over a 17-year period, Burnett and Marie saw Burnett Associates grow from being a front room operation to a company with 80 staff, three divisions and a turnover of more than £10m.

In 1993 Burnett and his family moved to France from where he kept direct, if informal control of the agency. That was until mid-1999 when a management buy-out was agreed and implemented. By 2001 the company had gone into receivership. More than two-thirds of staff were made redundant and the three arms of the organisation were hived off into separate businesses. Marc Nohr acquired the direct marketing arm of the business which was to be renamed Kitcatt Nohr; former director and head of consulting Tony Elischer acquired the consulting arm and created THINK Consulting Solutions; while the charity communications arm, Burnett Works, was acquired by its managing director Jackie Fowler.

Rumours abound as to exactly why the collapse occurred with blame being laid at the doors of various individuals. But whatever the truth there is no disputing the fact that the events devastated Burnett. "I felt very let down. I had put my trust in the wrong people," he recalls bitterly.

But while the impact on Burnett Associates may have been disastrous, it did nothing to dent Burnett's reputation, which was still riding high off the back of his book *Relationship Fundraising*. First published in 1992 but has since gone through several revisions, it focused on placing donors at the heart of all fundraising activity and is widely recognised as having changed the way the sector operated.

"It may seem obvious that if you build a genuine and lasting relationship with your donors that they will support you more generously and for a longer period," says Alan Clayton, managing director of Cascaid, "but in 1992, Ken showed us the way. Since then whole generations of fundraisers have come into the profession that is now steeped in the ethos of relationship fundraising."

Burnett is quite modest in his response to this. He says it was simply a product of "sheer selfish opportunism" when in fact the glory should be given to the likes of Harold Sumption, Guy Stringer, a former director of Oxfam, and Giles Pegram, current director of fundraising at NSPCC, who were "practising the technique long before I wrote the book. The basic idea is that if you are nice to your donors they are nice to

## The Godfather of Modern Fundraising

### Ramesh Singh, chief executive, ActionAid

"There are not that many people around, if anyone at all, who has remained so connected with and so excited about ActionAid for 30 years as Ken has. What is so extraordinary about Ken is that he has also been a big part of the modern day ActionAid and we have been lucky to have him on our board. As the then chair of our board, Ken presided over visionary and perhaps the most significant advances and changes in the whole history of ActionAid: ensuring that we took a human rights-based approach to all our work to end poverty and transforming the organisation to become truly international. He is challenging and demanding but hugely inspiring too."

### Alan Clayton, managing director, Cascaid

"Quite simply, Ken Burnett is the father and inventor of modern professional fundraising. Before Burnett Associates revolutionised fundraising – and revolutionised is not too hyperbolic a word – fundraising hadn't changed in the best part of a century. Any fundraiser that gained any sort of fame within fundraising circles did so because of their major donor work. Ken was the first fundraiser to gain recognition through fundraising from the general public."

### Tony Elischer, managing director, THINK Consulting Solutions

"Ken has played a central role in the development of professional fundraising over the last 20 years or so, which came to a peak when he wrote *Relationship Fundraising*. It refocused people's minds on a different way of thinking and fundraising and is still a very valid concept today."

### George Smith, former director, Burnett Associates

"He's been one of the top people in British fundraising for the last 30 years. But you have to go abroad to realise just how big a name he is. If you go to international organisations or conferences they all ask if you know Ken Burnett."

### Jackie Fowler, managing director, Burnett Works

"Ken's excitement about and enthusiasm for fundraising never fails, and he's always looking for better ways to do things. He believes passionately that fundraisers have a vital job to do and the best stories to tell – and that by treating donors with honesty and respect, they can unlock a powerful force for good. He turned these beliefs into the theory of relationship fundraising – and through his writing and speaking, and the organisations he's worked with, he's influenced and inspired generations of fundraisers."

### Giles Pegram, director of fundraising, NSPCC

"He, like me, is a born and bred career fundraiser. One of the things that is remarkable about him is that he is absolutely steeped in fundraising – he has worked for a charity, run an agency and has also been a trustee so sees fundraising in the broadest sense possible. He is one of the few great gurus of the current generation."



you. I've made a living out of the bleedin' obvious," he says laughing.

Pegram is a passionate advocate of relationship fundraising. "I believe it's fundamental to the future of modern fundraising," he says. "But while a lot of people have talked about it I'm not sure how many have read the book and actually gone through the agony of putting it into practice. Those that have, however, have been very successful."

Burnett concurs with this statement: "People nod in agreement but then go away and don't do it. There is a big gap between the theory and the reality."

Since then Burnett has added two more books to his portfolio, *The Zen of Fundraising* and *Tiny Essentials of an Effective Volunteer Board*, plus numerous articles for *the Guardian* and other titles around the world.

He has also retained his links with ActionAid – between 1998 and 2003 he was chair of its international board, helping steer the organisation through an internationalisation process which has seen the head office relocate to Johannesburg, South Africa. To this day he is an independent member of this board where he says he will stay at least until the internationalisation process is complete. Additionally, he is a trustee of Book Aid International, founder of White Lion Press, which publishes books on fundraising, and until



recently he was chair of the Cascaid group. He is also about to launch SOFII, the Showcase of Fundraising Innovation and Inspiration, which is an initiative designed to "capture and display the rich international heritage that is past and present fundraising excellence". See *PF* June 2007 for more on this.

But one of the main activities currently keeping him busy is his work with organisations in the developing world. In addition to a busy schedule as a conference speaker, he is working closely with a number of NGOs helping them to build fundraising capacity. "Big growth in voluntary activity seems inevitable in several parts of Asia and Africa. Last year I spent several weeks in India and China. Watch out for these countries, they will soon be catching up and overtaking complacent Western fundraisers," he says. It's a warning fundraisers would be wise to heed, as with the knowledge and influence of Burnett behind them there is every chance he'll be right.

**Becky Slack**



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