

Giving something back

As the first anniversary of the south Asian tsunami approaches, Ken Burnett looks at why the Disasters Emergency Committee is so poor at giving aid donors feedback and encouraging further giving

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Ken Burnett

Richard McPherson, a friend and renowned adviser to fundraising organisations worldwide, recently sent me an article he had written summarising the reassuring, even heart-warming experiences of American donors who gave money to relieve the Boxing Day tsunami. US charities, he enthused, have grasped the opportunity provided by email and the internet to ensure donors get a very personal report of what their donations achieve. Their aim is to create a carefully planned communications chain that will answer all questions and successfully encourage further involvement. Both donor and cause benefit from the communications because well-informed and inspired donors give more and support for longer.

Richard eulogised about how non-profit organisations in America are "working overtime to answer donors first big question: 'Did my gift help?'" Not an unreasonable question and one that's likely to be asked a lot over here in coming days.

Like me, you probably gave a donation to one of the emergency appeals that filled our screens immediately after the tsunami last December 26. Chances are, like millions of Britons, you channelled your contribution through the seemingly official Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC), which dominates the media at times of international disaster. Very possibly, like me, you're unsure now quite what, if anything, your donation achieved. The answer, I think, is probably "quite a lot". But I don't know, because the DEC's feedback borders on the abysmal. Yet I should know, and I easily could.

The spontaneous, emotion-fuelled wave of willingness to help that followed that awful tidal wave prompted an unprecedented outpouring of generosity in Britain and around the world. In the immediate aftermath 2.5 million people gave to the committee, mainly through their website or over the phone.

The idea of one central coordinating body at times of disaster is pretty much unique to Britain. It's a good system, convenient for the 12 big charities who make up the DEC, convenient for the media who like to deal with just one source, and convenient for the public, who trust that this collection of causes has some kind of official blessing. Such is the high-profile nature of disasters that the committee has now unquestionably established itself as a fundraising brand in its own right. That's why so many of us respond to them, without question.

But the people who control the DEC appear convinced that this vast group are not real donors, and never were. They seem to have assessed them - us - to be "virgin" donors, knee-jerk responders. Donors whose goodwill and interest will evaporate once the disaster is off their screens. People who aren't worth reporting back to, because their capacity for future giving is limited (most won't be asked to give again, either for long-term development or to a future disaster). This may be true for some but certainly isn't for all. Many people I speak to feel that the committee is missing several big opportunities.

The first anniversary of the tsunami will soon be with us, bringing extensive coverage commemorating the disaster. That will reveal what has been happening since to affected communities; how donors in Britain feel now about their unprecedented support; and what has or hasn't been achieved. In the absence of sufficient accessible feedback direct to donors, many fear a backlash against all the money raised.

Like it or not, similar disasters in the future are inevitable and our feelings about this disaster will influence how we respond when they occur again. What's at stake here is the credibility of the aid system and public trust and confidence in charities. Judging by correspondence since my last article on this issue many donors already feel that the system in Britain is sadly deficient. Most swear they won't give again to the DEC.

Whatever we conclude, the committee could do much to enhance the experience of those who give through them. If they don't, no one will be surprised if alternatives start to appear and if donors begin to shun the DEC.

Although the committee has potential to be much more than just a "bank and thank" operation, it seems some of its members won't allow it to be anything else. That is a mistake. All that is needed is for the DEC to commit to providing regular, individual feedback that will build trust and confidence so that donors see their money quickly put to work doing what they wished when they gave it.

The resources to do this brilliantly already exist in the 12 member charities of the committee. If the DEC system is the envy of the world, surely it can provide donors with as good feedback as any organisation anywhere? Donors will be greatly reassured if they do. And will likely give again, perhaps more generously, when asked next time.

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