

Charity communications teams are being affected by the credit crunch. But surprisingly, for some charities, it means spending *more* not less. For others, it means looking again at the things that work most effectively. ngo.media's Trina Wallace reports.

**People won't know** what your charity does if you don't tell them. That's the fundamental principle on which every charity communication team is based. But in times of (it's those dreaded words again) credit crunch, it is a principle that can easily be lost. Redundancies, recruitment freezes and budget cuts can lead to the easy option: trimming back charity communications.

Doing so, says Mencap PR manager Sam Heath, would not be sensible. Now is the time to increase your communications work, he says.

"Communications is crucial; it's not something we want to compromise on, especially in the current financial climate. The credit crunch will affect our income in the future and communications work can help generate new donors and sponsors. So communications is now more important than ever."

Heath suggests that if charity communicators are finding it difficult to convince trustees and senior management not to cut communications at the moment, they haven't been doing their job properly.

"Comms teams should be working hard to explain the impact and direction of communications to directors and trustees all the time - not just now," says Heath. "Then you will reap the rewards."

### JOB CUTS

At Oxfam, Magda Walter, acting head of PR, agrees that communications are "vital in these times" because "it's important that we reach people even more".

But like the rest of Oxfam, the comms department is cutting about 5% of staff, mostly through not filling vacant posts. Overall they're cutting about 15% of comms projects. Walter says the team are moving towards a more online-based model of communication because it is the most trackable and effective medium.

"Oxfam UK have been preparing for the economic downturn for months," she says. "The financial

planning is reflected in our strategic plans and budgets. We feel we are prepared. We are committed to spending as much as we can on our programmes and will cut variable costs such as direct mails and paid media advertising."

### TRIMMING DOWN

The NSPCC are making cuts too. The child protection charity announced last week that it is planning 150 redundancies because of a growing shortfall in fundraising income. Alison McKay, media manager at NSPCC, could not confirm whether these would be communications redundancies.

She says the charity will "trim down" all department budgets but is confident that this won't affect communications output. The charity is offering internal communications clients more "cost-effective options including more digital solutions - but this is part of our normal process anyway, not just because of the economic situation".

"We don't have the same problem that some charities do convincing other departments of the importance of communications," says McKay. "We need to reach as many people as possible to raise awareness of child protection issues and we're always careful to be cost effective."

### OVER BUDGET

Save the Children, meanwhile, have just "refocused" their UK work as a result of smaller budgets. The charity's offices in Newcastle, Birmingham, Leeds and in north Wales will close but Dominic Nutt, head of news, claims communications has not yet been affected in terms of job or budget cuts or output.

In fact, he's asked his communications director for a bigger budget. "I've asked for a higher than benchmark budget for the next quarter," he says. "I'm not sure we'll get it but requesting it wasn't discouraged."

“We’ll see how the credit crunch affects us, and our department, in the next few months but we’re prepared emotionally, culturally and mentally for its consequences.”

## EARLY DAYS

Elsewhere, charity communication teams say it’s business as normal. Macmillan’s communications office says the charity has not yet seen a drop in income and Louise MacDonald, chief executive at Scotland-based charity Young Scot, says no communication projects have been shelved because funding was ring-fenced in May.

Kate Sidwell, head of media at RNID, believes it’s early days and that if communications budgets have not been affected yet, they could be next year or in 2010.

In the meantime, Sam Heath at Mencap advises charity communicators to think long term. “Don’t commit yourself to long-term expenditure if you don’t have to,” he says. “But don’t cut back either. You have to invest properly in comms; you can’t do it on the cheap. Key to this is sensible project management.”

Keith Bradbrook, assistant director of communications at the NSPCC, agrees. He urges charity communicators to focus on key priorities for communications activity.

“Shop around,” he adds. “You always should, whatever the economic climate.”

## USE EXISTING RESOURCES

Making effective use of the resources you have available is also an important cost-cutting tip. Marie Holdt, who heads up Contact the Elderly’s small communications team, recommends thinking about how to use volunteers and service users to communicate your charity’s story. “Get them to talk about what they do and get them to feel good about it,” she says.

“Remember what you’re doing isn’t all about generating funds for your charity, it’s about people.”

## TOP TIPS FOR CREDIT CRUNCH COMMUNICATIONS

**Outsource.** Outsourcing specific projects can really save you money because you only pay for what you use. You’re not covering recruitment costs, sick days, holidays, water cooler moments or for your staff to sit in endless meetings. Outsourcing to experts can also get jobs done more quickly and efficiently than using someone internally who only counts the project as part of their role.

**Stick to timescales.** Half the time charity communications teams have a constant battle to justify their existence. The other half, everyone wants a stake in their output. Sticking to deadlines saves time, energy and most importantly, donors’ money. It simplifies the process because everyone knows at what stage in the project timetable they can offer their feedback and when all the deadlines are.

**Work with service users and volunteers.** Use their words. In reports, leaflets, web pages, campaigning materials and newsletters. Whatever communications project you’re working on, think about how you might be able to include the words of service users and volunteers.

**Work with aims in mind.** Every report, newsletter, magazine, leaflet, brochure or press release you produce should have a purpose. It might be to get people to campaign for your charity’s cause, to better understand what you do or to appeal to donors or sponsors. Always bear this aim in mind right from coming up with the concept for the communication, to its design. So, you shouldn’t just produce a brochure because you have the budget for it; all projects should use your donors’ money wisely.

**Time manage.** Don’t pass up opportunities to visit events at projects supported by your charity because you think they’ll be time wasted out of the office. These projects may not actually do the things you thought they did so they’re opportunities to know better, and therefore communicate better, your charity’s cause. While you’re at events like these, you can get to know regional project workers, talk to them about how they can work with the national communications team and set up some interviews with service users.

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