Insight from the Other World- A Marketing Professional Speaks on NGOs' Communication Challenges

What happens when you bring together a commercial marketing man with a group of communications, fund-raising and marketing officers from a selection of the UK's international aid charities? Polis Intern Paula Myers reports on a recent Polis report launch.

"What's the idea we can use?" Giles Hedger of the commercial marketing agency Leo Burnett shared his perspective on the challenges and opportunities NGOs face in communicating the distant suffering of others at the launch of a new Polis report exploring these issues.

Speaking to an audience primarily from the non-profit sector, Hedger highlighted the similarities between their two worlds:

- Both reach out to fatigued audiences- the post-materialist consumer and the post-humanitarian consumer

- Both use brands as "anti-distance devices." They work to engender trust, familiarity and to close the distance between preferences.

- Both have the marketing and communications goal of "getting alien thoughts to be more familiar to people."

- For both "there are those who already know and use your product and those who don't and don't." It's better to speak to the latter and this usually involves closing the gap in comprehension.
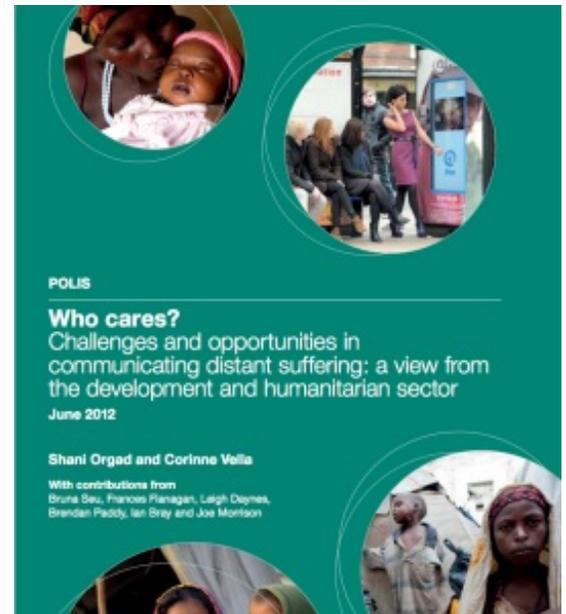
To accomplish this, marketers use different tools. The commercial marketing toolbox is 90% figurative (metaphor, analogy, etc.) whereas the NGOs' marketing toolbox is 90% representation (they show the product – ie the people they work for in their marketing).

Hedger suggested that the 'figurative' commercial approach might work for NGOs. It starts with finding a powerful idea within the larger theme. "You've got to show it."

An example is the recent anti-smoking advertising campaign in the UK that did not concentrate on the health damage to smokers. Instead it told smokers they're damaging their loved ones (through passive smoking).

Other thoughts shared by Mr. Burnett in this interactive session:

Regarding the extent to which NGOs should see each other as competitors, he advised, "Let the people who want to give you money categorise." It's necessary to understand where consumers draw competitive lines and realise they are not necessarily where the organisation draws them. Competition is good, he said, only because you have to be distinct in people's minds.

When challenging people to change their lifestyle, understand they may be daunted e.g. telling them third world debt

is in their hands. It's key to judge perfectly how much to ask of them. A certain degree of specificity helps. Themes may be too big so finding the idea within them works because it is less vague.

[The Polis report was written by Dr Orgad and includes case studies written by staff from Save The Children, Oxfam, the Disasters Emergency Committee and Plan UK. It summarises discussions held at a conference on the issues in November with NGO professionals working in advocacy, fundraising, development and humanitarian communications. It will be of interest to those involved in these areas as well as journalists who cover disasters, human rights and development.

It is part of a three-year research project headed by LSE in partnership with Bruna Seu of Birkbeck College (University of London) and funded by the Leverhulme Trust. Its focus is "the relationship between the audience's knowledge and caring and action."

Updates on this project will be posted on the Polis blog in coming months. To get a copy of the report or to get on the mailing list for future events and reports on this subject, please email polis@lse.ac.uk. For the full report please click here and here.]