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Relevance of Fundraising Charities' Content Marketing Objectives: Perceptions of Donors, Fundraisers and Their Consultants

Abstract

Many fundraising charities invest heavily in content marketing; often using consultants to direct their content marketing efforts. Thus it is vital to establish whether certain key aims of content marketing suggested by literature in the field actually match the aspects of content marketing deemed most important by charity donors. This paper examines the significance attached by samples of charities, donors, and content marketing consultancies to four possible major objectives of content marketing, i.e., the attainment of high search engine results page rankings, image enhancement through impression management, the stimulation of public perceptions of organisational transparency, and the creation of messages that 'go viral'. Several major differences in perceptions emerged among the three groups, with substantial implications for how fundraising charities should manage their content marketing programmes and activities. Charity managements need to consider carefully and critically the possible returns on large-scale expenditures intended to pursue the putative aims of content marketing that are routinely advocated by practitioner and academic literature.

Key words: charities, content marketing, search engine optimisation, organisational transparency, impression management, viral messages.

Introduction

Charities throughout the world increasingly employ *content marketing* both to communicate their philanthropic messages and to raise funds (Lawrance, 2013; Nah, 2014; Weisfeld-Spotter, Sussan and Gold, 2014; Barry, 2015; Haigh and Wigley, 2015). Content marketing involves 'the creation and sharing of valuable but often free-to-use content in webpages, blogs, e-newsletters, podcasts, videos, white papers, apps, virals, tweets, Facebook communications, online magazine or TV, etc.' (Hilpern, 2013 p.38). It is a

multi-channel device through which charities may attempt to intervene in situations where members of the public participate in conversations with or about a charity's operations (cf. Ahuja, Michels, Walker and Weissbuch, 2007). Charities' interest in content marketing derives in significant part from the rise of social media and its huge impact on fundraising. Social media marketing is 'the process that empowers organisations to promote their websites, products or services through online social channels and to tap into a much larger community that may not have been available via traditional channels' (Erdogmus and Cicek, 2012, p.1354). Globally, in 2014, an average of 500 million tweets were sent every day (i.e., 6000 every second); 300 hours of videos were uploaded to YouTube every minute, and 4.75 billion pieces of content were shared on Facebook every 24 hours (Barry, 2015). US survey data from the Content Marketing Institute suggested that in 2016 around two thirds of 1118 US nonprofits would be actively engaged in improving their social marketing and, in particular, their content marketing (Barry, 2015). Nonprofit marketers were, the survey suggested, 'feeling more confident about content marketing), trying more tactics, using more platforms and growing their internal knowledge and skills' (Barry, 2015, p.1). Forty-one per cent of the nonprofits in the sample had a dedicated content marketing manager; though only 23% had a documented content marketing strategy.

The content transmitted by a charity through social media platforms can be used to interact closely with members of the public (De Vries, Genseler and Leeftang, 2012), to create impressions of transparency and accountability of the organisation (Schniederjans, Cao and Schniederjans, 2013) and to enhance loyalty by making messages valuable and entertaining (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2012a). Among other things, content marketing seeks to influence (i) the nature and volume of comments made about an organisation on social media (Weisfeld-Spotter et al., 2014) and (partly in consequence of this), (ii) the organisation's position on search engine results pages. Content that is widely disseminated on social media will be picked up by search engine algorithms leading to higher results page rankings. Moreover, dissemination can result in content 'going viral' as browsers forward items to friends, relatives, acquaintances, work colleagues, etc. (Berger and Milkman, 2012). Lawrance (2013) noted how content that goes viral can quickly convert into increased donations. Also, Lawrance (2013) continued, charities could use content marketing to induce donor loyalty (by delivering consistent and valuable information), to make emotional connections with potential donors, and to initiate appeals. This was facilitated by the fact that charity content marketing is not 'fundraising' per

se, so message recipients are not on their guard and the content transmitted is more likely to be trusted. Nevertheless, the content of a charity's overall website will 'drive fundraising as it represents the charity's shop window where it can showcase its values, highlight its cause and encourage people to donate' (Team Hallam, 2014 p.1). CauseVox (2016) presented a number of case studies of how content deemed relevant by donors aroused interest and curiosity and directly stimulated donations.

Aims of the study

In view of the widespread and growing employment of content marketing by charities (see Cahalane, 2013; Miranda and Steiner, 2013; Nah, 2014; Barry, 2015) it is apposite to examine the relative levels of importance attached by fundraising managers to certain objectives of content marketing (as specified by literature in the content marketing field) and then to establish whether the objectives regarded by charity managers as being the most important are in reality the same as the aspects of content marketing deemed to be the most attractive by charity donors. Since many charities employ content marketing consultancies to advise them on content marketing issues, it is equally pertinent to explore the views of content marketing consultants concerning the importance of various possible aims of charity content marketing. It is necessary for charity managers and donors to have the same views on social media in order for charities to understand what donors are looking for and what donors appreciate in the digital charity communications domain (Flanigin and Metzger, 2007). A communality of views should help charities build donors' trust in the reliability of the information proffered on websites, hence preventing the supply of wasteful content, avoiding alienating browsers, stimulating engagement and generally improving donor relations ((Lauby, 2009).

Ultimately it is the senior management of a charity that determines the content of the organisations website, although often the decision is heavily influenced by a content marketing consultancy engaged to help the organisation with its efforts in the content marketing field (Waters et al., 2009; Econsultancy, 2012; Team Hallam, 2014). In the UK there exist thousands of content marketing consultancies that undertake specialised content marketing tasks for clients (e.g., search engine optimisation, analysis of content marketing metrics, video production, graphic design, online storytelling) (see Econsultancy, 2012).

Consultants advise their clients on which elements of an organisation's operations, performance, etc., it should describe and how best to present content to target audiences (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2012b). Also, for a fee they will seek to identify, recruit (through emails or banner headlines) and incentivise (via vouchers, special discounts or gifts) people likely to be considered influential among their peers. Selected individuals are then encouraged to supplement naturally occurring online conversations with script suggested by an organisation (Thomas, 2004) and to 'engage others with interesting exchanges' intended to favour the organisation (Ahuja et al., 2007 p.151).

Possible major aims of content marketing

Literature in the content marketing field (see below), the websites of content marketing consultancies, and theoretical considerations propose that content marketing has the capacity to improve a charity's position in search engine results page rankings, to generate in donors' minds beneficial perceptions that a charity's activities are transparent for all to see, to enhance a charity's image, and to result in some of the charity's communications being widely disseminated (i.e. 'going viral'). The present research enquired as to whether fundraisers, the consultants who advise charity managers, and donors, agree on whether these supposed characteristics of content marketing are critically important to them. The abovementioned possible key aims of content marketing are examined below.

Search engine optimisation

Search engine optimisation comprises 'the process of identifying factors in a webpage that impact on search engine accessibility to the webpage and fine-tuning the many elements of a website to achieve the highest possible visibility when a search engine responds to a relevant query' (Zhang and Dimitroff, 2005 p.666). Search engine rankings are determined by algorithms operated by the owner of an engine. Algorithms match *relevant* content to user queries. Hence, content is an 'especially important' criterion applied to the determination of results page rankings (Onaifo and Rasmussen, 2013 p.104). Content generates traffic and increases the volume of external links (Onaifo and Rasmussen, 2013), which themselves are ranked by search engines in terms of their quality (measured as amount of substantive content), and number of page

views and further third party links. Search engines rank webpages according to factors such as the extent to which content is shared (assessed by, for example, number of tweets and Facebook shares [Simone, 2013]); key word positions and duplications within a title and full text (Zhang and Dimitroff, 2005); and website owners' metadata descriptions. It is relevant to note however that the algorithms employed by search engines to rank websites that deal with particular topics (Google Penguin for instance) also use website content to *downgrade* websites that employ manipulative techniques (e.g., keyword stuffing, participation in link schemes, deliberate creation of duplication content) in order to achieve high rankings (Schwartz, 2013).

The advertisements of content marketing consultancies routinely assert an advertising consultancy's ability to secure higher search engine results page rankings for clients. Most internet traffic involves search engines (see Econsultancy, 2012; Barry, 2015), and it is known that search engine optimisation (SEO) leading to high search results page rankings is a primary aim of much content marketing (Hart, 2002; Wenham, Stephens and Hardy, 2003; Clarke, 2013). Interest in using content to drive SEO derives also from the fact that the majority of internet users only examine the top ten websites on a search engine results list, with only one per cent searching beyond page three (Zhang and Dimitroff, 2005). Pan and Crotts (2012) argued on the basis of social proof theory (see Cialdini, 1993) that this might be partially explained by a high SEO ranking signalling trustworthiness, and that browsers mimic the beliefs of those they trust. High SEO rankings, Pan and Crotts (2012) continued, leveraged social proof.

High search engine rankings create visibility for and awareness of a charity, even if donors do not think that high results positions are crucially important. They enable a charity to speak to many people quickly and will associate a charity with a particular cause. However, caution may be required before a charity commits very large expenditures to the attainment of this objective. Thus, given that a charity might invest substantial resources in maximising its results page ranking, it is a matter of considerable interest as to whether the *donors* to a charity *really* care about the charity's search result position (cf. Escalera, 2016). Gay, Charlesworth and Esen (2007) noted that just because most people only browse the first two or three pages resulting from a search, this does not *necessarily* mean that they regard top positions as important (implying in the present context that top positions may not induce individuals to give). Dangers could arise from browsers associating high positions with paid advertisements; from regarding the top few entries as 'digital

spam’, or from assuming that high positions must be the result of sharp practices by organisations that fake their importance in order to obtain higher rankings.

Smarty (2008) observed the growing cynicism of browsers with respect to ‘black hat spamdexing’ techniques, i.e., the deliberate manipulation of search engine indexes in order to achieve high results page rankings. Awareness of an organisation on a results page does not guarantee interest (Segal, 2011) or perceptions among donors of the relevance of content (Kesmodel, 2005). In some cases, a search term generates results containing a large number of paid advertised sites involving competing organisations, with thin content and marginal relevance to the browser’s requirements. Escalera (2016) noted the growing problem of ghost spam taking traffic away from relevant sites.

Accordingly, the first research question addressed by the present study is as follows.

RQ 1. Does a significant difference exist between on the one hand the degree to which charity fundraisers and their advisors regard high search results rankings as critically important aims of content marketing, and on the other the degree to which charity donors themselves value high search results rankings for a charitable organisation?

Image enhancement through impression management

A charity’s public image could be enhanced by the charity consciously managing the impressions its content makes on current and potential donors (Hart, 2002; Wenham *et al.*, 2003; Waters, Barnett, Lamm and Lucas, 2009). *Impression management* (see Schniederjans *et al.*, 2013) seeks to influence outsiders’ opinion or impressions by controlling the content of the information presented during interactions with the aim of maintaining or improving an organisation’s image. Information about an organisation’s accomplishments and shortcomings is presented discerningly; emphasising the former and downplaying the latter. A common impression management technique used by organisations is to attempt to obtain public approval by ‘conveying conformity’ and expressing ‘belief, value and attitude similarity’ with target audiences in order to

gain approval (Allen and Caillouet, 1994 p.48; see also Bozeman and Kacmar, 1997). Allegedly this creates impressions of legitimacy in the minds of message recipients (Allen and Caillouet, 1994; Yao, Brummette and Luo, 2015) and feelings of congruence between the values of the organisation and those of the audience (Fang, 2012). Information selectivity in the impression management context means selecting and/or modifying content to fit the expectations of the audience and/or choosing only to transmit specific information regarding an organisation's attributes, functions or quality. Thus negative events may be overlooked whereas positive happenings (endorsements, praise from politicians, etc.) are reported (Allen and Caillouet, 1994). Facts might be presented with the sole aim of inculcating in message recipients' minds positive beliefs and understandings (Bozeman and Kacmar, 1997).

Further support for impression management constituting a core objective of content marketing derives from the psychological proposition (see Schwartz, 2004) that the provision to individuals of a constrained amount of information reduces anxiety and is therefore psychologically beneficial. Thus, according to this line of thought, content that concentrates on just a few key points will reassure potential donors, remove doubts from their minds and, in the charity context, stimulate donations (Pan and Crofts, 2012). The information transmitted can be selected to fit the expectations of the audience, emphasising positive happenings (endorsements, praise from politicians, etc.) (Allen and Caillouet, 1994). This might involve the use of strongly persuasive language and the favourable presentation of performance comparisons between the home organisation and others (Fang, 2012).

However, the *recipients* of content designed to create favourable impressions of an organisation might not appreciate the material delivered. Some information may be valued (e.g., concerning a charity's events or aspects of its services), but not the rest. Browsers may suspect that stories have been embellished and, according to Bozeman and Kacmar (1997), may feel ingratiated and manipulated. Content based on efforts to impress could be perceived as boasting (Browning et al., 2010), as insincere, and as cynical manipulation of facts (Tufekci, 2008). It might cause website visitors to suspect that content damaging to an organisation's credibility is being suppressed, hence creating a 'legitimacy gap', i.e., a rift between the actual activities of an organisation and 'society's perceptions of how it should behave' (O'Donovan, 2002 p. 345). Abraham

(2004) observed how 'excessive impression management, can substantially damage the reputation of an organisation (p. 44). This leads to the second research question addressed by the current research.

RQ 2. Does a significant difference exist between the degree to which charity fundraisers and their advisors rank the importance of image enhancement through impression management as an objective of content marketing and the degree to which charity donors view as acceptable a charity's attempts at impression management contained within content?

Creating transparency

A different and alternative approach to content management that a charity might adopt is for an organisation, instead of only presenting selective information, to aim for maximum public *transparency* of its operations. Transparency may *itself* contribute to improving a charity's image (Rosenfeld, Giacalone and Riordan, 1995) and could be far more effective in this respect than systematic impression management (see Bernstein, 2012). Bhaduri and Ha-Brookshire (2011) reported numerous empirical studies which concluded that members of the public held more favourable attitudes towards organisations with transparent practices, behaviours and outputs. Organisational transparency has been variously defined as 'the provision of information that allows all people who are interested in a decision to understand what is being decided, why, and where' (Drew, Nyerges and Leschine, 2004 p.1642); as the 'visibility and accessibility of information concerning an organisation's practices' (Bhaduri and Ha-Brookshire, 2011 p.136); or more simply as 'honest and open communications' (Liu and Horsley, 2007 p.378). A literature review completed by Wehmeier and Raaz (2012) identified various dimensions of organisational transparency, including corporate governance; communications and relationships; law and regulation; efficiency and effectiveness; and finance. Further possible elements of transparency include organisational structure, technical competencies, the history of the organisation (Eggert and Helm, 2003), and justifications and rationales for discrepancies and inconsistencies in behaviour (Christensen and Langer, 2009).

Theoretical considerations support the suggestion that organisational transparency should improve a charity's relationships with donors which, according to Pan and Crotts (2012), will develop and strengthen the greater

(i) the degree of an organisation's self-disclosure of private and semi-confidential information, and (ii) the extent to which it expresses its 'inner self' (p.80). Self-disclosure allegedly represents a positive gesture towards message recipients that invites a positive response (Altman and Taylor, 1973). Specific benefits claimed for organisational transparency include the creation of a favourable atmosphere for public relations (Eggert and Helm, 2003), feelings of identification with an organisation (Bertot, Jaeger and Grimes, 2010), trust (DiStaso and Bortree, 2012), and an improved reputation (Bhaduri and Ha-Brookshire, 2011). Problems are that transparent information is freely available to competitors; that as more and more information becomes accessible it becomes increasingly difficult for message recipients to judge which elements are valid (Christensen and Langer, 2009); and that because individuals' perceptions of transparency are subjective (Eggert and Helm, 2003), opinions vis-à-vis the optimum amount of transparency will vary from person to person (Jiang, Raghupathi and Raghupathi, 2009).

It follows from the above that a substantial number of charities (and the consultants who advise them) might regard the attainment of transparency (as opposed to employing selective impression management) as a primary aim of content marketing. Nevertheless, the possibility arises that *donors* might not in reality be impressed by a charity's attempts at transparency. They might not believe the 'transparent' information that is transmitted, might consider it to be a form of advertising, or might not find useful the information that is provided. Donors may not want to be close to a charity to which they give money and might not feel any sense of identification with the organisation. Hence the third research question posed by the current research is:

RQ 3. Does a significant difference exist between the degree to which charity fundraisers and their advisors rate the importance of transparency as an objective of content marketing and the degree to which charity donors rate the importance of attempts at transparency creation within a charity's content?

Attaining viral distribution of content

The term 'viral marketing' describes promotional activities whereby an organisation encourages the mutual sharing and spreading by the public of information that it sends out. Organisations increasingly attempt to

create compelling content they hope will improve the chances of a message ‘going viral’ (Hinz, Skiera, Barrot and Becker, 2011). The chances of achieving virality may be improved by their employing (or internally developing) staff with storytelling, blog writing, video production and related skills (Deiser and Newton, 2013). Berger and Milkman (2012) found that high probabilities of viral distribution were associated with the inclusion in content of high-arousal positive and emotionally evocative messages; avoidance of deactivating messages (e.g., those invoking sadness, anger, awe or anxiety); and the presentation of useful, interesting and surprising information. Positive content is likely to be shared, Berger and Milkman (2012) continued, because it reflects favourably on the sender, given that people generally prefer to be identified as individuals who share upbeat stories and who make others feel good. Humorous and/or ‘quirky’ content was especially likely to have a good chance of going viral. Pan and Crofts (2012) argued (on the basis of social exchange theory) that a ‘me too’ effect can help explain viral distribution of content, i.e., if individuals see that others have shared a post then they are likely to follow suit. Content received from friends and relatives was particularly likely to be passed on as it was often construed as ‘more credible, honest and trustworthy than that generated by marketers’ (p.75).

Achieving viral distribution requires ‘giving the right message to the right messengers’ (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2012a p.253). Individuals with large numbers of social media contacts represent excellent starting points for viral marketing campaigns (Hinz *et al.*, 2011; Weisfeld-Spotter *et al.* 2014), especially if the people involved possess large amounts of marketplace information and proactively engage in discussions with others to spread this information (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2012b). Such individuals can exert a heavy influence on public opinion (McConnell and Huba, 2007).

It is relevant to note however that donors might resent being pressured into passing on messages. Donors may assume that certain messages have been sent by agents, may feel ‘used’, and might regard as ‘digital spam’ messages that are clearly intended to encourage virality (Woerndl, Papagiannidis, Bourlakis and Li, 2008). Also, donors may be indifferent to content that includes uplifting stories and highly emotional themes.

Hence:

RQ 4. Does a significant difference exist between the degree to which charity fundraisers and their advisors rate the importance of devices intended to increase the potential virality of content marketing and the degree to which charity donors approve of attempts at encouraging the virality of a charity's content?

Because the study gathered basic information on the properties of the respondent charities and consultancies (size, age, sector – see below) and on the characteristics of donors (age, income and education levels, intensity of use of social media, giving behaviour) it was feasible to pose a final research question regarding possible connections between these variables and a participant's views on the importance and/or roles of transparency, etc., within a charity's content, i.e.:

RQ 5. (a) If the respondent is from a charity or a consultancy, do there exist significant relationships between the characteristics of the person's organisation and the individual's views on transparency, use of impression management to improve a charity's image, attempts at securing virality, and search engine optimisation? (b) If the participant is a donor, do there exist significant relationships between the individual's characteristics and the person's views on transparency, etc.?

Methodology

Heads of marketing in the UK's top (by income) 1000 charities were emailed (*via* a rented list) and invited to complete a questionnaire exploring their charities' content marketing aims. A survey approach to the research was adopted in order to maximise the generalisability of the results beyond that which would be possible using ad hoc case studies. After follow ups 239 replies were received. A list of 301 content marketing consultancies was obtained from a content marketing trade association. This was supplemented by details of a further 113 consultancies taken from the pages of the major search engines. Emails were sent to the 'chief executive' of each of the 414 consultancies attaching a questionnaire and inviting the chief executive's participation in the research. One hundred and five responses were eventually received. Information was also collected from 489 charity donors approached at random in street locations in various

districts (some prosperous, some deprived) of Greater London (the maximum number possible given the budget for the research). The work was undertaken by graduate students who had been trained and were paid for the task. People who stated that they 'never give to charity' were excluded from the exercise. This was because charity donors constitute the primary audience of interest to fundraising charities. People who have never given to charity may be influenced by a quite different set of factors compared to those who actually give. Approaches were made at disparate times of day on different days of the week. Response patterns within the data collected by various interviewers and on different days were compared, no statistically significant differences ($p < .05$) emerging.

Questionnaires sent to charities, consultancies and donors

These were developed consequent to (i) discussions with four senior charity fundraisers and three experienced content marketing consultants, and (ii) a pre-test involving the completion of relevant documents by 20 charity fundraisers, ten consultants and 20 donors. Section one of the questionnaire sent to charities (see Appendix 1) asked for information about a charity's size, age and sector, and whether it used a content marketing consultant and/or employed dedicated marketing staff. Two thirds of the charities employed a content marketing consultancy; half had a dedicated marketing manager (or public relations or communications officer). Consultancies were requested to state whether they specialised in charity clients. Subsequent sections explored the respondent's perceptions of the importance of transparency, their opinions regarding the use of impression management, their perspectives on virality, and their views concerning the quest for search engine optimisation within the charity content. The sources of the questionnaire items employed in the survey are given in the Appendix.

Appendix 2 summarizes the questionnaire administered to charity donors. This began with routine queries concerning the donor's age, income category and education, intensity of use of social media, amount given to charity in the previous year and frequency of giving. Donors were then asked for *their* views on the importance of transparency, the use of impression management, etc., within content. The questionnaire employed the same questions (suitably adapted) that were given to charities and agencies. The replies to the items contained in the questionnaires were factor analysed (principal components method), with the

outcomes reported in the next section. Each of the factor structures that emerged was checked for reliability using the confirmatory factor analysis procedure of the IBM AMOS 20 package. Regressions were completed to answer RQ. 5.

Factor analysis of responses

As the research involved adaptations of selected items from pre-existing scales it was necessary to analyse the structures of the patterns of response from the three categories of participants. For each group (charities, consultancies, donors) the replies to the transparency items factored into three dimensions. Factor 1 contained two items involving the ‘provision of detailed information’ (see Appendix 1 section 2 A [i] and [ii]); factor 2 had two items concerning ‘content is easy to understand’ (2A [iii] and [vi]); while the third factor held two items regarding a charity being ‘open about mistakes’ (2A [iv] and [v]). Items relating to selective impression management fell into two factors, the first of which may be labelled ‘discussion of the organisation’s problems’ and which contained items 2B (i), (ii) and (vii). The second impression management factor may be termed ‘over exaggeration’ and comprised items 2B (iii) and (iv) plus 2B (viii) and (ix). The items relating to the virality construct factored into three dimensions. Factor one may be referred to as ‘arousal of strong emotions’ and held items 2C (i), (ii) and (iv). The second factor involved ‘humorous and quirky messages’ (see 2C [v] and [vi]), while factor 3 contained just a single item (2C [iii]) concerning ‘asking recipients to pass on messages’. Items about search engine optimisation divided into two factors: one holding items 2D (i) and 2D (iv) (reverse scored) and referring to ‘donors think highly of high ranking search positions’, and the second relating to ‘donors dislike SEO devices’ (see 2D [ii] and [iii]). Table 1 shows the patterns of 2000 results of the factor analyses of the three sets of responses from charities, consultancies and donors. Responses for each factor for each of the three groups were averaged for use in subsequent analysis. (Averaging was appropriate as the correlations among the items in each of the factors for each group exceeded .75). The same *factor structure* emerged for the responses from each group, but with major differences in the average values of responses to the items within particular factors, as shown in the Table.

As well as the abovementioned average values being used to compare the views of charity and consultancy managers and of donors regarding the desirability of various aims of content marketing (Table 1). They were also used as dependent variables in a series of regressions designed to assess (i) the impacts of certain organisational factors on the strengths of the organisational respondents' views on these matters (Tables 2 and 3) and (ii) the effects of specific personal characteristics on the strengths of the views of donors on the same dependent variables (Table 4).

Results and discussion

Table 1 indicates that substantial disparities occurred between the views of charity managers, consultancy executives and donors in relation to the utility of several aspects of certain aims of content marketing. These results help answer research questions 1 to 4. Research question 5 was dealt with separately. Results relating to each of the research questions are detailed below.

Research question 1: Search engine optimisation

Charity managers and heads of consultancies generally believed that donors thought more favourably about charities that enjoyed high rankings on search engine results pages (mean [M]=4.2 and 4.1). Donors tended not to share this view (M=2.7). This is an interesting and potentially important result given the large amount of effort that many organisations (charities included) appear to devote to SEO activities. Responses from donors in the present study suggest that charities need not invest heavily in securing high search engine results page rankings. Donors in the sample did not seem to be overly concerned about this matter, perhaps because they did not mentally associate the pursuit of high results page rankings with a charity's philanthropic mission.

Also, most donors reported that they disliked (M=3.9) the use of devices intended to secure high results page rankings (e.g., requests to share content with others). Conversely, respondents in charities and consultancies generally opined that donors did not greatly object to such measures (M=2.8, M=2.9). Thus, charities and consultancies should recognise that many donors find these devices to be intrusive and irritating.

Research question 2: Selective impression management

Whilst many of the respondents in charities and consultancies believed that it was important for charities to avoid discussing a charity's problems (M=4.0 and M=4.1) and to avoid over-exaggeration (M=3.6 and M=3.5); donors typically reported that discussions of this nature should not be avoided (M=2.4). The managerial implication here is that a charity will enhance its relationships with donors if its content presents the organisation modestly and is prepared to acknowledge the existence of problems.

Research question 3: Transparency

There were statistically significant ($p < .01$) differences between the importance attached by charity managers to the desirability of charities providing detailed information within content (M=4.1) and (i) the importance attached to this matter by consultancies (M=3.3), and (ii) the degree to which donors regarded detailed information provision to be important to them personally (M=3.0). Thus, whereas charity managers believed it was extremely important to supply detailed information on their charities' organisation and finances, consultancies and donors were much less convinced that this was the case. The policy implication for fundraisers of this result is that a charity might do best by including in its content just a single, straightforward yet powerful message and not be overly concerned with providing donors with large volumes of information. Consultancies seemed to be more in tune with donors with respect to this matter.

Members of all three groups thought it vital that content be easy to understand. Donors felt that it was important for a charity to be open about its mistakes (M=4.0), but charity managers and heads of consultancies did not see this matter as particularly important (M=2.9 and 2.7 respectively). This suggests that a charity will appear more credible to donors if its content readily and candidly admits the organisation's mistakes and openly recognises their causes and consequences.

Research question 4: Virality

There was general agreement among the three groups that the arousal of strong emotions and the transmission of humorous and quirky messages were likely to increase the chances of content 'going viral'. This outcome corresponds to the views of a number of (mainly practitioner) authors who have expressed views on the subject (for details see, for example, Hinz *et al.*, 2011; Berger and Milkman, 2012; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2012a). Nevertheless, charities and agencies believed that the practice of explicitly requesting message recipients to pass on messages facilitated virality to a far greater extent ($M=3.9$ and $M=4.1$) than was the case for donors ($M=2.8$). It seems, therefore, that charities need to be extremely careful about how they ask content recipients to pass on messages. Possibly they should avoid direct and/or abrupt requests and instead apply circumspect and less obvious methods to try to persuade content recipients to relay messages.

Research question 5: Respondents' views and organisational or individual characteristics

(a) Charities and consultancies

Table 2 shows the presence of a number of significant influences ($p<.05$) of organisational characteristics on the dependent variables covered by the investigation (transparency, impression management, virality, SEO) in the regressions involving the responses of charity managers. The participants' views on the averaged values of the items in the transparency factor 'Extent to which content should provide detailed information' were affected by charity size; which also impacted negatively on the averaged values of the items in the transparency factor 'should be open about mistakes' and positively on the opinion that donors favour charities with high ranking positions on search results pages. The first of these outcomes might be due to larger charities possessing the resources to harvest and process large amounts of detailed information; the second to the possibility that big charities may be more concerned about protecting their reputations (expensively built up over many years) and may have more extensive public relations facilities; and the third to managers in large charities believing that a large and well-established charity *must* perform well in relation to SEO in order to maintain its credibility.

The effects of charity sector are not shown in Table 2, or in the subsequent Tables. Dummy variables were constructed to divide charities into seven categories of type of cause, following the NCVO's (2012) classification of charities (itself based on the International Classification of Nonprofit Organisations). Initially these were included in the regression equations, but failed to attain significance ($p < .1$) in all instances. Hence, charity sector was excluded from the subsequent analyses. The correlation between charity size and the likelihood of an organisation having a dedicated marketing department was .37. However, the magnitude of the relationship was substantially lower than the threshold at which multicollinearity would cause technical problems for the estimation (see Aiken and West, 1991). This relatively modest correlation suggests that a charity's interest in marketing (in general) was likely to be due to a managerial orientation rather than size. None of the correlations among other pairs of the independent variables in Table 2 or in Tables 3 and 4 exceeded .31. Tolerance statistics for all the independent variables (1 minus R^2 when each of the latter was used as a dependent variable) exceeded .7. Regression error terms were normally distributed in all the estimated equations.

Respondents in older charities and charities that used content marketing consultancies also tended to believe that high results page rankings were important. The latter result is perhaps unsurprising considering that consultancies make their living in part by helping organisations maximise their search engine results page rankings and understandably will want to direct clients towards the belief that high rankings are important. Individuals working in older charities were relatively less inclined to state that content should be open about a charity's mistakes or discuss problems. Significant influences on the same dependent variables in regressions involving the responses of heads of consultancies and consultancy characteristics are given in Table 3. Heads of consultancies that specialised in working for charity clients were less likely than others to suggest either that a charity be open about its mistakes or to discuss its problems. This might be due to managers in such consultancies taking less idealistic and more pragmatic approaches to charity public relations than heads of agencies that do not specialise in charity work. This is an interesting result considering that content marketing agency executives working primarily in the private commercial sector might possibly be expected to be more rather than less inclined to recommend concealing mistakes.

(b) Donors

The regression analysis for donors revealed that better-educated donors and people who gave larger amounts to charity were more inclined than others to want a charity's content to provide detailed information and to be open about mistakes (see Table 4). These results might be expected *a-priori*. Individuals who used social media intensively held more favourable attitudes towards their being asked to pass on messages, and were more likely to retransmit messages that were humorous and/or quirky. Arguably this reflects the younger age profile of heavy users of social media.

Conclusion

Although the results reveal a communality of views among charity marketers, heads of content marketing consultancies and donors in respect of certain issues, e.g., the need for content to be easy to understand and the likelihood that emotional and humorous content is more likely to 'go viral'; significant and substantial differences arose in relation to the views of managers and donors regarding the desirability of content (i) incorporating detailed information on issues, (ii) being completely open about mistakes, and (iii) over-exaggerating an organisation's attributes. Also there were differences in views regarding the importance of search engine optimisation, and the utility of the employment of devices to attain high results page rankings. The managerial recommendations ensuing from the findings are clear. When drafting their electronic content, charities should not allocate space to presenting detailed information but instead should focus on conveying the 'big picture' *vis-a-vis* the organisation's mission and work. Content needs to be straightforward, quick and easy to understand, and designed to arouse strong emotions. Charities should be candid about their mistakes, problems and shortcomings, and not seek to impress donors with information that cannot be verified. Public concerns regarding the provision of unverified information by charities have extended to statements about the percentages of their incomes that charities spend on marketing and administration (see Bennett and Savani, 2003), claims about the quality of their work, assumptions about the causes of problems (especially where politics are involved), and the degrees to which charities receive government funding for contract work to which strings are attached (BBC Ethics Guide, 2014).

Donors should not be asked to pass messages on to other people if there are any dangers of the request being unwelcome. Some people do like to engage with organisations in this way, provided they trust the organisation and see the request as relevant (Berger and Milkman, 2012). It is essential however to give ‘the right message to the right messengers in the right environment’ (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2012a p. 260) to allow people to share a common interest and to seek or obtain validation of their opinions (Handley and Chapman, 2011). Also, charities should not be obsessed with attaining high search engine results page rankings. The overall implication is that charities need to examine carefully their donors’ views on the usefulness of their electronic content marketing activities.

These outcomes are disconcerting considering that many charities could be making substantial investments in crafting their content in manners they believe to be the most effective but which in reality have little meaning for donors, and also in search engine optimisation. Some of these expenditures will be wasted if charities target their spending at dimensions of content that donors do not in reality regard as important. (Econsultancy [2015] reported that content marketing budgets were set to reach an all-time high in 2015/16.) Clearly, charities need to undertake much more research into the effectiveness of their content marketing, the factors that underlie success or failure, and donors’ attitudes towards the content they generate. Far more extensive engagement with donors concerning charities’ planned content marketing activities is necessary.

A number of limitations apply to the study, which themselves create interesting opportunities for further research. The work was completed in a single sector (fundraising charities) in a single country and with a restricted sample size. Replications of the investigation in other countries would be valuable. The current research could only consider a relatively small number of explanatory variables. It would be useful to explore the influences on donors’ perceptions of content of various personal inclinations known to affect donor behaviour, e.g., empathy, affect intensity, degree of altruism. Equally it would be interesting to examine the influence of a wider range of organisational characteristics, e.g., market orientation, management structure, centralisation or decentralisation, competitive environment, on executives’ views on content marketing. The study only covered people who in the past had given to charity. Consideration of the views of non-donors to charity would be worthwhile.

Appendix 1. Questionnaire sent to charities and consultancies

1. General

(i) Number of employees, annual income category, age of the organisation, sector.

(ii) If the organisation is a charity (a) does the charity use a content marketing consultancy; (b) does the charity employ professional marketing staff?

(iii) If the organisation is a consultancy: does the consultancy specialise in charity clients?

2. Perceptions of importance

Please indicate the level of the importance you attach to each of the following characteristics of the message content your charity (your client's charity) communicates to its donors.

Key 5 = crucially important (a top priority); 4 = very important; 3 = somewhat important; 2 = not very important; 1 = not at all important

A. Transparency

Source: Adapted from Rawlins (2009)

Provision of information that:

(i) gives detailed information on the charity's organisation structure and systems

(ii) gives detailed information on the charity's finances

(iii) is easy to understand as well as being complete and comprehensive

(iv) is completely open about events that might be damaging to the organisation

(v) freely admits mistakes made by the organisation

(vi) makes it as easy as possible for donors to find information about the charity's activities, organisation and finances.

B. Impression management

Source: Adapted from Fang (2012); Levashina and Campion (2007); Grazioli and Jarvenpaa (2003)

When seeking to obtain donations, charities should always avoid (5-point agree/disagree scales):

- (i) discussing the charity's inability to provide certain services
- (ii) mentioning organisational problems or weaknesses
- (iii) stretching the truth in order to attract donations
- (iv) constructing fictional stories to attract donors
- (v) exaggerating facts favourable to the charity
- (vi) adjusting images of the organisation to match the values and beliefs of the typical donor, even when the adjusted images exaggerate the truth
- (vii) stating anything about the organisation's weaknesses
- (viii) over-exaggerating the charity's reputation in order to impress donors
- (ix) inflating the charity's credentials to meet donors' expectations of what it exists to do.

C. Virality

Source Adapted form Handley and Chapman (2012)

In order to maximise the likelihood of people passing on the messages they receive, content should (5-point agree/disagree scales):

- (i) aim to arouse strong emotions

- (ii) aim to inspire strong positive emotions (e.g., joy, hope, optimism) and to avoid arousing negative emotions (e.g., anger, fear, sadness, shame)
- (iii) explicitly request recipients to pass on messages, e.g., by retweeting, emailing to friends, blogging
- (iv) sometimes be shocking and controversial
- (v) sometimes be very humorous
- (vi) aim to be unusual, out of the ordinary and quirky.

D. Search engine optimisation

Please indicate the strength of your agreement or disagreement with each of the following statements (five-point scales: 5 = strong agree; 1 = strongly disagree).

- (i) Donors think more favourably about charities with high rankings on search engine results pages.
- (ii) Donors generally dislike the use within social media of devices intended to secure high rankings on search engine results pages (e.g., obvious and excessive use of key words within content, schemes designed to induce donors to click on particular links).
- (iii) Donors generally object to being asked to share content, e.g., retweets, Facebook shares.
- (iv) Donors often assume that high ranking links that appear on a search engine results page are paid-for advertisements or are 'digital spam'.

Appendix 2. Questionnaire completed by donors

1. General

(i) Age, income category, highest educational qualification.

(ii) I use social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, internet blogs): several times a day/once or twice a day/once every couple of days/once a week/once a fortnight/once a month/less than once a month.

(iii) Approximate amount given to charity in the previous 12 months.

(iv) I give to charity approximately: more than once a month/once a month/once every 3 months/once every 6 months/once a year.

(iv) Type(s) of charity mainly supported (children's, overseas aid, medical, etc.)

2. Perceptions of importance

The items in Appendix 1.2A were modified to establish donors' views on these matters, for example:

'When you receive a communication from a charity through social media (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, internet blogs) how important to you personally do you believe it is that the communication':

(i) gives detailed information on the charity's organisation structure and systems

etc., through to and including section B of Appendix 1.

4. Virality

The items in Appendix 1.2C were also amended to establish donors' views on relevant matters, viz:

I am most likely to pass on to friends, relatives, work colleagues and other acquaintances a communication I receive through social media from a charity when the communication:

(i) arises strong emotions within me

etc., through to item (vi) of Appendix 1.2C.

5. Search engine optimisation

The items in Appendix 1.2D were modified to establish donors' views on these matters; viz:

(i) I think more highly of a charity that has a high position in a search engine results page.

(ii) I generally dislike...as in Appendix 1.2D (ii) through to (iv).

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Factor	Mean value of averaged items in factor		
	Charities	Agencies	Donors
<i>Transparency</i>			
Provision of detailed information	4.1	3.3	3.0
Content is easy to understand	4.1	4.2	4.2
Open about mistakes	2.9	2.7	4.0
<i>Impression management</i>			
Discussion of the organisation's problems	4.0	4.1	2.9
Over-exaggeration	3.6	3.5	2.4
<i>Virality</i>			
Arousal of strong emotions	4.0	4.2	4.1
Humorous and quirky messages	4.0	4.3	4.3
Asking recipients to pass on messages	3.9	4.1	2.8

<i>Search engine optimisation</i>			
Donors think highly of high ranking search positions	4.2	4.1	2.7
Donors dislike SEO devices	2.8	2.9	3.9

TABLE 1. FACTOR STRUCTURE AND MAJOR DIFFERENCES

*Indicates statistical significance at the 0.01 level or below.

TABLE 2. REGRESSION ANALYSIS: CHARITY MANAGERS

	Independent variables				Regression R-square
	Size (annual income)	Age (years)	Does/does not use a CM consultant	Does/does not have a dedicated marketing department	
Dependent variables:					
<i>1. Transparency.</i> Extent to which a charity's content should:					
- provide detailed information	.41 ((5.02)*	-.06 (0.04)	.12 (1.03)	.11 (1.01)	.50
- be easy to understand	.20 (1.54)	.19 (1.44)	.16 (1.09)	-.09 (0.08)	.09
- be open about mistakes	-.39 (3.99)*	-.29 (3.33)*	-.08 (0.09)	.12 (1.03)	.56
<i>2. Impression management</i> Content should avoid:					
- discussing an organisation's problems	.15 (1.64)	.35 (4.44)*	.06 (0.09)	-.19 (1.02)	.44
- over-exaggeration	-.10 (1.00)	-.02 (0.07)	.12 (1.03)	-.09 (0.09)	.08
<i>3. Virality</i> Content is likely to 'go viral' if it:					
- arouses strong emotions	.07 (1.04)	-.05 (0.09)	.19 (1.54)	.11 (1.66)	.09

- has humorous and quirky messages	-01 (0.05)	-01 (0.06)	.14 (1.08)	.15 (1.04)	.06
-asks recipients to pass on messages	.09 (0.11)	.06 (0.10)	.19 (1.26)	.16 (1.19)	.06
4. <i>Search engine optimisation</i>				2000	
Believe that donors:					
- think highly of high ranking search positions	.44 (4.77)*	.31 (3.22)*	.29 (3.06)*	.19 (1.68)	.62
-dislike SEO devices	.10 (1.22)	.16 (1.66)	-.08 (1.00)	-.09 (1.10)	.11

*Indicates statistical significance at the 0.01 level or below.

	Independent variables			
	Size (annual income)	Age (years)	Does/does not specialise in charity clients	Regression R-square
Dependent variables:				
<p><i>1. Transparency</i></p> <p>Extent to which a charity's content should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - provided detailed information - be easy to understand - be open about mistakes 	<p>.01 (0.06)</p> <p>-.01 (0.05)</p> <p>.10 (1.23)</p>	<p>.09 (0.10)</p> <p>-.01 (0.03)</p> <p>-.06 (0.09)</p>	<p>-.09 (0.09)</p> <p>.13 (1.01)</p> <p>.39 (3.39)*</p>	<p>.02</p> <p>.05</p> <p>.41</p>
<p><i>2. Impression management</i></p> <p>Content should avoid:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - discussing an organisation's problems - overexaggeration 	<p>-.05 (1.00)</p> <p>-.08 (0.08)</p>	<p>-.03 (0.07)</p> <p>.09 (1.01)</p>	<p>-.09 (0.09)</p> <p>-0.12 (1.18)</p>	<p>.06</p> <p>.07</p>
<p><i>3. Virality</i></p> <p>Content is likely to 'go viral' if it:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - arouses strong emotions - has humorous and quirky messages - asks recipients to pass on messages 	<p>.10 (1.22)</p> <p>.11 (1.12)</p> <p>-.16 (0.67)</p>	<p>.12 (1.04)</p> <p>.07 (1.10)</p> <p>.10 (1.00)</p>	<p>.08 (1.00)</p> <p>.07 (0.09)</p> <p>.09 (1.03)</p>	<p>.09</p> <p>.09</p> <p>.07</p>

<i>4. Search engine optimisation</i>				
Believe that donors				
- think highly of high ranking search positions	-.01 (0.01)	.10 (0.09)	.10 (1.00)	.05
- dislike SEO devices	-.06 (0.08)	.08 (1.00)	-.11 (1.11)	.08

TABLE 3. REGRESSION ANALYSIS: CONSULTANCIES

*Indicates statistical significance at the 0.01 level or below.

TABLE 4. REGRESSION ANALYSIS: DONORS

	Independent variables						
	Age (years)	Income category	Highest educational qualification	Intensity of use of social media	Amount given to charity in last 12 months	Frequency of giving	
Dependent variables:							Regression R-square
<i>1. Transparency</i>							
Extent to which a charity's content should:							
- provide detailed information	.11 (1.29)	.09 (1.08)	.44 (4.45)*	.08 (0.09)	.32 (2.94)*	.17 (1.66)	.53
-be easy to understand	.19 (1.61)	.11 (1.10)	-.05 (0.05)	.12 (1.10)	.01 (0.09)	.02 (0.09)	.09
-be open about mistakes	.10 (1.02)	.12 (1.04)	.35 (3.35)	.14 (1.19)	.41 (3.97)*	.15 (1.53)	.46
<i>2. Impression management</i>							
Content should avoid:							

-discussing an organisation's problems	.18 (1.19)	-.11 (1.02)	-.16 (1.65)	.14 (1.00)	.16 (1.55)	10 (1.11)	.05
-over-exaggeration	.12 (1.12)	.08 (0.09)	-.10 (1.20)	.07 (0.09)	.16 (1.50)	.10 (1.14)	.06
3. Virality							
Content is likely to 'go viral' if it:							
-arouses strong emotions	.04 (0.07)	-.01 (0.06)	.05 (0.04)	.14 (1.67)	.09 (0.09)	.06 (0.08)	.01
-has humorous and quirky messages	-.08 (0.10)	-.01 (0.03)	.07 (.09)	.38 (4.49)*	-.04 (0.08)	.02 (0.05)	.43
-asks recipients to pass on messages	-.07 (0.10)	.08 (1.02)	.04 (.08)	.36 (4.07)*	-.02 (0.07)	.09 (1.11)	.45
4. Search engine optimisation							
As a donor I:							
-think highly of high ranking search positions	-.03 (0.03)	.07 (1.12)	.11 (1.18)	.19 (1.70)	-.09 (1.10)	.12 (1.22)	.08
-dislike SEO devices	.18 (1.70)	-.06 (0.09)	-.08 (1.10)	-.18 (1.70)	.07 (1.10)	.05 (0.06)	.02

*Indicates statistical significance at the 0.01 level or below.