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COMMUNICATION POLICY OF CHARITY FOUNDATIONS
SUPPORTING SICK CHILDREN: PERSUASION TOOLS

Marina Terskikh (a)*
*Corresponding author

(a) Dostoevsky Omsk State University, 55 A, Prospect Mira, Omsk, Russia, terskih@mail.ru; +7(3812)670620

Abstract

The study analyses communication activities in the area of charity for sick and poor children. On the one hand, charity as a social phenomenon plays an important role in modern society. People are interested in the problems connected with spiritual renaissance; governments, private businesses, and individuals become engaged in different charitable activities. The most popular spheres of these activities support educational projects, helping orphanages, giving financial support to children in need of money or expensive treatment, creating and supporting groups of volunteers ready to entertain children staying in hospitals, etc. On the other hand, our society remains ill-informed about the activities of socially-oriented non-profit organizations, and people do not put much trust in charitable foundations' activities. That is why in 2016–2017, professionals engaged in charity started a campaign against frauds in the area of charity, meaning pseudo-volunteers, pseudo-charitable foundations, etc. The author presents the results of an Internet survey aimed at defining whether Russian citizens are able to identify real charity foundations, and what they feel about their activities. The paper also focuses on the key concepts reflected in the charity foundations' texts and their persuasive potential. The author analyses the interaction between visual and verbal components used in the messages of socially-oriented non-profit organizations. Overall, polysemiotic texts of charity foundations appeal to the mercy of the target audience, rousing a desire to help children in need. In the conclusion, the author makes recommendations that may help improve the communication activities of Russian modern charity foundations.

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Keywords: Charity, charity foundations, non-profit organizations, communication activities, communication policy, concept.



1. Introduction

These days there are a lot of different non-profit organizations (NPO) – foundations, associations, and centers – in modern Russia, traditions of mercy and charity are being revived, and charity activities are gaining more importance, especially in terms of dealing with different social issues connected with childhood support, such as fundraising for treating children with cancer and their rehabilitation, creating volunteer groups in oncohaematological units, entertaining children in hospitals, promoting donorship, etc.

Charity foundations are trying to complete social, educational, cultural, and other missions that are vital for society. They support people in need, therefore “non-profit organizations, especially socially-oriented ones, become a cornerstone of society” (Komadorova, 2015, p. 37).

It should be noted that communication activities in the non-profit area, as well as the discourse of social communications, have not yet received adequate attention in Russian communicative science. Despite this, we all have witnessed a sharp increase in research activities focused on the communicative strategies of NPOs (Bezverbnaya, 2017; Bobrovnikov, 2010; Vasilyeva, 2016; Karagodina, 2012; Strategic Communication for non-profit organizations, 2016; Domingues, Machado, 2017; Technologies of interaction between socially-oriented non-profit organizations with stakeholders, 2015).

As Hauser argues, the communication policy of non-profit organizations “is a system of interactions implemented by means of community works, aimed at the formation of public opinion, which by all means requires public dialogue” (Hauser, cited in Ulyanova, 2016, 68).

One of the core problems of the charity sector is a certain level of ambiguity of charity organizations’ work. It is not transparent for the mass audience, which becomes a target audience for NPO’s calls for helping people in need. Moreover, the bulk of Russian society does not put its faith in the idea of charity.

2. Problem Statement

Childhood issues constitute one of the most popular categories used to manipulate human consciousness; not many people are eager to make a donation at the adults’ fundraiser, but the image of a child triggers more emotions. Therefore, fraudsters often use images of children. According to the Public Opinion Foundation’s survey, half of the respondents claim that they are ready to help any individual despite of his or her age, 32% are ready to help children, and 12% are ready to help elderly persons. Only two respondents out of 533 claimed they are ready to help adults (it makes 0%). Children receive help much more often. Russian citizens prefer to support an ecology project rather than donate for the treatment of a critically ill adult.

According to VTsIOM (Russian Public Opinion Research Center), in 2014, only 20% of Russian citizens were acquainted with the work of public charity organizations. In 2015, the ISTOKI Foundation carried out a survey aimed at detecting whether the Russian mass audience was able to recognize charity organizations. They also wanted to understand how Russian people responded to NPOs’ activities. The results were disappointing, because about 60% of the respondents failed to recall any charity organization. Those who were able to name different foundations usually mentioned Greenpeace (6%) and the Podari Zhizn Foundation (3%), which provides support for children treated for cancer. One third of respondents said that they were not interested in socially oriented organizations’ activities at all, 14% stated that they had never encountered an organization whose work seemed important. Every fourth respondent explained

that he or she never took part in charity activities because of lack of money. About 15% said that they needed more information on such foundations, 10% were unsure of their scrupulousness, and 4% of respondents said that governmental authorities should solve all social issues. About 90% of respondents said that they had never received any support from charity foundations and had never heard of such occurrences. That is why only 11% of respondents claimed that they were ready to take part in charity organization activities (all survey results can be found in *The Vedomosti*, November 11, 2015).

3. Research Questions

The main research questions of the study are as follows:

What charity foundations supporting children do Russian citizens know? What is their attitude towards them? Do they take part in charity events and why?

Why do people not trust charity foundations supporting children? What steps can be undertaken to improve the foundations' communication policies and build trust in potential donors?

What are the key concepts that charity organizations use to attract donors? How are these concepts supported by verbal and visual means of persuasion?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to define whether Russian citizens are able to identify real charity foundations and what they feel about their activities. We have also researched the key concepts reflected in the charity foundations' texts and evaluated their persuasive potential. The other objective is to analyze the interaction between visual and verbal components used in the messages of socially-oriented non-profit organizations and to understand, to what feelings and values these polysemiotic texts of charity foundations appeal.

5. Research Methods

In 2017, we conducted another Internet survey to provide insight into Russians' attitude towards charity organizations. 100 people took part in the survey (male - 34%, female - 66%, aged 18-45; most of the respondents were aged 18-25, that can be explained by the type of survey chosen). We asked the respondents to state their sex and age, to name all charity foundations/organizations they knew (they could choose them from the list or specify their own variant); to say how they knew about these NPOs (social networks, media, volunteers, etc.); to answer the question about their attitude towards these organizations and specify the level of their credibility, as well as to say whether the respondents took part in charity events themselves, etc.

The research of communication activities of NPOs was based on the analysis of the following charity foundations that specialize in supporting children in need and children with certain health problems: Rusfond (motto "We help to help"); charity foundation specializing in the field of childhood cancer support Podari Zhizn ("Give Life"); Center for social programs RUSAL; charity foundation AdVITA (motto "No one can take the beloved from you..."); charity foundation supporting critically ill children Liniya Zhizni ("Life Line"), motto "Save children together"); charity foundation supporting children with oncohaematological diseases and cancer Zhizn ("Life"); public charity foundation Detskiye Serdztza

((“Children’s hearts”) motto “Help save children’s hearts!”); charity foundation supporting children with cancer “Nastenka”; charity foundation Spaseniye (“Salvation”); foundation supporting hospices Vera ((“Belief”) motto “Life for life”); Russian public organization Miloserdie ((“Benevolence”) mottos “There is love in this world”, “Make the world kinder”), food charity foundation Rus (motto “Do good”).

6. Findings

Podari Zhizn (“Give Life”) Foundation (87%) and Rusfond (36%) turn out to be the most famous charity foundations. Sources of information about these foundations mentioned by the respondents include media (73%), social networks (64%), and volunteers (24%).

About 83% of respondents are positive about charity organizations’ activities, 16% feel indifferent towards these activities, and only 1% of respondents share their negative attitude. Only 35% of respondents support charity foundations themselves; thus, despite their positive attitude towards charity, most respondents do not trust these organizations and prefer to support people in need directly (45%). That is a sign of distrust that most of the respondents display. The bulk of respondents find the question “why don’t you trust charity organizations?” difficult, though most of them are unsure that the money is spent as per their intended purpose. That means the foundations’ reports are not always convincing and charity projects’ financing schemes are not transparent, which builds mistrust in people. About 84% of respondents believe that charity foundations do support people in need, so there is no reason to suspect them of fraudulent charity.

Most of the respondents reckon that the main reason for any distrust of charity organizations lies in a confidentiality of deposits, which makes it impossible to track the donation of a certain individual. There is also lack of real feedback from the donation’s addressee. There is one response, which is very illustrative: “I would like to see the person I’m helping”. Sometimes this feedback is impossible, because not every person in need can express his or her gratitude to the donator – he or she may live in another city, may be too old, or may find it impossible to talk because of some physical disability. One way or another, the foundations must give some kind of feedback to build confidence in their activities.

The bulk of respondents receive information about charity foundations’ activities from media and social networks, hence we decided to focus on calls transmitted through these channels. Besides, it is very important to analyze the name of a charity foundation and its motto as key tools used to create the desired attitude. These elements become extremely important in the non-profit sector, because the main activity of the NPOs in question is charity. Firstly, the name and motto should reflect the area of activities explicitly or by creating associative response, (the target audience must understand the area of the foundation’s activities); secondly, it should evoke **trust** and **the desire to help**; thirdly, it should not bear pressure upon the target audience.

In modern communication, a proper name’s function is not only to identify an object, it is usually assigned additional meanings – reminiscence of some event or individual, references to cultural specific signs and key concepts, etc.

Our findings show that Russian charity foundations’ names:

- 1) Reflect the specificity of their activities with reference to the concept of *Russia*: Rusfond, Center for social programs RUSAL, charity foundation supporting children with oncohaematological diseases

and cancer Zhizn (“Life”, the functional name reflecting the foundation’s activities), food charity foundation Rus.

- 2) Appeal to the concepts essential for the Russian language’s consciousness – kindness, mercy, belief, life, salvation.

The Russian public organization Miloserdie (“Benevolence”): implicit call for compassion, mercy, and help is supported by the fund’s motto – “There is *love* in this world”. *Mercy* and *love* are two key metaconcepts which also appeal to the religious feelings of the target audience; the foundation appeals to these supreme values regardless of people’s social status, because the desire to help one’s neighbor is innate for every Christian.

The foundation supporting hospices Vera (“Belief”): this name is based on the concept of belief, connected with orthodox tradition.

The foundation Podari Zhizn (“Give Life”): the foundation’s name appeals to two key concepts - *gift* and *life*. To give life means to come closer to God – this is one more reference to orthodox culture.

The charity foundation AdVITA, charity foundation supporting critically ill children Liniya Zhizni (“Life Line”), and charity foundation supporting children with oncohaematological diseases and cancer Zhizn (“Life”) refer to the concept of *life*.

Analysis of more than 300 texts of different size and style generated by the foundations mentioned allows us to pick out concepts essential for this type of discourse (the quantity of concepts found is shown in parentheses): *help* (3064), *disease/suffering* (2767), *health* (2656), *hope* (1789), *kindness* (1786), *children* (2610), and *mercy* (409).

We can argue that the most frequently used concept is *help*, which, on the one hand, represents the area of a foundation’s activities and the field of subject-object relationships (*help, support*), on the other hand, it is closely related to the motivation sphere (*we need help; support needed; help, please*). Moreover, all texts include the “cross-cutting” concept *money*, because help and support usually mean financial aspects thereof. The second batch of most used words includes the words connected with the concept of disease: *pain, illness, terrible diagnosis, critically ill, disabled, rare diagnosis*. Also all the texts of the foundations that support children with diseases contain words connected with the concept of *health* (*maintain health, treat, treatment, become a donor*). Organizations specializing in childhood support often use words connected with the concept of *childhood*: *children, boys, girls, kid, infant, infancy, etc*. The words *mother* and *parents* are used in correlation with information about the *child*’s health.

The foundations’ texts usually appeal to a number of key concepts used **to build trust in the organization’s activities** and **urge to help** those in need. For example, *Welcome to the official website of charity foundation Liniya Zhizni (“Life Line”)! Our foundation was created to help children aged 0-18 suffering from diseases that can be treated using advanced modern medicine. We want to urge people to help every child who is going through a rough patch. Besides that, the foundation’s program is aimed at creating a culture of charity in modern society. Those who are facing trouble do not need your sympathy; they need financial support and your belief in the ability of each child to cope with the disease. Join us! Together we can help!*

Sometimes these concepts are actualized and enhanced by using non-verbal visual codes. These non-verbal communication instruments include photo galleries, containing photos of those who need help,

as well as those who have received it. This type of visualization allows us to see the addressees of donations. On the Rusfond website there is a button under the photo of each child which can be used to find out information about this child, diagnosis, and the sum of money necessary. Call for action – *Help, please* – includes a special way to make the money transfer. The Rusfond website uses red and white colors: the red color is to confirm the bank transfer from a credit or debit card. We think that the decision to use red color – the color of danger – is not a good one, because this confirmation button is associated with anxiety; a green button would have been a better choice (taking into consideration the mission of this organization).

Talking about the interaction of verbal and visual components, we must point out that the location of these elements of the interface is quite reasonable – the message is located in the left margin, the picture is on the right – a classic example of correct location of objects, which allows the viewer to process the information displayed. It is important that the web page is not overloaded with other elements; the message consists of some text and a photo. Besides, sometimes web-designers add multimedia elements, such as scrolled mini-galleries.

7. Conclusion

Polysemiotic texts of charity foundations appeal to the mercy of the target audience, rousing a desire to help children in need. The main problem today is the aspect of availability of information about NPOs to the public, and building trust in charity foundations' work.

For this purpose, it was necessary to create a permanent information field to attract donators, including media campaigns, special TV-series and programs about people, who have already received support, positive-image building advertising, and public events. For example, in 2017, a campaign called #GivingTuesdayRussia (#ЩедрыйВторник), an international charity day, was held for the second time in Russia. According to the Russian branch of the Charities Aid Foundation (CAF), more than 1800 partners from 227 Russian cities and towns took part in this campaign, more than 2000 different charity events were held, and the amount of on-line donations grew by 180%.

Nevertheless, despite the growing number of people taking part in charity events, its quantity can still be increased. Russians are more eager to donate to individuals than to charity foundations and do not know much about Russian charity organizations.

Charity foundations mostly work by reacting to individual problems, though it may be wiser to change this strategy and focus on prevention by collaborating with medical institutions, so people who need an operation will not have to wait for their quotas. They also can monitor new support addressees by cooperating with children organizations, hospices, clinics, etc. In other words, charity foundations should not wait for calls for help; they should search for people in need themselves. Such an active strategy will enable these foundations to strengthen their potential and create a positive image of charity activities.

Generally, people still think that charity is the responsibility of large businesses. Those stereotypes connected with charity foundations, activities, and donators are still very much alive. At the end of 2017, many events aimed at the promotion of charity were held in Russia. The number of participants has been enlarged by involving actors, athletes, celebrities, and representatives of other groups enjoying public recognition in charity activities. The main aim of these events is to show that charity is not a privilege of the rich, but a chance for any individual to help those in need.)

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