

LEVERAGING THE POWER OF EMPATHY

IN ADDRESSING EXTREME POVERTY AND HIV/AIDS IN AFRICA:

From the literal distance of being a half a world away, to the cultural differences between agrarian and post industrial worlds, to issues surrounding race and religion - so much of the experience of those who live with HIV/AIDS and in extreme poverty is foreign to us. This distance results in seeing them as "the other," very different from us or our experiences and serves as an excuse to turn away from the problem. This separation forces us to overcome our own cognitive dissonance on the topic with excuses for not getting involved. At best people say, "I have my own problems to deal with" and at worst they place blame at the feet of those affected suggesting that their situation is a product of their own lack of personal responsibility or inadequacies. This is especially relevant when the West's traditional view of HIV/AIDS is unfairly applied to developing countries.

Our experience in addressing these and similar issues suggests that progress is only possible to the extent that we can connect their situation to our own in either a direct or at least tangential way. This can come in the form of any or all of three ways:

Create a better connection between the circumstances surrounding HIV/AIDS, extreme poverty and the developed world.

It is easy for the privileged to distance themselves from the realities of life in sub-Saharan Africa. But the truth is the challenges faced by these populations are part of the not so distant history the countries and individuals for most of the world. Hearing that people live on \$1 a day does not hit home as much as realizing that those in extreme poverty face barriers that many other nations have been able to overcome. It is largely within the last century in the days starting with our great grandparents that we were also an agrarian based society. It was our grandmothers who fought for the right to vote paving the way for more gender equity. And it was our parents who helped build the roads and railways that form our nation's infrastructure. So while the plight of today's poor may be more extreme than those our ancestors have faced they should not seem so foreign. Today's HIV/AIDS could be put into the context of yesterday's polio. In doing so, we can close the gap that prohibits us from putting ourselves in others shoes and acting accordingly.

Create a better connection between the people you are empowering and the people whose help you need.

In spite of our obvious differences, many do not realize that every person on the planet shares 99.9% of the same DNA. What separates us is but a fraction of what unites us, not just biologically but in terms of our shared roles and experiences. If we lead with stories of "people who have HIV/AIDS and live in extreme poverty" we

begin by creating distance. However, if we tell stories of mothers wanting a better, healthier future for their children, fathers who are fighting for a better opportunity for their families or boys and girls who should be free to enjoy a healthy childhood we begin with a shared perspective that relates to our own lives.

Create a better connection between an organizations approach to this issue and the difference it can make

If you already support an organization or its approach, more information affirms your beliefs, but when you are not yet on board it has the opposite effect (i.e. "thou doth protest too much"). Instead of affirmation, alienation results.

Appreciating the need for a comprehensive, multisectoral response to the issues of extreme poverty and HIV/AIDS, most organizations present their approach cloaked in unnecessary complexity when communicating to their stakeholders. More information, more facts, more systems creates more distance between your organizations singular mission and its impact.

A real barrier exists in the perception of ending global poverty and HIV/AIDS as being futile, fairly or unfairly. Therefore it is critical to distinguish what differentiates an organization's approach in addressing this long-standing issue. Our experience in reframing health within a social context for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is highly relevant. Our challenge was to take a wonky term like "social determinants of health" and communicate that in meaningful, human terms; to help people understand that health starts not in doctor's offices and hospitals, but in homes, schools, jobs and communities.

The answer to a perceived history of futility is to create a present full of success stories - simple, intuitive and compelling cases of the differences being made in a single life.

THE METRICS BEHIND MESSAGING

At YELLOWBRICKROAD, we appreciate that every dollar that goes into communications is a dollar that could be going to direct support for our partner's causes. This takes on even greater significance on this issue, where the same dollar that might be invested in working with us, is a dollar that a child living in Ethiopia could live on for a day.

We take this responsibility very seriously and recognize that it is necessary that this work have a return on investment that justifies this tradeoff and ultimately more than pays for itself.

Fortunately, in the last several years, our knowledge of how our minds process information - and how best to frame languages and messages - has expanded exponentially. A rise in academics and political consultants have taken various approaches to taking complex political issues and policies and explaining them to the public and key stakeholders in more relevant language. Whether conservative (Frank Luntz's *Words the Work: It's Not What You Say, It's What They Hear*), liberal

(George Lakoff's *Think Like an Elephant*) or progressive (Drew Westen's *The Political Brain*), their approaches all recognize certain universal truths about how our minds receive and interpret information. Most importantly, it is also largely based on a growing body of research that should give us greater confidence that the application of these principles and practices can change behavior and improve lives.

Below provides best practices and examples of success in messaging and framing that we believe is an important primer and starting point when thinking about how best to communicate about this issue:

1. One vs. many: Mother Teresa said, "If I look at the mass I will never act. If I look at the one, I will..." Professor Peter Singer of Princeton writes, "Rationally, our deliberative system should act for the masses, but this knowledge lacks the impact of something that tugs on our emotions the way a single needy person does."
2. The Identifiable Victim: In a psychological experiment on fundraising for Save the Children, subjects who were shown a photo of a child in need and told that she was "desperately poor and that 'her life will be changed for the better by your gift'" gave significantly more than the groups who: were provided only general information; were provided the child's photo, information, and general information; and were provided with information about an additional child.
3. Reducing Stigma: The California food stamp program strategic branding and messaging work we developed for the state of California resulted in over 40% preference of our brand design and tagline, as well as consistent ratings in the top two options in creating a brand that was modern, more welcoming and accessible to eligible Californians, delivering on all points of our messaging strategy. These are all critical precursors to reducing the stigma associated with the program and redefining traditional views of aid and assistance.
4. Empathy Trumps Policy: In research released last year, we partnered with Penn State University to test the effectiveness of empathy driven narratives vs. policy led stories regarding marginalized populations. The study concluded that empathetic stories led to significantly stronger cognitive and behavioral responses.
5. Futility: A study co-authored by Paul Slovic found that "the proportion of lives saved often carries more weight than the number of lives saved. People will give more support for saving 80% of 100 lives at risk than for saving 20% of 1000 lives at risk."
6. Putting a Face on the Needy: Foster Parents Plan is an organization that sends letters from the child in need to the "foster parent" showing that aid

is not futile, providing a clear sense of responsibility for “their child” and making the child part of their family. Peter Singer says, “this seems as close as possible to an ideal arrangement for tapping into the feelings of affluent people so that they will help the poor in distant countries.” In separate research, specifically identifying that a family had “already been selected” for a new home from Habitat for Humanity had more significant impact in giving vs. a family “will be selected.”

7. Priming Concepts: A proprietary study commissioned by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Vulnerable Populations Portfolio, developed by YBR, Westen Strategies and Public Opinion Strategies, showed that after seeing the messages we developed that primed audiences about social determinants of health, an increase of over 30% of Americans chose social factors, such as income level, education level, work or job environment, and neighborhoods as having key influences on one’s health.
8. Priming Giving: In a recent study published by Dr. Paul Piff and his colleagues at University of California, Berkeley in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* suggested that it is the poor, not the rich, who are inclined to charitable giving, but that when primed the wealthy’s capacity to give increases. More specifically, it showed that when the rich were shown a compassion-inducing video vs. emotionally neutral material they were more likely to help someone. In other words, the rich are capable of compassion but they need to be primed or reminded and do not necessarily show it spontaneously.
9. Community-based approach: Foster Parents Plan renamed itself Plan International to address problems and projects undertaken at the level of the community (e.g., safe drinking water, sanitation, etc.). Yet it leverages the insight and success above by continuing its “Sponsor a Child” program, while also letting donors know that the organization pools the contributions of other sponsors to benefit communities worldwide.
10. Link between happiness and giving: An experiment by economists William Harbaugh and Daniel Burghart and psychologist Ulrich Mayr found that when students acted on an option of anonymously donating money to a local food bank for the poor, the brain’s “reward centers” became active, as when you eat something sweet or receive money.