

Charities partner with the public and private sectors to create long-term change

Harriet Oppenheimer, Chief Executive, RNID

Charities can play a unique role in tackling complex social challenges. Their charitable purpose gives them the targeted focus to really get under the skin of a long-term issue and explore its causes and potential solutions.

Of course, all organisations have a purpose – but at their best, charities have a particular freedom and legitimacy in pursuing theirs. Inevitably all freedoms come with conditions, such as fundability, which is essential for charities and often extremely challenging to achieve. However, successful charities can benefit from different opportunities and collaborations to commercial organisations, and neither are they constrained by public process and the politics of the day in the way that government organisations are. Used well, this confers trust and independence in the eyes of the public, industry and government.

I want to draw out three implications for charities of this particular freedom and legitimacy in terms of how they work and deliver value.

Firstly, charities can create salience about big complex issues affecting millions of people. This is particularly important given the intense competition for attention from different aspects of social or environmental injustice. This salience comes from the cause being personally important to a large number of people, either because it affects their personal lives, or because it speaks to their personal values. RNID's purpose is supporting the 12 million people in the UK who are deaf, have hearing loss or tinnitus. That's a huge range of the UK population, and it's a big responsibility for RNID to raise awareness about the needs of our communities, which is why we are strengthening and developing our research panel, so we can access targeted insight from people who are deaf, have hearing loss or tinnitus – for example to test product design, gather experience of services, or gauge priorities for social change. Insight from our communities gathered through the research panel shaped our [Subtitle It!](#) campaign which will result in new obligations on on-demand broadcasters being passed into law through the Media Bill this spring.

Secondly, charities can create collaborations and partnerships with a host of other organisations – industry large and small, public sector, academia and of course other charities. There have been some iconic examples of charities collaborating with each other (think Make Poverty History, or Time to Change) and with business. The greater the salience that the charity can demonstrate of their cause, the more attractive they are as a partner for collaboration.

Business-to-consumer (B2C) companies will recognise that designing products and services to meet the needs and values of millions of people is hugely important for their reach and retention of the core customer base. Increasingly, large business-to-business (B2B) employers view charitable partnerships as a great way to deepen employee engagement, by accessing meaningful ways to create collective social impact – the “S” in ESG (the Environment, Social and Governance framework) is increasingly a feature of such partnerships.

So, a great charitable partnership can allow the charity to reach new and important audiences and resources, and influence the design of the services on which we all depend for so many aspects of our daily life. At the same time, it can enhance a firm's consumer or employer brand, while simultaneously enriching the lives of their customers and employees.

For example, Network Rail has partnered with Samaritans to create the Rail Industry Suicide Prevention programme. It brings together actors from the charitable, public, and private sectors whose actions can help prevent suicides on the rail network, and provides practical information, advice, and training. It has had meaningful social impact for an issue which is not of universal salience, and which still has some social stigma. And RNID has just begun a partnership with the BioIndustry Association, the membership body and voice of the innovative life sciences and biotech industry. This is a genuinely unique opportunity to make connections right across the life sciences industry, helping to raise the profile of hearing loss research, galvanise innovation in hearing health, and bring us closer to having treatments to restore hearing and silence tinnitus.

And thirdly, charities' ability to create both salience and collaborations is dependent on the insight and evidence that they can collate about their cause. It's this insight and evidence that creates their legitimacy as a trusted, independent powerhouse for social change – akin to a think tank. Over the last year, the Refugee Council has been a particularly good example of this evidence-based insight about a topic that is rarely off the front pages of the press. For example they published proposals for a Fair and Humane Asylum System, based on independent detailed analysis of the identity and motivations of refugees who come to the UK and the success rate of their asylum applications. And they put forward evidence-based recommendations for how to resolve circumstances where the authorities question the age that an unaccompanied child claims to be. The evidence comes from running the only Age Dispute Project in the UK, working closely with local authorities, care professionals and lawyers.

Beyond the hot topics of the day, it's precisely a charity's ability to source this kind of evidence-based insight that can create the salience that brings a social issue to prominence. RNID is keen to increase our curiosity and knowledge about new trends and possibilities in technology, because when the design of these innovations is based on real insight of our communities' needs, they have the power to make daily life far more inclusive – and conversely, when technology is used inconsistently or poorly, it creates big barriers to access. As an example, RNID is beginning to work with a cross-sector Special Interest Group about the potential for Bluetooth technology to revolutionise accessibility for people who are deaf or have hearing loss. We want to connect with all parties, regardless of their potential competitive positions, because it is in our communities' interests. Technology has the potential to make a big impact on the lives of our communities – as well as to provide valuable insight about a significant customer segment to manufacturers and service providers.

For some causes, getting meaningful evidence on which to base any insight is no mean feat. Data about the 12 million people in the UK who are deaf, have hearing loss or tinnitus is patchy at best, due in part to a lack of consistency about what and how data is captured. If salience is created by evidence of the widespread relevance of a particular issue, then without this evidence it's a big challenge to create social change. RNID is beginning on this journey of tacking the evidence gap. An example of where this has been done well is the Centre for Homelessness Impact, originally set up by Crisis and the then Glasgow Homelessness Network, which has successfully grown an evidence base over the years so that it is now a What Works centre with significant influence.

The approaches described in this essay can create real benefit for everyone. Industry can use better insight and data to design their products and services around their customers. Employers can tailor their work practices to meet the needs and values of their employees. Government can create more robust, evidence-based and responsive policy and legislation. And collectively we can create greater inclusion in all aspects of society.

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