

Building Common Purpose in Oxfam GB

Oxfam is a global movement of millions of people who share the belief that, in a world rich in resources, poverty isn't inevitable. The movement is shaped and coordinated by a globally renowned aid and development charity with 70 years of experience. It represents an international confederation of 18 organizations working together with partners and local communities in more than 90 countries.

The bulk of Oxfam's work includes emergency support in response to crisis, and development work to help governments and communities reduce poverty. Oxfam's fundraising touches everybody in the UK including those who donate cash, those who give to or buy from Oxfam shops, and active sponsors and their supporters who raise money through charitable sports and other activities.

In addition to these high profile activities, Oxfam funds research and develops policy to inform and influence. Its campaigning work addresses issues such as women's rights (two thirds of poor people are women), and it partners with business to promote fairer markets and ethical practices.

The challenges

Oxfam GB has a narrative designed for its people to tell others about what Oxfam stands for and what it does. It needed a process to take this narrative off the page and help people internalize the story.

The challenges included helping people explain the scope of what Oxfam does, sharing the same vision and direction, and building confidence in talking about Oxfam in a meaningful way. Creating this greater understanding could also improve internal collaboration.

Previous approaches, including the narrative itself, typically involved PowerPoint and personal stories, but little in the way of deeper conversations and exchanges that helped people connect in a more meaningful way.

The objectives of the work were to create "ownership" of the narrative amongst direct employees and volunteers and to build more sense of shared purpose and goals.

Approach

The people who work for Oxfam are intellectually challenging and driven by a strong commitment to the cause of reducing poverty. The Big Conversation created numerous opportunities for them to meet colleagues from different areas and debate the contribution each made to the bigger picture.

We worked with a Design Team drawn from various roles across Oxfam to create a Big Picture that captured the main elements of Oxfam narrative but began with a First Conversation in which the team discussed for an hour and a half their perspectives, ideas and concerns about what might appear in a visual for Oxfam. This conversation highlighted that Oxfam:

- Is a rights based organisation which keeps primary change agents at the core of what it does in a way that is empowering (not seeing "beneficiaries" as "victims")
- Facilitates transformational change at scale so it influences and its impact lasts after the money has run out
- Challenges the systemic reasons why people can't lift themselves from poverty
- Has a fundamental humanitarian imperative to save lives
- Is transparent and accountable as stewards of a resource entrusted to us by those who seek value for money and leverage
- Has people who are passionate about speaking up against injustice and inequality and doing something about it - especially the inequitable opportunities faced by women when accessing services and resources

This rich conversation helped the Design Team understand the inspirational nature of the process and allowed an illustrator to begin work on an image informed by their passion.

Over the course of this and subsequent Design Team meetings we developed a Big Picture to capture the Oxfam story, with the Design Team testing and developing it in conversations they then ran with their colleagues.

Towards the end of the development process the Design Team coached a larger group of facilitators in the use of the Picture. The focus was on helping develop a set of questions they could all use to involve others in the Big Conversation.

Over the course of the following months the larger team engaged the wider Oxfam GB population in these conversations.

Results

Facilitators collected feedback as part of the process and these comments capture the spirit of much of the feedback:

"I could intellectually "get" the organisational story on a set of slides but it was only until I had a conversation about it that I started to really remember what an amazing place Oxfam is to work (something which I think can get lost in the everyday emails and to do lists). I started to re-connect emotionally with Oxfam again and went away feeling more positive and uplifted than I have for a while."

“This made me feel again - it re-inspired me. And it also managed to succinctly explain this enormously complicated organisation that is usually so hard to talk about without downplaying the complex and thoughtful approach we have to overcoming poverty”.

In harder terms the following ranks the positive swing (before vs. after participation in the Big Conversation) in percentage of people who STRONGLY AGREE that:

| | % who Strongly Agree | | % change |
|--|----------------------|-------|----------|
| | Before | After | |
| I understand our priorities as an organization | 22 | 41 | +19 |
| I experience a strong sense of shared purpose within Oxfam | 20 | 38 | +18 |
| I understand how I support Oxfam’s purpose | 45 | 58 | +13 |
| I have a clear understanding of Oxfam’s purpose | 56 | 65 | +9 |
| I am proud of the work that I do for Oxfam | 63 | 70 | +7 |

Some of the comments capturing the reasons for the strongest swings in the perception of common purpose are:

“It was really motivating to be reminded of how the different parts of Oxfam, that often seem so disparate, fit together”.

“We always talk about how we’re a movement of people working towards the eradication of poverty together, but sometimes we get so caught up in the day-to-day tasks and occasional politics that it is easy to forget how cohesive a movement we actually are”.

The groups that derived the greatest benefit from the process were the fundraising and trading teams. They perhaps have the greatest need to be able to explain “what is Oxfam” in their dealings with external stakeholders.

Lessons

This was the first such large scale intervention Oxfam GB undertook to align people behind Purpose. Some of the lessons are:

- The contribution made by the design team. The team helped to shape the approach from all levels and roles in Oxfam. This helped increase the relevance of the visual representation of Oxfam’s purpose and the quality of the conversations facilitated by the team.

- The power of the first conversation which helped open peoples' eyes to the intention of an affirmative conversation that can inspire and re-energise people
- The potential of using a collaborative approach, which is more "bottom up." Purpose driven programmes typically flow from the top down. With the narrative in place Oxfam could afford to invite higher levels of participation at the design stage with a pay off in relevance for participants
- The power of a visual approach that encourages debate, dialogue, and challenge and makes it easier for people to connect their role with the business strategy.

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