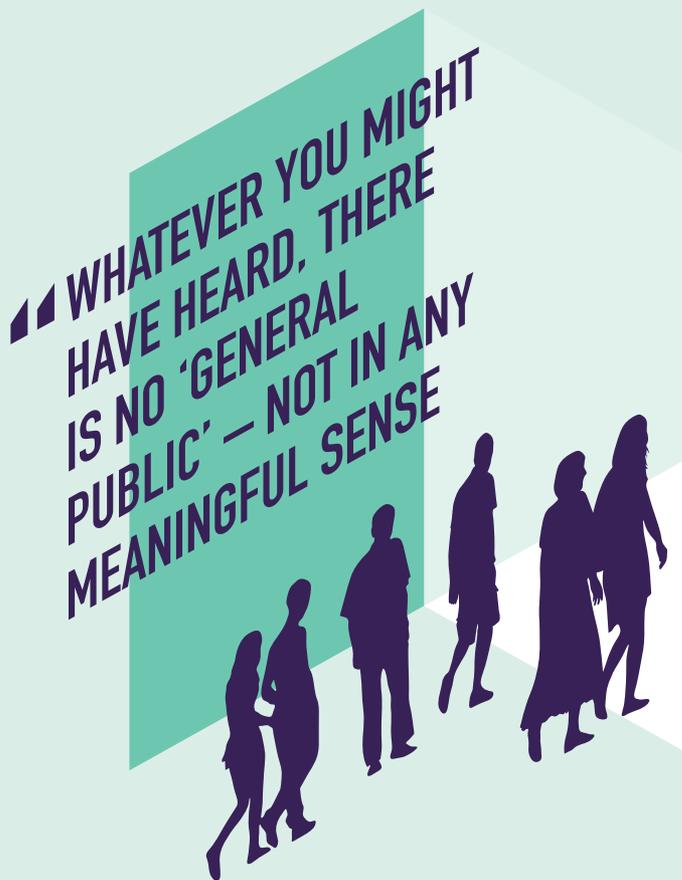


STILL TALKING ABOUT  
'TARGETING THE GENERAL  
PUBLIC'? HERE'S HOW  
TO MAKE THE CASE  
FOR SEGMENTING AND  
SELECTING.



AN EXCERPT FROM THE BOOK

## WHO CARES?

BUILDING AUDIENCE-CENTRED ENGAGEMENT  
STRATEGIES IN THE NON-PROFIT SECTOR

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WITH SARAH FITZGERALD

CharityComms

## WHY SEGMENT AUDIENCES ANWAY?

**Whether the audiences you want to engage are members of the public or people working in particular professions, you'll need to *segment* them.** That means finding a way to carve up large populations of people into smaller groups using some kind of criteria, and then deciding which to target.

Whatever you might have heard, there is no 'general public' – not in any meaningful sense. Any national population is just too diverse to make useful observations about it. The adult population in the UK, for example, now stands at about 51 million and includes 18-year-old clicktivists, 70-year-old church volunteers, overworked doctors, 20-something cosplayers, semi-retired yoga instructors, recently-graduated office assistants, full-time working parents, motorsport enthusiasts, house-sharing gamers, middle-aged van drivers, stressed-out blue light workers, and 30-year-old entrepreneurs. **Understanding what 'they' as a group are likely to think or do is meaningless.** If we want to learn anything useful about our audiences, we need to find smaller groups of people who share something in common, and understand what set them apart from others.

You'll find the same challenge with professional audiences: people you're interested in because of their jobs. They are more easily defined, as they've already 'self-segmented' by the career choices they've made. But these groups are not uniform either. Let's say you want to target people who work in higher education. Your potential audiences could include lecturers, managers, civil servants, administrators, students, technicians, opinion leaders, research assistants, examiners, subject specialists, and so on – and within each of these groups you'll find diversity of attitudes, goals, and needs. All of these will have different reasons to engage with you and you with them. So when you look at your sector, who specifically do you want to engage and what do you want them to do? That's segmentation.



## REACH AND FREQUENCY

I'm sure you won't, but if you do ignore my advice and settle on the 'general public' as your audience, you'll instantly hit a second problem. Not only will you lack useful information about them, but you'll also have no realistic chance of reaching them. Only a small handful of charities can afford to spend millions on external engagement, and they know better than anyone that their communications have to be precisely targeted to get noticed and justify their investment. If you have a more modest budget, you have even more reason to focus your efforts.

So, whatever sized organisation you are, you will have to find a way to balance reach with frequency – *communicating with the right number of people the right number of times* – within boundaries defined by your budget and your time. Even for the largest charities, the highest priority audiences should never total more than a few million people.

There are some very reasonable objections to the advice I've just given. There are two I hear a lot, so let's look at them:

### 1 | You have big ambitions to change public attitudes on your issue

The causes of mental health and Alzheimer's have both benefitted from a recent surge in public interest, for example. And look at how the experience of women and girls has become such a central part of the international development story, when just a few years ago drawing the connection between gender and world poverty seemed kind of niche. These issues were built largely by charities and NGOs, usually working in coalitions and partnerships, and have led to huge changes in social and political norms, and in public spending. Can you effect big changes like that if you target just a few million people?

Well, yes you can. That is because if you want to build an issue, you need to find the people who will build it for you. Who are the multipliers, the influencers, and the ambassadors who will adopt your cause and talk about it to anyone who will listen? Who are the local community volunteers who will organise the bake sale? The marathon runners who will draw in 100 sponsors each? Who are the bloggers setting the news agenda, and who's going to share their posts? These people constitute your target audiences. **You only need to directly engage a few million of them and they'll do the rest for you.**

### 2 | You want anyone who needs your services to have access to them

Let's say you offer services for a particular group of people, such as those with housing issues, debt problems, or a specific health condition. If you have the capacity to help them all, for example with online services or information materials, then why should you favour one group over another? Some organisations are staunchly resistant to prioritising particular audience segments for their information services, because it seems to go against the egalitarian principle of an open-door service strategy. So they might decide their target audience is 'people who need our services' and leave it at that. But look a little closer. We know some people have more complex needs than others and might need services more tailored to their specific circumstances or more help to access these.

## SEGMENTING YOUR SERVICE USERS DOESN'T MEAN CLOSING THE DOOR TO ANYONE

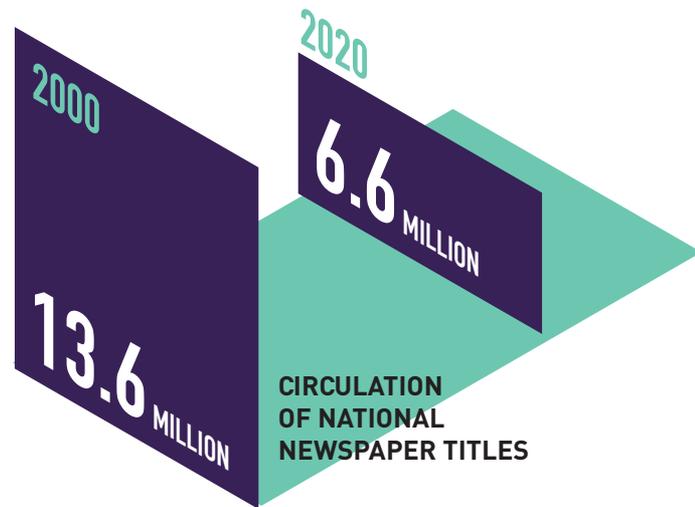
We also know that some people are less likely to seek help – for example, men are in general more reluctant to access health-related information than women. Further, there may be some people who could just as easily get help somewhere else, while for others you are the only available source.

So, what would happen if you didn't segment these audiences and left the whole thing to chance? Were you to track who was using your services, there's a good chance you'd find you're not reaching the people who need you most, because self-selecting service users – while as deserving as everybody else – are often those with the least acute or complex needs. Segmenting your service users doesn't mean closing the door to anyone. But it does give you the tools to make considered decisions about which services to develop, in what channels and formats, and who to promote them to.



## MORE MEDIA, MORE MESSAGES

When I was a kid, there were just four TV channels and most people read one of a handful of newspapers every day. Even when I got my first charity job in 2000 at Shelter, newspaper readership was (kind of) holding up, and the main terrestrial TV channels could still command a huge audience. But even back then, the buzz phrase was *media fragmentation*: how were we going to reach large audiences, when the rise of the web and digital TV, and the predicted decline of newspapers, meant they were becoming scattered into niche groups? Still, there wasn't much sense of urgency. It was more a talking point than something we had to actually *do something about*, beyond building a decent website. And while I was trying to find new audiences through online services and campaigns, my colleagues downstairs in the press office could still rely on their Rolodex of media contacts to get their messages broadcast widely.



Average circulation in January of each year.  
Audit Bureau of Circulations.

They might accuse me of oversimplification, but back then it was really all about *The Today Programme*, *The Guardian*, the trade press, and maybe the regional papers if you could find a local angle. With the right story, and the right celebrity, you might also get onto the daytime TV sofa, or into the long-lead lifestyle magazines. Back then, when we were basically plugging away at the same small number of high-reach channels, there was far less pressure to segment audiences.

It's different now. Since the explosion of social media and streaming services, and the collapse of print newspaper readership, audiences have fragmented into smaller and smaller groups – sometimes of only a few hundred people.

## REACHING A HUGE AUDIENCE THROUGH A SINGLE CHANNEL IS NO LONGER REALISTIC

### Target practice

What this means for you, of course, is that you will have to make daily choices about who to target. The prospect of reaching a huge audience through a single channel is no longer realistic. This is

complicated further by increased personalisation – through social networks, recommendation engines, behavioural targeting, and personalised search – which has pushed audiences into filter bubbles where they're exposed to an ever-narrowing range of self-reinforcing content and opinion. At a certain level, filter bubbles can be useful to you, enabling you to connect with groups of like-minded people in social media groups, for example. But what about everyone else? How will you grow your audiences or reach people who don't agree with you yet?

Your audience segmentation – based on finding and knowing your particular audiences – will guide those daily choices about where to place your content and help you figure out how to reach new audiences, including those who have become insulated from your message and your cause.



## AUDIENCES ARE CHANGING, AND SO IS TRUST

The big disruptions I talked about in the introduction to this book mean charities are facing a period of change. I'll recap. Many of the assumptions we still make as a sector, about how to talk about our issues, and how we are perceived, are based on what we learned from the last generation. But attitudes to our causes, and how people engage with them, are moving on. We need to keep up.

You could probably find a thousand blog posts about how social norms and values have changed over the last ten or so years, and in particular how the Millennial generation has transformed our society, not just for themselves, but for all of us. Much of what is written about these changes is negative. Politically disengaged (we're often told), Millennials don't know their history, have become detached from any sense of coherent ideology, are consumed by fascination with their own identities,

and are preoccupied only with self-expression and personal discovery. You might also read about how the 'always on' digital world has created insatiable expectations of transparency and responsiveness, while making younger consumers – many of them your supporters – more demanding and less loyal. These are caricatures and, like all caricatures, probably have a little truth in them. But to me they smack more than a little of the old guard rolling its eyes and decrying 'kids these days', and if I were a Millennial – as perhaps you are – I'd be offended.

### The kids are alright

If we look more generously at these generational changes, there is a lot to celebrate. Fascination with identity has never just been about the 'self'. It is also expressed as compassion and solidarity with others whose identities make them subject to discrimination. Look at #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, or #TimeToChange. Issues such as sexual violence, race inequality, or mental health would not have the attention they do today if it weren't for the Millennial generation.

And these demanding, fickle consumers are surely igniting – if gradually – transformations in corporate practices. Many of our biggest consumer brands have realised that they need to show leadership on social causes or they'll be abandoned. Establishing ethical supply chains, or championing issues, is now good business, and a prerequisite to attracting the current crop of ethically conscious employees and consumers.

Some argue that the corporate occupation of a space normally held by civil society is cynical and profit-driven. Others argue it's a sign that we're winning our battles and our best hope of sustained change. Whatever your perspective on that, it's hard to ignore what Millennials are telling us, loudly and clearly, about the kind of world they want to live in. And to some extent the world seems to be shaping itself to their demands.

## Face the change

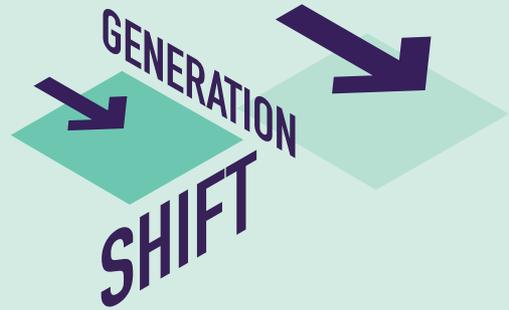
One very clear characteristic of the post-digital age is that trust for institutions is eroding, giving way to a more questioning consumer culture, and preference for more personal, informal engagement. At some point in the mid-noughties, when social media went mainstream, and user reviews started making and breaking businesses, the Edelman Trust Barometer reported that public trust for individuals – ‘people like me’ – had overtaken trust for institutions like government, the media, or business. The most credible voices were now those that reminded us of ... us. It didn't matter if we knew them personally – we only needed to believe they shared our values to believe what they had to say.

More recently, the rise in populism with its false ‘anti-establishment’ prospectus has gained its foothold by assigning vested interests to all institutions, meaning all institutions are treated with suspicion, including charities.

If this trend continues, and if public trust is a casualty of it, charities are not immune. If anything, they've felt this loss of trust most strongly. Having once been the sector assumed to hold the highest ethical and behavioural standards, charities are now being held accountable to these standards in more difficult and unforgiving ways. Sometimes fairly, sometimes not.

These social trends will doubtless be familiar to you. But this is just one of many possible narratives about how changes in demographics, media, technology, and politics are affecting attitudes and behaviours, and having implications for charities. There is a constant here: audiences are changing more quickly than most charities can keep up with them.

As you research and segment your audiences, you'll need to consider your own take on all this. Wherever it takes you, be ready to have your assumptions challenged. Some of your audiences may surprise you – and you should want them to.



**In audience research generational differences pop up everywhere.** Some of them signal societal changes, as new generations bring values that may last a lifetime, while others are simply characteristics of different age groups that change as we grow older. One such difference, of which charities are well aware, is that younger people are much more likely to see their support as a conspicuous act – something they're likely to discuss and share – while for older audiences, it's a quieter, private act.

### SUPPORTING A CHARITY IS A PRIVATE MATTER AND NOT ONE I WOULD DISCUSS WITH OTHERS (NET AGREEMENT)



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