

A Message to NGOs in the “Third World”: Stop Burning Tyres and Turn on the Charm (Part One)

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If you live in a developing or “Third World” nation, you know that burning tyres in the middle of the road is synonymous with an expression of frustration, angst, dissatisfaction and unrest amongst citizens—it is the “oppressed” masses’ understanding of citizen advocacy. For those of you who are not familiar with this tactic, it is simple really. Here is how it works:



There is a problem in the community, i.e. no water, no electricity, bad roads so the citizens write letters to their local government representatives and for all intents and purposes, the response is not quick enough, the solution is not satisfactory and/or it falls on deaf ears altogether. Still inconvenienced and growing more and more angry due to the perception that they are being ignored, these community members take to the streets, block the roads and burn tyres to demonstrate their frustration, shame the government and hopefully agitate their representatives to action. TV, newspaper and radio all rush down and report the event as though it’s an international incident. Government representatives are contacted for the stories. Ill-advised or ill-sufficient answers are given in response to the queries and BAM! Mission accomplished: the government is shamed and will make some small step to pacify residents until the cycle repeats itself. Is this a win for the members of that community? Maybe a small one, it is a short-term fix. They have won the battle and lost the war because they have created and/or fostered bad blood between their community and those in government; they have shown all of their cards, wounded their representatives’ public pride and hurt their egos. Hence, their representatives have no incentive to be proactive or to eagerly meet their needs; they have destroyed what could have been a great relationship because they hastily resorted to public shaming.

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That brings me to the NGO equivalent to this tactic which I saw unfold while sipping my morning tea and watching the local morning talk show that I half-watch, half-listen to while catching up on industry news before I officially start my work day. I almost dropped my tea cup when I overheard the representative from a wildly popular (and frankly, necessary and efficient) local NGO suggest that because their application to a government fund designed to provide funding to NGO projects of their kind was halted—and they had run out of funding—they had put together an online petition for a certain number of signatures to get the attention of the Prime Minister. I mean, really?! What a way—whether they realised it or not—to wage war on the sitting government through a public shaming of the highest order. Here the NGO is; a fabulous organization doing all the right things for the citizens of the developing nation, providing a necessary and under emphasised service that the government does not yet offer—clearly on the side of “the people.” There the government is; they don’t do what the NGO does and have not made any indication that they plan to, yet they have not funded the NGO or taken their meetings and if the NGO is on the side of the people and they haven’t funded the NGO they must be clearly against “the people.” Right? That may not be the message that the NGO is trying to send, but that is how it comes across to the average citizen who is watching, listening or reading these public pleas for government assistance. How will it end? More likely than not, the government will cave and provide the NGO some sort of assistance to sustain itself for a short time.

Is that a win for the low-resource, struggling NGO, you ask? Hardly! And, here is why: fundraising is about relationship-building—developing, nurturing and maintaining long-term relationships with funders and potential funders. I’ve already shared how the tyre-burning approach fails to help the average citizen develop a fruitful and lasting relationship with his/her representatives, why would you think the dynamic would be any different for an NGO and an even more influential target?

If we liken it to dating or courting, the NGO in this scenario is like the scary guy who stands outside of a young woman’s (in this case, the government) window and serenades her incessantly. Finally she comes to the window and says “if I go out on one date with you, will you stop serenading me? I can only promise you one date and no more.” He is so excited to have gotten her attention that he agrees to the deal, they go on the date and their relationship is over—he is heartbroken and she is rid of him. The relationship was over before it started because of the way he tried to initiate it and I’m afraid any NGO that chooses this path to secure financial support will suffer the same fate.

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If “Third World” NGOs are going to really achieve self-sufficiency and true sustainability through fundraising, they have to stop burning tyres and turn on the charm! I will outline how to do just that in part two of this article.

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