From the Editor

The present, past and future of charities all get some attention in this issue.

The present state of Canadian charities includes a mix of organizations of national scope and of much smaller operations. The nation-wide charity inevitably faces the language question: can we operate effectively in both national languages? As Jean-Claude Carisse points out, the answer is not simple. Different organizations have different approaches, some more constructive than others. He suggests that many Canadian charities have more to do before they can be said to serve or reflect adequately the interest of all their members.

The smaller organization is beset with challenges that its larger counterpart may not experience, or may not experience in the same way. Régine Horinstein explores the nature of these challenges and proposes some ways to meet them. Collaboration and technology are only two promising approaches to survival, or even to success.

The past is recorded in the financial statements. Thomas Beechy and Brenda Zimmerman continue the discussion from the last issue about how charities can realistically account for their operations for the benefit of those who rely, for a variety of reasons, on their statements.

Future success lies in innovation: finding new ways to meet changing demands, whether social, financial or cultural. Robert Couchman shows us that the problem is not simply thinking up new ideas or even getting started, difficult as both may be. The enemies of innovation may pass as its friends in many cases. The mission statements of organizations and the structure of governments may operate to frustrate even successful new projects, while vaunting the organization's openness to change. Mr. Couchman's insights may warn the proponents of innovation to prepare for battle on other fronts.

One wonders if the public itself is not a barrier to innovation, particularly where public funds are concerned. Trying new ways of doing things means risking failure; if no endeavour fails, perhaps people are playing too safe in a changing world. The public, and at least some segments of the public press, are very quick to criticize failure without much appreciation of either the difficulty of the challenge or the thoughtfulness of the attempt.

People can be almost puritanical about the use of public funds. It is likely that more boondoggles have been perpetrated from the taxpayers' pockets by schemes to create jobs or promote high technology than by charities trying to improve the society we live in. So long as the intolerance for failure lasts,

however, governments will be very cautious in supporting anything new, as the article points out, even in the absence of the institutional barriers to innovation it also describes.

The private sector has to keep this in mind when it is asked to underwrite new programs. Foundations and other donors have a duty to keep failure in perspective, and also to educate the public (including governments) to maintain that perspective. This is not an argument for supporting every half-baked novelty that shows up in a fund-raising proposal. It is an argument for taking risks sometimes. Structures will be more favourable to innovation when attitudes are open-minded.

But will the public want to know about the new? Are people too overwhelmed with requests for donations to give serous attention to a reasoned proposal? Boyd McBride does not think so, and in his article on donor fatigue, he tells us why. He argues for the high quality "ask", and suggests that many charities are wasting their efforts in seeking only small gifts by such methods as direct mail. Taking such a course risks diverting attention and energy from the pursuit of the significant donation, so both charities and donors lose.

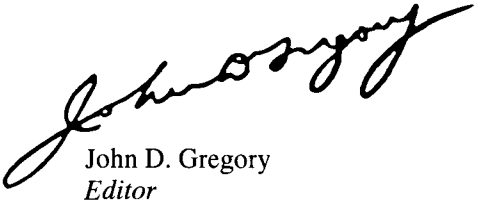
Mr. McBride admits however that the question is not open-and-shut. Some mass mailings and repeated solicitations are used because they work. Effectiveness is not the only criterion. The article suggests some ethical and practical considerations that should guide direct mail fund raising, gambling, and similar practices. The article also explores the ethics of list exchanges. A number of governments have recently been wondering if the practice needs regulation to protect the privacy of the people on the lists. This aspect of the question would support an article in itself.

Mr. McBride's article might persuade some charities to abandon mass approaches for more lucrative focused solicitations. Others may find direct-mail appeals the only practical way to go. Unfortunately, donor fatigue will harm the well-meaning and respectful fund raiser as much as the thoughtless one.

Are there just too many requests, too many dinner-time phone calls? Does the proliferation of commercial appeals through the same channels dull the charitable response? Is government competing in the fund-raising business as it advertises on prime-time television to encourage us to buy lottery tickets?

Public education is needed here too. People should learn to say "no" without guilt, so that they will be in a position to say "yes" when the proper request arrives. This is a theme of the IMAGINE campaign as well.

In short, can we turn Canadians into relentless philanthropists who will give rationally and resist the temptation to say no to everyone? Improving the quality of the requests can only help. It may not be enough.



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