

# When charities engage in 'brand activism', research shows they must demonstrate bravery to attract donations

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Charities often rely on ["warm and fuzzy" images and "poverty porn" tactics](#) to attract donations. But in recent years, some UK not-for-profits have shifted towards [activism-driven campaigns](#).

[Shelter's 2021 Fight for Home campaign](#) took a bold stand in support of the human right to safe housing with a protest-inspired logo redesign and a campaign spotlighting real people affected by the UK housing crisis. And more recently, during Pride month (June), [charities](#) including the Worldwide Fund for Nature [changed their logos to a rainbow](#) to signal their LGBTQ+ allyship.

Charities are clearly well positioned to undertake ad campaigns with notions of social change at their core. But our [recent research](#) shows they could risk creating the perception of hypocrisy with such strategies. They need to tread carefully with this kind of "[brand activism](#)", [defined as taking a stance on a controversial sociopolitical issue](#).

In March 2023, for instance, [Oxfam faced significant backlash](#) when it launched an [inclusive language guide](#) stating: "Language has the power to reinforce or deconstruct systems of power that maintain poverty, inequality and suffering". The conservative right accused Oxfam of being [too "woke"](#).

This kind of brand activism is starkly different to conventional fundraising campaigns. Plus, donors don't always respond positively to activism from charity brands, according to our research. Charities that want to use brand activism need to be wary if they want to attract donations rather than backlash.

## **Charities need to adapt to survive**

[Research indicates](#) that donors are typically driven by guilt, empathy and the warm glow of doing good, rather than a desire to change the system. So, if a charity wants to activate the desire to incite change, tactics such as brand activism can be more effective—but also controversial. Engaging in activism by taking a public stance on issues such as Black Lives Matter, #Metoo or LGBTQ+ rights could certainly enhance a

brand's image and engage consumers.

Traditionally, charitable organizations have not needed to "virtue signal" to prospective donors. After all, they are what is known in academic research as "[higher purpose natives](#)"—organizations with civic engagement at their core.

But times have changed. A recent report shows signs of recovery to pre-pandemic giving levels but reveals a [long-term decline](#) overall. Approximately 69% of people donated to charity in the three months from April to June in 2019, compared to 63% over the same period in 2023. Furthermore, the awareness and visibility of charities are diminishing—research shows fewer people are able to [recall the name of a charity](#) when asked.

Charities are also constantly faced with the need to prove their legitimacy as the public raises questions about their [transparency and trustworthiness](#). This is partly due to the increasing engagement of for-profit companies in purpose-driven marketing efforts.

Clothing brand Patagonia focuses on [environmental issues](#), for example, while ice cream makers Ben & Jerry advocate [for social and equality matters](#).

To adapt, survive and make sure their messages are also heard, charities can reposition themselves as movements and start to speak out to honor their core missions. But they also need to think about how best to continue to attract donations—particularly in the wake of [sector-wide funding cuts](#)—without falling into the trap of "[woke washing](#)" (when actions are perceived as insincere or performative).

**'Brand bravery' is essential to support activism**

Our [new research](#) shows that "brand bravery" is key to successful brand activism campaigns in the not-for-profit sector.

Brand bravery should be an important part of a brand's identity. It involves seven dimensions: [altruism, boldness, courage, determination, endurance, fearlessness and grit](#), according to research. Bravery means brands must [stand up](#) for—and communicate—beliefs and values, even if it requires courage and risk-taking. It's about disrupting the status quo and shaping the future. As it is inherently divisive, the risks may involve losing some existing supporters as a result of taking a stand on certain issues.

In our study, we surveyed 518 British individuals on what they thought about a specific charity's brand activism strategy, how brave they perceived the charity to be, if they believed the charity was being hypocritical and their overall impression of whether the brand activism strategy added value (brand equity).

We found that, without brand bravery, brand activism negatively impacts donors' actions and feelings towards the charity. In fact, when people perceive a lack of bravery, they judge a brand to be hypocritical and are less likely to donate.

Donors' moral foundations also have a part to play. When individuals have a strong concern for justice, they are more likely to perceive activism as a brave rather than a hypocritical act by the brand, which in turn shapes how they respond to the [charity](#).

## **From 'warm' to 'warrior'**

There are [ongoing discussions](#) about the inequalities that persist in the not-for-profit sector due to problematic institutions, systems and historical structures. The humanitarian sector is perceived to have grown

out of a colonialist and racist past, which has cultivated a "[white savior mentality](#)".

Campaign groups such as [Charity So White](#) have made inroads recently to attempt to dismantle these inequalities. When charities make the move away from being "warm" to being "warriors", they are raising funds for their own causes. But they are also helping to disrupt the inherent assumption that all not-for-profits and the work they do are inherently "good".

In this way, brand activism could be a catalyst for change within the third sector, if charities are brave enough to engage in this way.

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