

R&D in Charity Communications

Participants

- Alzheimer's Research UK
- Association of Medical Research Charities
- Blood Cancer UK
- British Heart Foundation
- Cancer Research UK
- Eve Appeal
- Stroke Association

Introduction

CaSE's Discovery Decade project aims to create a more outward-facing vision for R&D in the UK. By helping R&D organisations and advocates to connect with a broader base of public supporters, we can ensure that R&D investment remains a political priority.

We're working closely with organisations across the R&D sector, including through a series of targeted workshops, to collate and share what's already known about reaching public audiences.

Workshop aim

To understand how medical research charities are engaging the public on R&D through their fundraising campaigns and donor communications.

What's working?

Medical research charities occupy a unique position in the R&D ecosystem, as household names with deeply passionate public supporters and a very visible high street presence. Their direct link to the beneficiaries of research offers charities a chance to dispel the view of R&D as an abstract, irrelevant activity in society.

The **British Heart Foundation's** This is Science campaign delivers stories that combine 'living proof' – people who are alive because of research – and 'awe-inspiring science' that celebrates cutting-edge research. Bringing together patients and researchers has proved effective; **the Stroke Association** found that messaging that links researchers to someone who has benefitted or was involved in the research boosted donation income.

A strong connection to place can also drive donations. **Alzheimer's Research UK** seeks to bring R&D closer to donors through bespoke regional communications that focus on specific local people or R&D infrastructure. **Blood Cancer UK** has found that this effect is particularly strong in the devolved nations and low population areas.

Fundamentally, successful engagement must be tailored to the motivations, interests and activities of different groups. **Cancer Research UK** emphasises science content for some audiences, such as philanthropists, but tends to emphasise other aspects for broader, mass communications.

“Areas with high science capital are very used to R&D. Areas with less might see much greater impact from a story about local R&D in the local paper.”

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What's challenging?

A significant challenge mentioned by participants was low public awareness of the role that charities play in funding R&D. For instance, audience research commissioned by BHF found that only 50% of people knew that the charity funds medical research.

Charities must recognise people's understanding of research and adapt messages accordingly. Having found that 66% of its supporters had only a slight understanding of the research it funds, **Blood Cancer UK** is stripping back its messaging to focus on increasing understanding. **The Eve Appeal** noted the importance of recognising people's own experiences and finding case studies that resonate strongly.

Tone is important – bold or emotive messaging, or even fear, can be effective tools to catch people's attention, but **the Association of Medical Research Charities** noted the dangers of doomsday messaging. There was also general agreement that it is not always helpful to talk about a cure, which may not align with people's experiences. It can be better to talk about improving rather than saving lives.

"The role of communicators is to tell the truth in the most compelling way possible. Describing your vision should not be at the expense of being accurate."

Further tensions exist in the fact R&D doesn't offer instant outcomes, but many donors will want to see an impact from their support. Charities must balance optimistic messaging with pragmatism about the timescales and inherent uncertainty of R&D. Some charities also face challenges in explaining why a disease remains prevalent despite years of research funding.

What's next?

- **Medical research charities should be at the forefront of the R&D sector's public image, with their high street profile and experience blending emotive and pragmatic messages.** However, the contribution medical research charities make to R&D is too often overlooked, and more work is needed to strengthen that connection in the public eye.
- **R&D advocates should go further to champion the voices and experiences of patients and researchers.** Visibly linking the beneficiaries of research to those conducting it can help humanise the R&D process, especially as researchers are generally well-trusted by the public.
- **Audience segmentation could help tailor public-facing messages and 'asks'.** Framing messages as participatory movements was seen as one way to engage younger people. Other public audiences will respond better to messages about the progress made to date rather than how far there is to go.
- **Medical research charities should do more to highlight their collaborative work.** Despite frequent cooperation, these partnerships between charities are not necessarily seen by the public. Making more of collaboration between funders can reinforce the value for money that charities extract from everyone's donations.