

Three Fundraising Curses

1) The Curse of Knowledge

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The Curse of Knowledge

Have you ever read something, got to the end and realised you had no idea what the writer was talking about?

I review a lot of grant applications and it astounds me how many times I reach the end and am no clearer about what it is they are trying to do than I was at the start.

And it's not just funding proposals. Business plans, mission statements, strategy documents – more often than not they are filled with rambling sentences and obscure words that take up a lot of space to say nothing at all. Arts organisations' documents are filled with this nonsense. Or – to use a phrase I first learned from the ever-fabulous Jules Bellingham – “arty bollocks”.

Here's an example:

“We are seeking support to bring young people into our Triangle of Interaction at Stage 1 to start their journey with us as a first point of participation with the arts. We recognise that every young person is different, so that while one young person may join us at Stage 1 and find themselves capable of progressing to Stage 4 in 2 years, another young person may require more time engaging with us at Stage 3 before feeling capable of progressing further.”

Nope. I don't know what it means either.

But the person who wrote it does. And I reckon that most people from this fundraiser's organisation would understand it, too.

But for you, me and the poor Grant Manager that has to decipher the application containing that paragraph, those 82 words might as well be in a foreign language. Rather than have us scrambling to make a donation they leave us confused and frustrated.

Ladies and gentlemen, what you have just witnessed is an organisation infected by the Curse of Knowledge.



“I'm so clever that sometimes I don't understand a single word of what I'm saying”

Oscar Wilde

The concept of the Curse of Knowledge has been known for a while but it was made popular by Chip and Dan Heath in their highly memorable book, Made to Stick. (This book is a must-read for fundraisers. Not read it? Go now! I'll wait...)

This is how the Heath Brothers describe the Curse of Knowledge:

“Once we know something, we find it hard to imagine what it was like not to know it. Our knowledge has “cursed” us. And it becomes difficult for us to share our knowledge with others, because we can’t readily re-create our listeners’ state of mind”.

To demonstrate the Curse of Knowledge in action, Chip and Dan recall a psychology experiment carried out by Elizabeth Newton at Stanford in the 90s. Participants were paired up to play a game. One person would be a “tapper” and the other would be a “listener”. The tappers were given a list of well-known songs and asked to tap them out. The listener had to try and identify the song from the taps.

Having looked at the list of songs, the tappers predicted that the listeners would be able to identify half of the songs. After all, they were all songs that the listeners would know and they felt confident they would be instantly recognisable.

In reality, out of the 120 songs tapped during the experiment, only 3 were correctly identified.

You can imagine the frustration on the part of the tappers.

“How can you not know this? No, of course it’s not Iron Maiden, you idiot. It’s Happy Birthday! It’s so obvious!”.

And it is obvious.

To the tapper. Who not only knows the answer but also, more importantly, can imagine all the missing parts of the song as they tap. The backing track playing in their head provides all the context they need for the tapping to make sense.

The listener doesn’t have this advantage. All they can hear is some sporadic knocking, that sounds more like a three-legged horse tap dancing than a piece of music.

So what does this mean for fundraisers?

Fundraisers make ideal victims for the Curse of Knowledge.

In the 'Triangle of Interaction' example, that paragraph wouldn't have made any sense to the fundraiser before they joined the company. But since their induction they have lived and breathed that sacred Triangle every moment of every working day.

Fundraisers are immersed in their organisation's work. They see projects all the way from first ideas to opening night. They speak the language. They are saturated in organisational knowledge. They can hear all the different parts in their head when they tap out their fundraising messages.

Our listeners don't have the benefit of this context.

You might think that the Triangle of Interaction is an extreme example. But fundraising messages are full of examples of the Curse of Knowledge at work. Far too often, fundraisers assume that potential supporters have more knowledge than they actually do.

We assume they understand our jargon and acronyms (NPO might mean National Portfolio Organisation to you, but it means Non-Profit Organisation to most funders). We assume they will know that "famous" artist/director/performer. We assume they understand the intricacies of how the arts are funded. We assume they share our view of how we do what we do, why we do what we do and why the arts matter.

We make incorrect assumptions about our supporters' knowledge on a daily basis.



The McDonalds "What is a Flat White?" advert shows it is not just fundraisers that fall victim to the Curse of Knowledge. Hipster Baristas are just as vulnerable!*

** Of course, this only makes sense if you have seen the advert. If you haven't seen it, this attempt to share an example of the Curse of Knowledge has, itself, fallen victim to the Curse of Knowledge...*

So, what is the antidote to the Curse of Knowledge?

Even when we are aware of the Curse of Knowledge it can be hard to spot when it has taken hold. Here are some of the things you can do to fend off this evil curse:

1) Create an avatar of your target audience

Having a clear idea of who you are trying to communicate with can make it easier to see the world through their eyes.

To do this, many organisations will create an avatar or caricature of their target audience.

These imaginary characters go beyond just basic demographic data such as age and gender. They include information about likes, dislikes, lifestyle, experiences, beliefs and motivations.

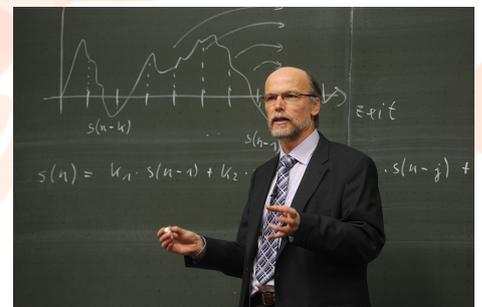


These avatars help them to understand how their average target audience member sees the world and how they are likely to make decisions. They can then make organisational decisions based on how these caricatures would react. This includes knowing what products to offer, what messages they need to hear and how best to present those messages.

Chip and Dan Heath give the example of American grocery store chain, Trader Joes. Trader Joes pride themselves on being the “home of cheap thrills” – a place where you can buy interesting and adventurous meals at affordable prices.

They characterise their target customer as “an unemployed college professor who drives a very, very used Volvo.”

In reality, Trader Joes’ car parks are not full of old Volvos and the stores are not full of men wearing chalk-stained jackets with elbow patches. But their stores are full of well-educated, experience-seeking people who are conscious of quality but also conscious of budget.



Developing an avatar for your target audience means you can refer back to it as you develop your fundraising message. Would your caricature understand what you mean? More to the point, would they care?

2) Use your target audiences’ existing knowledge as a starting point

Sometimes our fundraising messages have to communicate complex information to a new audience. But if our aim is to get our target audience to give money, simply trying to educate them is unlikely to work. We need to find a way to simplify the message.

One of the ways you can do this is by using your target audience’s existing knowledge and understanding as a starting point.

Here’s an example: **Draw a picture of a Gerenuk.**

Not sure what a Gerenuk is? No problem. Let me describe one for you.

A Gerenuk is 80–105 centimetres tall and weighs between 28 and 52 kilograms. It has a long, slender neck and limbs. Two types of colouration are clearly visible on the smooth coat: the saddle is reddish brown and the flanks are fawn to buff. The horns, present only on males, curve backward then slightly forward and measure 25–44 centimetres.

Still not sure what to draw?

A Gerenuk is an antelope with a long neck.

By linking to something you are already familiar with (in this case, an antelope) I can quickly and succinctly help you to understand something new.



And that's not all.

Linking to an existing "schema" makes it easier for your target audience to remember.

3) Use simple, concrete language... ...and use it to talk about the things that matter

One of the biggest problems with "arty bollocks" is that it is abstract and ambiguous. Give it to 50 people and they will come up with 50 different interpretations of what it means.

Our messages need to be much more tangible to ensure our target audiences receive the message we intended.

I *think* what the Triangle of Interaction author is trying to say is that they will run workshops to introduce children to live theatre or music, and that they will tailor this work to enable participants to develop at their own pace.

But even if the Triangle of Interaction could be explained in a more concrete way, is this really the information supporters need to hear to move them to donate?

Fascinating (?) as the theory is, this tells the supporter nothing about why the work is important and why they should care enough to donate.

Which is a shame.

Because I've seen the look of open-mouthed amazement on a young child's face when they first hear a symphony orchestra playing at full blast.

I've heard an auditorium full of chattering school kids suddenly fall silent as, for the first time, a Shakespeare play comes to life for them on stage.

And I've felt the electricity generated by 120 young people being given the opportunity to perform on one of the most renowned stages in the world.

Supporters don't care how you are going to do what you do. They want to know is how is the world going to be a better place because of their gift.

Stop focusing on abstract concepts. Instead, make sure your fundraising message paints a clear picture for your target audience. A picture that shows the need for your work. A picture that shows what happens if the work doesn't happen. And a picture that shows the amazing things that could happen because of the supporter's gift.

Your artistic director might not like you describing the work in this simplistic way. But you are not writing it for them.

4) Avoid style over substance

The Curse of Knowledge can sometimes creep in when a fundraiser is trying to be too clever.

We've all been guilty of this. We get obsessed by a clever idea. A pun. A witty acronym. A metaphor or striking image.

Or perhaps it's not the fundraiser trying to be clever. Maybe the idea has come from the Artistic Director, the Chair of the Board or the Head of Marketing.

These clever ideas can be incredibly successful. A good pun or play on words can help catch our target audience's attention. A good metaphor can communicate our message in an engaging, inspiring and memorable way.

But just being clever is not enough. These ideas are only clever if they enhance our story.

Don't let your clever idea get in the way of the thing that matters the most – telling the supporter a simple, personal, emotive story that compels them to give.

Check that your clever idea is helping rather than hindering. If it's strangling your story it's not so clever.

Secondly, check that your clever idea doesn't rely on knowledge or understanding that your potential supporter doesn't have. (Remember the tappers' mental backing track!).

5) Ask an outsider to help

It might seem obvious but test your messaging with an outsider. Can they understand what you are talking about? Can they summarise the project accurately? Do they have the emotional response you were looking for?

If they can, great! If not, it's back to the drawing board to simplify, simplify, simplify.

***Are you worried that your fundraising has been infected by the Curse of Knowledge?
Contact us today to see if we can help you tap out a clearer message!***

You can find more blogs and resources on the “Apollo’s Muse” section of our website:
www.ApolloFundraising.com/Apollo-Muse

What is stopping you from taking your fundraising to the next level?

Unsure about the steps you need to take? Worried that your team doesn’t have the skills or knowledge they need to be successful? Nervous about putting your plan into action?

We all need a helping hand from time to time. Apollo Fundraising can provide the support you need to achieve your fundraising goals.

We can help you *find your direction* – we’ve helped arts organisations write their first fundraising strategy, planned large-scale capital appeals and reviewed the strategies of successful teams looking to take their fundraising to the next level.

We can help you *improve your skills* – we’ve trained arts fundraisers, volunteers, board members and senior managers. We’ve provided training on topics such as making the ask, making the most of digital technology and setting up individual giving schemes.

We can help you *build your confidence* – we’ve coached theatres on approaching major donors, mentored visual arts organisations on launching crowdfunding campaigns and supported museums to put their fundraising plans into action.

Need a helping hand? Contact us today to see how we can support you!



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