

Case Study:

Bath Cats and Dogs Home

Key themes

- Developing charity shops as part of a balanced fundraising strategy
- The importance of good donor relationship management and understanding the supporter's journey
- Making the most of volunteers as part of a joined-up approach to fundraising



Sustainable Funding Project Case Study: Bath Cats and Dogs Home

Overview

Bath Cats and Dogs Home (BCDH) has been rescuing and re-homing pets from the Bath and North Somerset area since 1937. Started by a local businessman, who served as the charity's President until he passed away at the end of 2009, BCDH now sees around 3000 animals every year. Although a local branch of the RSPCA, BCDH does not receive any funding from the national charity and has developed its own distinct brand and a strong local identity. From a small start, it received a donation in the 1940s that allowed the purchase of some land near the university and has since continued to grow by maximising the support of the local community. BCDH now needs to raise just over a million pounds every year.

The need for a sustainable funding strategy

BCDH has always relied heavily on income from legacies. A large bequest in 2000 allowed new kennels to be built and for many years the annual income from legacies was in the region of £300,000-£400,000. However, in 2007 BCDH experienced an unexpected drop in this income, which highlighted how unpredictable legacies could be; although they usually knew who had made pledges in their Will, they had no idea when this money would arrive. With the new kennels and increased number of animals coming through their doors as a result of previous capacity-building bequests and contracts with local authorities, they now have 56 members of staff and considerable overheads.

Sarah Thorn, Fundraising Manager, realised that they needed to look for other sources of unrestricted income that would create a stable base: "Because it's an animal charity there always had been very generous legacies, and generally speaking it's fine, but you only have to have a year when you don't have any and you've got a problem".

Developing the trading idea

Bath Cats and Dogs Home already had a charity shop in the nearby town of Frome that was widely considered to be under-performing. The charity also had a small petfood shop in the reception of the Home, that they saw as having considerable potential and were keen to expand, perhaps via online shopping.

The recession seemed like a particularly good time to be expanding charity shops as premises were available and shoppers were keen on buying cheaper products. However, they knew that in order to upscale their trading ideas successfully they would need an injection of funds. The Friends of Bath Cats and Dogs Home - a separate charity that raises money locally and gives grants to BCDH - was very keen on the idea of developing a chain of charity shops, as they favour projects that will become self-sustaining. If Sarah could convince them of the financial viability of BCDH's plans, then the Friends might be a good source of start-up funding.

First, BCDH set up a trading sub-committee, comprised of those who could help to get trading off the ground; two trustees, the finance manager, the chair of the Friends, and later, Jeff (who was to oversee the charity shops), Sarah and the administrator. They successfully applied to NCVO's Only Connect scheme to visit Helen and Douglas House to learn how to transform the fortunes of their existing shop and develop it into a small chain.

Research, Sarah says, was crucial - they spent three to four months on solid research, exploring everything from types of flooring to the ideal size of the shop. And Sarah was surprised by how helpful people working in other charity shops were: "people were very very friendly - amazingly. Some told us how much their takings were!" From this research BCDH was able to put together a good business plan, based on refurbishing the Frome shop, investing in staff and putting in place systems and processes that would easily extend to more shops in the future at minimal cost. Originally, they'd estimated that this would cost around £15,000. However, after their research they realised that in order to make the shops successful, much more would be needed. The research enabled BCDH to be able to demonstrate why this was necessary and secured £28,500 of start-up funding from the Friends of Bath Cats and Dogs Home.

Date

Based on an interview with Sarah Thorn, Fundraising Manager, October 2009.

Sustainable Funding Project Case Study:
Bath Cats and Dogs Home



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Placing trading into a broader Sustainable Funding Strategy

Sarah is aware that charity shops are a good platform for the charity’s other fundraising activities: “It has other benefits - you have the income from the shop itself, but you can also push events, you can raise the profile of the charity, you can sell merchandise - so you have a whole plethora of other benefits - you can even give out donation forms.”

One of Bath Cats and Dogs Home’s key strengths is the way that their fundraising activities are so joined up. Every piece of literature has a donation form on the back, as they are aware that their supporters may donate to a shop, become a volunteer dog-walker, then help with events and maybe eventually leave a legacy.

But BCDH has not always had such a joined-up approach. Not too long ago much of their printed material was photocopied and there was no clear brand. The refurbishment of the charity shop in Frome gave them a good opportunity to refresh the image of the charity. Sarah says that this did not cost much money - they found a sympathetic designer who understood what they needed and was happy to undertake the work within their budget. They’ve also managed to get a lot of the printing for free by working with a company who sells advertising space in their re-homing packs. This re-brand has helped to strengthen the organisation’s local identity - something that is especially important because as a branch of the RSPCA, many supporters have inadvertently sent their donations to the national charity. They now have leaflets about leaving a legacy, in memoriam giving and becoming

a ‘paw pal’ (sponsoring an animal by direct debit) alongside visitor information and becoming a volunteer, plus their regular printed newsletter.

Knowing your supporters and making the most of them

Sarah says that they know their main source of income will always be from individuals - the trick is to know who is likely to give to your cause, what they respond to and to make the most out of that. The Home’s leaflets include case studies of abandoned animals they’ve helped, plus information about what donations can help to pay for, such as £500 for a Cat Pod. They know that supporters are likely to have animals of their own, and therefore they run a book of remembrance for pets and a pet cemetery.

Sustainable Funding Project Case Study:
Bath Cats and Dogs Home

BCDH attend networking events organised by local businesses and find out which senior managers own pets, then target those companies for support and donations. For instance, one local company has many staff who volunteer at the Home but Sarah found out that their Managing Director is 'not an animal person'. The volunteers are extremely valuable, but there is unlikely to be much point in spending time targeting their employer. On other occasions they've found out that a person adopting an animal is a manager of a company and successfully approached that company for support.

Aware of the constraints of the recession, BCDH often starts by asking companies for in-kind support or offering partnerships to sell products. Their biggest corporate supporter, James Wellbeloved, benefits from selling pet food through their pet shop at the Home and other local companies, such as Bath Aqua Glass, give a donation for every 'paw print' item they sell. Many companies also get involved with events, run fundraising activities or collect in-kind donations, such as cat and dog food.

The Home has even managed to engage schools with their fundraising. They give talks and presentations, often delivered by volunteers, that fit in with the National Curriculum for primary schools and offer work experience placements to older students. Many pupils go on to run fundraising events - raising cash but also the profile of the organisation in the community.

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Sustainable Funding Project Case Study:
Bath Cats and Dogs Home



The crucial role of the volunteer

BCDH is fortunate to have so many volunteering opportunities available; from dog-walking to painting walls, helping with open days to working in the shop. Volunteers can even sign up to be a 'kitten cuddler'! Recognising the importance of volunteers, the organisation employs a Volunteer Manager who coordinates opportunities.

When the ideas for the refurbishment of the shop in Frome were discussed, several of the volunteers were strongly opposed to them. In common with many charity shops, BCDH's shop was staffed by a team that had been working there for a long time, did not necessarily have commercial experience and who believed that spending money on the shop was wasting money that should be spent helping animals. Armed with the facts and figures

from their research, Sarah convinced most of the need for investment. However, several of the most long-standing volunteers resigned, causing tension in the team and meaning that new volunteers needed to be recruited and trained.

BCDH has places in several half marathons, it runs 'challenge' events such as abseiling and organises a couple of sponsored walks each year, in addition to a programme of events such as art sales and music nights. They've made a concerted effort to get volunteers involved and have managed to increase their fundraised income during 2009 by 20% - at a time when many charities have seen sharp declines. The recession has actually presented the Home with opportunities for their appeals, as the number of animals being abandoned has

markedly increased and supporters have responded strongly to this increased need.

The biggest fundraising event for the Home is their annual Open Day, which relies on 'an army of volunteers'. In 2009 it raised £38,000 and saw 5000 visitors - an opportunity to keep existing supporters in touch with BCDH's work, bring new supporters on board and, of course, re-home animals. The Home's skills at keeping a large group of very committed, very active volunteers engaged during a period of challenge and change has enabled it to grow to be one of the four biggest charities in the region.

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Sustainable Funding Project Case Study: Bath Cats and Dogs Home

What's next?

2009 was the year for re-branding the organisation and re-launching the charity shop at Frome. In 2010 Bath Cats and Dogs Home hopes to build on this enhanced image by investing in their website and ensuring that their strengths in keeping supporters engaged is taken into the digital age, including developing an e-newsletter. They plan to open more charity shops in the area, which they should be able to do at a much smaller cost now they've invested in the systems and technology, and increase online sales from their petshop. Further in the future they are considering more trading ideas, such as an on-site café, puppy behaviour classes or even dog hydrotherapy; making the most of skills they already have in-house. They hope that this investment in trading opportunities will mean that the year-to-year income of the charity is stabilised, paying for the core costs and allowing legacies to pay for capital projects such as rebuilding the cattery.



Bath Cats and Dogs Home's Top Tips for organisations looking to run charity shops

- Research, research and then do some more research. Visit other charities who are doing the same thing and think about what works - everything from whether you organise your stock by colour to whether you hang clothing on metal or wooden hangers. All these things make a difference.
- It is always likely to be the case that some volunteers and perhaps some trustees aren't keen on change. Try to convince them with well-researched proposals and include them as much as possible, but at the end of the day you need to do what is best for the organisation.
- Make sure you invest enough money into doing things right! BCDH's 'Epos system' (that takes care of the different types of income coming through the till, including gift aid) cost £11,000, but each additional shop will only cost £1,000. The shopfitters cost £15,000 - but were worth it!



LOTTERY FUNDED

The Sustainable Funding Project is an NCVO initiative working in partnership with the Big Lottery Fund and Charity Bank.

NCVO's Sustainable Funding Project is the sector's premier provider of tools and resources encouraging and enabling voluntary and community organisations to develop and implement a sustainable income strategy.

Visit our website at

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Contact

Bath Cats and Dogs Home
The Avenue, Claverton Down,
Bath BA2 7AZ

Tel: 01225 780259

enquiries@bathcatsanddogshome.co.uk

www.bathcatsanddogshome.org.uk