

Do-it-yourself DRTV: A practical guide to making direct response television advertising work for charities

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Tobin Aldrich has just joined the youth homelessness charity, Centrepoint, after four years as Fundraising Director of Concern, Ireland's largest charity. In that period the number of Concern's regular givers increased twelvefold and voluntary income more than doubled. Concern won the IDM Business Performance Award for 2002 and won the Institute of Fundraising/Professional Fundraising Awards in 2001, 2002 and 2003. Prior to Concern, Tobin worked for Sight Savers International and other charities in the UK and also for several years in the IT sector. He holds an MA from Cambridge and an MBA from City University Business School.

ABSTRACT

Direct response television advertising (DRTV) has been used by charities as a form of promotion for many years; in the case of the UK for over two decades. In that period many charities have tried the medium but only a handful have achieved consistent success. In the process, a layer of mystique has attached itself to DRTV and a number of outright myths have been perpetuated.

DRTV should work for many more charities than currently use it. This is in contrast to other media which are in danger of being swamped by overuse by charities. Any charity raising or wishing to raise money from the general public should at least consider this medium.

INTRODUCTION

Various myths have grown up around DRTV advertising: that it is expensive, that it is only for big organisations and that television advertising is fundamentally different from other fundraising media. This paper challenges these myths and argues that smaller charities can make DRTV work by taking ownership of the process themselves. A practical guide is offered to the basics of making and showing a DRTV advertisement, handling response and measuring results, using examples of successful campaigns from the UK and Ireland. Charities do not have to rely on agencies to do everything for them and the more they do themselves the better their understanding will be.

Finally, the paper offers a ten-point guide to running a successful DRTV campaign, emphasising the importance of clear objectives, of using what is already known about results in other media, of understanding how DRTV works and starting small and testing at every stage.

The paper concludes that to make DRTV work a charity needs, above all, to have a cause that can be expressed succinctly and which motivates people to give money. Given that, by following some fairly simple rules most charities ought to be able to mount a successful DRTV campaign.

WHAT IS DRTV?

Direct response television advertising (DRTV) is advertising whose *primary purpose* is to generate immediate and measurable response. It is distinct from general or brand advertising.

Brand advertising is aimed at building awareness of a brand proposition, often over a considerable period of time. A brand advertisement may have a responsive element, but this is secondary to its main purpose, which is building a brand identity.

This key distinction gives direct response campaigns a very different shape from brand campaigns. Buyers for a brand advertiser are looking for penetration into key target audiences, they want the largest number of people in their key target groups to see the advertisement and to provide the best conditions for them to recall it. DRTV buyers are less interested in who sees the advertisement, they are looking at response and at how much each response cost them.

A DRTV campaign will typically consist largely of off-peak airtime. It is likely to be made up of a large number of relatively small audience spots with large audience spots actively avoided for a variety of reasons (cost of peak time, reluctance to risk too much budget on a single spot and response handling considerations).

WHY CHARITIES USE DRTV

Charities and other nonprofit organisations use DRTV for a number of, often complementary, purposes:

- to generate financial support in the form of one-off donations or regular gifts
- to recruit new members or new supporters
- to gain support for campaigns

- to build charity brands or raise awareness of issues (this would be a subsidiary objective or outcome of a DRTV campaign).

Most charity DRTV advertising in the UK and Ireland has the primary purpose of new supporter or member recruitment. The support sought is usually financial but this is generally to be received over a period of time, often largely through follow-up activity. Examples would be the regular giver donor recruitment campaign of organisations such as Oxfam and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) seeking a monthly gift of £2 to £5, or of child sponsorship advertisements from the likes of World Vision or Plan, seeking £10 to £15 per month.

Relatively few DRTV campaigns have immediate financial return as the primary objective. Exceptions would be disaster or emergency appeals which aim to raise money quickly for a specific disaster. These may have a supporter recruitment objective as well.

DRTV can be used for campaigning with the objective of generating petition signatures or other non-financial expressions of support.

DRTV campaigns can be used for brand building in addition to the primary response objective. Cancer Research UK significantly increased its DRTV activity after its formation as the result of the merger between the Cancer Research Campaign and the Imperial Cancer Research Campaign in 2001, partly to help promote the new name of the organisation.

DRTV campaigns have been shown to have a significant positive impact on other fundraising campaigns by the same charity. DRTV can lift the results of other media, particularly if there is integration between the television message and

the other campaigns. Mixing brand and response objectives, however, frequently results in unsuccessful DRTV campaigns. In the author's view an advertisement should have a primary objective, which is either response or brand building. If the primary purpose of the advertisement is unclear it commonly will fail to achieve either.

Charities with strong brand positions can effectively gain additional brand value out of DRTV advertisements without compromising response. In the UK, the NSPCC is a good example of this.

Whatever the purpose, charities that use DRTV do so because it is a mechanism that can reach significant audiences and generate direct, measurable response. It is a medium that can be extremely cost-effective as the ever greater proliferation of channels gives increasing choice and serves to keep costs down.

DRTV MYTHS

Half a century after its inception, and quite without justification, television advertising still retains a certain element of glamour or mystique that other communication mechanisms, such as direct mail, lack. Perhaps partly as a result of this a number of myths have grown up about DRTV for charities.

DRTV is expensive

Television advertising is actually, on a cost per thousand people reached basis, rather a cheap form of advertising. It is, of course, possible to spend vast sums on television advertising but equally possible to construct effective, targeted campaigns for relatively modest sums. A DRTV advertisement of reasonable quality can be made for under £15,000 and a media schedule of five million viewer impacts can be bought for less than £50,000.

DRTV is only for big charities

Direct response television has worked well for many charities that are not particularly well known. Successful users of DRTV in the UK include Sight Savers International, Concern and the National Canine Defence League, none of them household names in the UK (although Concern is well known in its home market of Ireland). Charities do not need to be big and they do not need to be well known.

Television advertising is different

Fundraising using DRTV is not fundamentally different from fundraising using any other mechanism. A proposition that works effectively in other media, such as press advertising or direct mail, has every chance of working on television.

The DRTV donor

Another reason why some charities are reluctant to use DRTV is a perception that the medium recruits donors of a lesser quality than other fundraising techniques. This is also something of a myth.

It is important to avoid generalising about the type of person who responds to DRTV advertisements. To a large extent, the nature of the proposition and where the advertisement is screened will determine the make-up of donors recruited from the medium. As the typical charity DRTV campaign has tended to populate daytime schedules which are disproportionately viewed by an older, female audience, this influences the make-up of donors recruited. However, much will depend upon the proposition. An animal sponsorship proposition such as National Canine Defence League 'sponsor a dog' advertisements tends to appeal to a relatively lower income audience than an overseas development cause such as Concern or Sight Savers.

Whatever the precise make-up of the donors recruited through a DRTV cam-

paign, there is no evidence that donors are of a lower quality overall than those recruited from other sources. They will undoubtedly be less responsive to subsequent appeals by direct mail than donors recruited through that medium, but this should be a finding that surprises nobody. Concern's experience is that DRTV regular donors tend to have somewhat higher attrition rates (the rate at which they cancel their regular gifts) than donors recruited by direct mail, press or inserts. DRTV recruits have significantly lower attrition levels, however, than donors recruited by 'direct dialogue' fundraising, that is recruitment to direct debit or standing order carried out on the street or door-to-door.

MAKING THE ADVERTISEMENT: WHO DOES IT?

Making a television advertisement, getting it shown and handling the response involves a large number of different activities. The most significant are:

- Creative
- Production and distribution
- Media planning and buying
- Response handling
- Measuring and evaluating results

Many charities use advertising agencies to manage the whole production process from initial concepts to the booking of television space; some even get an advertising agency to manage the response handling and to evaluate the results. It is not necessary, however, to use an agency for all of these functions. In principle, a charity could carry out all of them in-house and more commonly, many charities will manage the process themselves, using a number of specialist suppliers for the activities they cannot or do not want to perform themselves.

The advantages of using an advertising agency to manage the whole process are principally those of having one supplier to deal with and one company to take responsibility. However, agencies will charge a premium for managing other suppliers. The charity needs to be clear what added value the agency is bringing before deciding that such an arrangement is suitable.

MAKING THE ADVERTISEMENT: THE BASICS

Objectives

First, it is important to be clear about the objective of the advertisement. Is it new supporter recruitment or immediate financial return. What are the targets and over what period will they be measured? Is there an awareness or branding objective, if so how is this to be measured?

Proposition

A strong proposition that can be articulated powerfully in a very short space of time is absolutely key to successful television advertising. The most successful charity television advertisements all have very strong propositions. A classic example is Sight Savers' '£15 will restore the sight of a blind person'. It is short, easy to understand and has a great impact.

The formula that a small sum of money equals a huge outcome is not possible for all charities. Most charities, however, should be able to demonstrate how a small sum of money can make a worthwhile difference.

Structure

The classic charity DRTV advertisement structure goes as follows:

- Problem

- Solution
- Call to action

An example is Sight Savers' river blindness DRTV advertisement of 1998:

- Problem:** 'This could be your worst nightmare. Millions of tiny worms inside your head. The worms grow. You wake up to compare darkness. You're blind. This isn't a bad dream. It's river blindness. Millions of people in developing countries are at risk of river blindness.'
- Solution:** 'The real tragedy is that they are suffering needlessly. A simple pill will provide protection against river blindness.'
- Call to action:** '£3 per month will protect six people from river blindness for a whole year. Please call 07000 202020 to give just £3 per month.'

Time lengths

How long should the advertisement be? The length of advertisements is almost infinitely variable, from as little as ten seconds to as long as three minutes or even longer. 'Long form' DRTV in the USA and Canada describes advertisements which are essentially 'infomercials' and run for an hour or longer.

The classic UK charity DRTV advertisement is 'long copy', with 90 seconds the most common length. The 90-second advertisement was developed by the early users of charity DRTV because it gives long enough to articulate the problem, solution and call to action and allows the response mechanism to be repeated a number of times.

Ninety-second advertisements still make up a significant proportion of charity

DRTV ads. Sixty-second advertisements are also used very frequently, particularly by better-known charities such as the NSPCC or the Salvation Army.

Shorter advertisements are not commonly used for DRTV except in conjunction with longer versions in processes such as 'top and tailing' where there is an advertisement at the beginning of a break of any length from 30 to 80 seconds with a much shorter 10- or 20-second advertisement at the end of the same break. A similar technique might be used with consecutive advertisement breaks with the longer advertisement in the first and the shorter in the second.

Shorter advertisements can work on their own for well-known charities, however, or if the cause requires little in the way of explanation. Emergency DRTV advertisements by Concern are often only 30 seconds long because they assume that the disaster has already been featured in media coverage and thus the advertisement can move straight to the response mechanism.

Ask levels

The amount of money charities ask for also varies and there are no right or wrong answers. There was a time in the UK when every charity advertisement seemed to ask for £15 as a one-off gift. When advertisements asking for a regular gift became common, most of them seemed to ask for £2 or £3 per month. The picture now is much more varied with regular giving ask levels going from £3 to £15 per month (the latter being product-based propositions such as child sponsorship). Sometimes weekly amounts are asked for.

Voice-overs

Who will voice the advertisement? The first question is whether to use a celebrity, a voice-over artist or someone else (perhaps a charity staff member).

Celebrities may just be used as voice-overs and there are many advantages to this. A recognisable celebrity voice acts as an endorsement for the charity in the same way as does a celebrity fronting the advertisement. The right celebrity can make a big difference to an advertisement. A 1999 Sight Savers advertisement with a voice-over from the actress Joanna Lumley achieved a 20 per cent higher response rate than the same advertisement with a non-celebrity voice-over.

A professional voice-over artist is usually used in the absence of a celebrity. A charity might opt to use a non-professional voice-over such as a field worker or the chief executive, but there is a skill to voice-over work that amateurs usually lack and a poorly delivered voice-over can kill an advertisement.

Tone of voice, accents and gender are all key points to consider when selecting voice-overs. There is no general answer about which voice types work best for each environment but there can be a marked difference in results for the same advertisement with different voice-overs.

Music

Music can make an enormous difference to an advertisement. It is not essential to use a musical score but longer advertisements in particular are likely to work more effectively with one. There are three basic alternatives with music: to use an existing recording of an existing track; to make a new recording of an existing track; or to have a new track composed.

To use an existing recording, it is necessary to get permission and perhaps pay a fee. Getting permission is never simple. It will involve a number of parties: the songwriter, artist, record company and sometimes others. It may be easier to get permission for a well-known song from the writer and to re-record using session musicians. This can work well, a good

example being the Sight Savers' advertisement, which used the Ewan MacColl song 'The First Time I Ever Saw Your Face' recorded by session musicians as a soundtrack.

The alternative, to get a piece composed, is often simpler and can work well as the piece will be written around the advertisement.

RESPONSE MECHANISMS

How will people respond to the advertisement? The most immediately recognisable aspect of a DRTV as opposed to a brand advertisement is usually the prominence of the telephone number. There are other response alternatives too, however, and these are becoming increasingly important either alone or in conjunction with the telephone.

Telephone

Most DRTV advertisements have the telephone as the primary response method. This is usually a freephone or a low-call number. Because the number has to be communicated in a relatively short space of time, the shorter the number and the more memorable the better. The decision between freephone, low-call or other rates is one which is not clear-cut and is something to test. A freephone number may produce more response but it can also generate significant numbers of unwanted hoax calls, which may make a low-call number a more efficient option.

Web

Very few charity direct response television advertisements currently offer only website response but a website is frequently offered in addition to a telephone number as a response mechanism.

There is no doubt that response via the web will increase significantly over time.

The proportion of consumers using the internet for financial transactions is increasing steadily and it is natural for these people increasingly to use the web for charity donations too. The web and the relatively new medium of interactive television are particularly useful for dealing with consumers who wish to find out more about the proposition before committing to a donation decision. Charities with animal or child sponsorship propositions are now reporting as much as a third of all DRTV responses coming via the web, with very significant savings in fulfilment and conversion costs.

If a web address is used for an advertisement, it is important to define what web address is to be used and what the process will be for people who respond.

Interactive

Digital broadcasters led by Sky are now offering interactive options for television advertisements on their platforms.

An interactive advertisement will allow the viewer to click on the advertisement with their digital remote control and access one or a series of micro-sites which have further information. This can include a donation facility by credit card or direct debit. Because the viewer's information is already held by the set-top box, only bank details and donation amount would need to be entered.

Interactive television is very much in its infancy as a component of a DRTV strategy. It potentially has enormous benefits for the charity, with the ability ultimately to target advertisements right down to the individual household. Currently, the technology is relatively costly and options to exploit it are fairly limited, but this will change quite quickly.

Texting

Texting is increasingly being used as a communications tool by charities and it is

now possible to use texting as a donation mechanism. Reverse billing for text messaging allows individuals to make payments by mobile phone.

Whatever the response mechanism, it is critical that it is shown on screen for long enough for viewers to be able to absorb it. It is surprising how often this rather elementary point is still forgotten, particularly by creatives in advertising agencies.

SHOWING THE ADVERTISEMENT

Television airtime varies enormously in price measured on a cost per thousand impacts basis. It varies by channel, by day part within channel, by particular spot within a day part and, massively, according to market conditions.

To advertise on ITV in the UK at peak time, against a popular programme such as 'Coronation Street', during a popular month (usually the busiest month is November), could easily cost £12 or £13 per thousand impacts (CPT) for 30 seconds of airtime. (With an audience of around 10 million, a 60-second advertisement would cost in the region of £240,000 to £260,000). A satellite channel at off-peak during a quiet month could cost a sixth of that sum, £2 CPT, even less on occasion. A 60-second spot on such a channel might have an audience of 10,000 and cost £40,000.

It is unlikely that a spot against a popular programme would achieve a response rate so much higher than a much cheaper (absolutely and proportionally) spot on a satellite channel. There is even some evidence that response rates can be higher for less popular programmes that have lower viewer engagement. This is why charity and other DRTV users typically populate the cheaper daytime spots on terrestrial and satellite television.

How to buy

TV media buying is something strictly for professionals. The media planning and buying function needs to work closely not only with the creative agency but with the telemarketing or response handling operation to allow changes in the media plan to be made depending upon the initial results from each channel.

When to buy

The television market is incredibly fluid and there is no right or wrong time to buy airtime. The essential options are between buying 'long', well in advance of when the buyer wants the advertisement to be shown, and buying 'short', as close as possible to the airtime date. Which strategy is appropriate will vary according to the supply and demand situation for the desired channel.

Effective television buying strategies will combine long- and short-term buying. The key is generally to have maximum flexibility. If an advertisement has to be shown in a certain period, this will always limit options and the price will, therefore, almost certainly go up.

Targeting and demographics

Broadcasters can give sociodemographic breakdowns for audiences for each programme (as indexes) giving age range and gender breakdowns and social class. Other analyses of audiences are available, for instance the TGI consumer behaviour index.

If a charity wants to buy particular demographics, the trick is to do this without paying a premium. This is possible, particularly if the buyer is after groups (perhaps women over 50) in which other advertisers are less interested.

RESPONSE HANDLING

There is no point in having a good

advertisement if the charity cannot manage the responses.

Charities should not underestimate how complicated telephone response handling for a DRTV advertisement can be. As a rough estimate, 90 per cent of all calls in response to an advertisement will happen within three minutes of it being shown. If the advertisement is in a large audience spot, even a 0.02 per cent response rate can mean a lot of calls in a very short space of time. A ten million audience spot, for example, would produce in the region of 2,000 calls in a few minutes.

If the charity does not have the people on hand to take the calls, responses will be lost. Few people who do not get through will call back.

Automated call handling systems are available which can take some or all of the calls, but these also have disadvantages. Some callers will hang up rather than talk to a machine. A live person is better at answering questions the caller may have and can use the call to 'up sell', encourage the caller to give more or to give through regular means such as direct debit.

Fulfilment and pledge conversion

Most of today's DRTV campaigns will involve something being sent out to responders, even if it is just a thank-you letter. For the regular giving campaigns that form the majority of charity DRTV in the UK and Ireland, the responder (unless they agree to a paperless direct debit) will receive a form to sign to set up their regular gift. There is often a substantial percentage of people who respond to such advertisements who never return the form. A campaign will need a reminder element (post and/or outbound telemarketing) to follow up such people.

Paperless direct debits (PDDs), since

their introduction in the UK in 1999 have had a significant impact on the cost-effectiveness of regular giving DRTV advertisements. Prior to the introduction of PDDs, it was common for 40 per cent or even more of regular giving pledge responses from DRTV campaigns to fail to convert into standing order or direct debit forms returned to the charity. PDDs that can be set up over the telephone or internet have reduced this wastage substantially with 80–85 per cent of responders who agree to give by direct debit setting up the gifts using paperless direct debits.

THINGS TO TEST

The essence of successful DRTV advertising is to deconstruct each part of the process and test each to find out what works and what does not. There is an almost inexhaustible list of aspects to test, some of which follow.

Creative tests

- Creative concept
- Proposition
- Script
- Ask levels
- Captions/Graphics
- Film sequences
- Timelengths
- Music
- Voice-overs
 - Gender
 - Tone of voice
 - Accent
- Celebrity vs no celebrity.

Media tests

- Channels
- Macros
- Dayparts
- Position in break

- Consecutive breaks
- Top and tailing.

Response tests

- Local vs freephone numbers
- Different numbers
- Different response mechanisms.

Testing each separately and then in combination gives an enormous potential variety of advertisements. Concern, for example, in two years produced over 150 different advertisement versions with differences as minor as a telephone number changed.

Testing is essential to the successful use of DRTV. This is one of the reasons why having a relatively low entry level cost for the campaign is so important. If an advertisement has been made for a few thousand pounds, some of the money saved can be used for tests of some of the key variables that might influence response.

TEN-POINT GUIDE TO MAKING DRTV WORK

The most important things to remember about making DRTV work can be summarised in the following ten points:

- *Do not let objectives be clouded.* Do not make a hybrid advertisement to please other parts of the organisation, trying to mix response and branding objectives. In DRTV, response is the beginning, middle and end.
- *The fundraiser is not making art.* Creativity is important but it must always be related directly to response objectives.
- *Television is just another medium and DRTV is just another fundraising mechanism.* It is necessary to understand the mechanics of how it works and decipher the jargon, but with a good

grasp of the essentials of fundraising there will be no problem with DRTV.

- *Start with what is known.* If there is already a proposition which works in other media, start with that.
- *Understand the process.* Do not become a prisoner of agencies with their received wisdom. Fundraisers understand their charity and their cause better than any agency. There are no real experts in charity DRTV, everyone is learning as they go and things change continually. If time is spent learning how DRTV works it will be possible to have much more control over whether it works.
- *Remember who the audience is.* Keep the target audience in mind at all times. Do not make an advertisement the fundraisers or the chief executive like; they are not the target market.
- *Do not start with a Rolls Royce.* The more expensive the advertisement, the higher the barrier to clear to achieve success has been set. The lower the production costs, the easier it is to make changes and to test different components.
- *Do not expect to get it right first time.* Look at what happens and learn from this. Try to understand why the advertisement succeeded or failed. Use all the information available — response data, formal and informal feedback — and consider organising market research to understand why people responded or did not respond. Make changes, then try again.
- *It is more than making an advertisement.* At least as much attention should be

paid to the other elements of the process: media planning, scheduling, response handling and results analysis.

- Fundraisers will not know whether DRTV will work for their charity until they have tried it. If there is already a fundraising proposition that works in other media, there is no reason to think DRTV cannot succeed for a charity. But there is only one way to find out.

CONCLUSION

With rapid technological change, there may well be no such thing as DRTV in ten years' time. There will be direct response fundraising in the multichannel world, however, and the principles will be the same. If charities manage to crack DRTV, the multichannel future should hold no fears for them.

Television advertising can appear mysterious and frightening to those new to it but the basics are straightforward enough and most people will have little difficulty grasping them. Just like fundraising, in fact.

In DRTV the creative is extremely important. But successful DRTV is much more than just a powerful advertisement.

Moreover, the creative concept is less critical than the proposition, what the charity is about. The charity must have a cause which can be expressed succinctly which motivates people to give it money. Once it has this, everything else is just a mechanic which enables the charity to ask for money. The mechanic is important and needs to be understood, but the cause is what makes it work.