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Good causes

# When you're mugged in a good cause

Despite bad press, fund-raising in the street works, says Nick Kettles

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[The Observer](#)



Plans announced in the Queen's speech to control alleged abuses by the new breed of charity muggers, or 'chuggers', canvassing on the streets for regular donors, seemed to confirm the view that these fundraisers are nothing more than an extra urban nuisance.



But despite unfavourable media headlines about this newest branch of the fundraising industry, complaints against chuggers ran at just 0.014 per cent of interactions - just under 1,000 out of about 7 million - in 2002, according to the Professional Fundraising Regulatory Association (PFRA). The organisation, which was formally established in 2000 to implement best practice for face-to-face fundraisers, represents 19 professional fundraising organisations and 110 charities. But do these people indignant enough to put pen to paper or pick up the phone represent the silent majority?



Recent research by Charity Monitor reveals only 6 per cent of British adults choose to sign up to a direct debit via a paid street or doorstep fundraiser as the first or even second preference out of 10 methods of charitable giving. Thirty one per cent placed face-to-face fundraising tenth, and it was least popular among people over 65. Maybe those who politely refuse chuggers hide their disdain, or maybe they read the headlines.

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The PFRA commissioned some independent mystery shoppers to assess face-to-face fundraisers against the PFRA Code of Practice.

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The survey undertook 300 sign-ups to 31 different charities. Of these, 296 encounters were described as 'friendly and courteous'. Crucially, fundraisers made it clear they are paid whenever asked and highlighted this issue without prompting in a further 72 per cent of cases. Under the 1992 Charities act failure to make this declaration is a criminal offence. Clearly, chuggers weren't holding the pen while 690,000 signed on the dotted line last year. However, three fundraisers tried to 'guilt-trip' people into signing and six were described as 'pushy' when the shopper declined to sign.

What are we to make of this? That 1-2 per cent of chuggers are responsible for face-to-face fundraising's pushy profile? It's quite possible they have informed recent headlines. The Charity Commission says, however, that it gets complaints about all fundraising methods. Face-to-face may be unpopular with some, but it's a valuable source of revenue for charities, particularly from younger givers, who, charities say, have previously been unreceptive to other methods.

Some say it's played a key role in stopping the decline in fundraising over the past 20 years. Breakthrough Breast Cancer says street fundraising has been the most successful way of attracting new regular supporters. The National Deaf Children's Society raises 60 per cent of its income in this way. Age Concern says it is one of the best ways of raising awareness of local services while attracting committed supporters at low cost.

The remaining challenge is communication. Lesley Boswell, chief executive of the Institute of Fundraising, says: 'Charities need to find some way of explaining to core supporters that face-to-face is an absolutely essential way of getting regular donations from the under-35s and so ensuring the future of the charity.'

If the public realised that the 690,000 people who signed up last year will be worth almost a quarter of a billion pounds over the next five years, they might offer face-to-face fundraisers a friendly smile. And indeed, if they realise that what the fund-raising agencies get paid amounts to less than 15 per cent of the total lifetime value of the direct debit, they might even raise a cheer.

The UK's big charities do not enter into contractual agreements without checking the small print first. Some even commit the agency to pay part of the direct debit for people who renege on their commitment. All the main agencies used by the big charities have signed up to the IoF's code of practice as implemented by the PFRA. Furthermore, face-to-face fundraising will be covered by law for the first time in the new Charities Bill. The aims include a requirement to ensure that chuggers tell potential donors how much of their money is to be used to pay the hiring costs of the fundraiser and to stop charities competing on the same patches.



The legislation should free the PFRA to fulfil its role in the allocation of face-to-face fundraisers and create a level playing field. Maybe then charities will attempt new, less obvious locations. Joel Voysey from Amnesty International says they have successfully used London's theatreland to promote their work to protect artists and playwrights suffering abuses in their homelands. The RNLI only targets coastal towns. We might welcome the British Heart Foundation at major sporting events.

It may be called the voluntary sector, but fundraising has been a professional business for a long time. Chuggers are here to stay, providing they can refrain from invading our all-important private space. That, it seems, is worth more than their cause.



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