



Research: Driving Social Change

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In the spring of 2013, I made the conscious decision to enter the non-profit world. I had little to inform my decision other than it felt right, and that was enough at the time. I had spent 15 years in marketing research; the first six years at Ipsos ASI, the rest with OpenVenue (which evolved to become Research Now). I believe I understood the basics of what drove marketing research and the innovation behind emerging technologies in the sector. The sector gave me a lot and I'm grateful, but it was time to move on.

Having always worked in a client-centric environment, I knew that what I enjoyed the most about my work was interacting with people. I was drawn to philanthropy and the charitable sector because of its altruistic focus on people, but I was also very aware that I didn't know, what I didn't know – so I started to work towards filling in the gaps of my knowledge.

I researched and sought out people who worked in the sector to engage them in conversation – yes, through good old-fashioned cold calling and networking. Coming from a sales-oriented working environment, I was surprised by the warm reception I received. Of course, when I called I wasn't asking for a job, I was asking for insight and advice to support my career transition. And I received it; 2013 was one of my best summers ever. I believe there are key insights for research professionals to consider beyond research reporting for this sector.

I started at United Way Toronto as a fundraiser in the fall of 2013. I was intrigued by the myriad of facts to assimilate and absorb the import of. Did you know that there are 85,000 registered charities in Canada? We have the second largest non-profit sector in the world (the Netherlands leads, the U.S. is fifth)¹. Every year, the sector adds around \$80

billion and two million jobs to the Canadian economy². Non-profits rely on a staggering 13 million volunteers who contribute over two billion hours of their time annually³ – equivalent to a million full-time jobs. One of the hardest to recruit segments in the marketing research world is 15-to-24-year-olds, yet they are the most likely to volunteer⁴ for a charitable cause.

While the statistics were interesting in themselves, I was surprised by the amount of compelling research and the key role it has in providing direction at United Way today. While by no means an expert on the role of research in the non-profit sector, I can clearly see how research has resulted in seminal reports which have driven United Way Toronto's strategic direction over the past two decades. United Way's role is that of advocate and trusted partner to its constituents – city residents, social service workers, charitable agency leaders, civic leaders and the corporate sector. United Way also raises funds to provide near-term support for its charitable partners and agencies.

Ultimately the United Way works to increase its impact by driving much needed, long-term, systemic social change. Advocacy is key for this as it helps shape investment strategies. I believe it would be accurate to say that at the United Way, research has literally driven the agenda for social change. In 2002, the United Way published *A Decade of Decline*⁵, a foundational report on the sharp growth of poverty, which directly impacted United Way's strategic plan (2003) and subsequent research direction. *Poverty by Postal Code* followed in 2004, leading to the Building Strong Neighbourhoods Strategy in 2005. In-depth research has continuously informed subsequent strategic plans and has almost always been the result of a collaborative effort between partners. For example, *It's More*

than Poverty (2013), explores employment precariousness. United Way was a key partner in the research group producing this report, comprising representatives from universities and community groups.

The work behind these reports is an education on how to successfully partner with community groups, charitable agencies, as well as federal, provincial and municipal groups, to drive unarguably important social change. The impact of research has been to bring into sharp focus the complex, evolving social issues at play, and to bring all constituent groups together to develop action plans to reverse negative trends. It's working.

A step back: Since Canada's charitable sector is large and well established, you could well be thinking that it is getting more than enough help already, but this is not at all the case. It is worth noting that United Way Toronto, as an example, receives no operating funding. So, almost all charities find it necessary to raise funds to continue their work. Fundraising as a function within the charitable sector has consequently grown in importance over the past 20 years. Charities will include fundraising as a key part of an executive director's role (most people wear many hats). If you're a larger non-profit organization, you might be in the fortunate position to have a fundraiser (or two). Either way, fundraising is a requisite for all charities to pursue their mission and continue their good work.

I believe that non-profits play an invaluable incremental role to augment government programs and services. This is true in health care and education, as well as social services and community development. Many people I have met and work with have moved into a non-profit career from other professional areas, with backgrounds as varied as finance, publishing and pharmaceutical sales. Pro bono consulting can help in a sector where budget resources are stretched thin. But you don't have to work in the non-profit sector to support it. There are many other ways to give back both personally and professionally.

Donate, if you can. Every one of us has something or someone that we care passionately about. If you already donate to your cause – good for you! If you feel the desire to give more, or if you haven't already donated, find a charity that speaks to you and your cause. Research it, and ensure it is transparent and ethical in its practices. Then give. It may be helpful to know that in 2013, the Government of Canada introduced a Super Credit on top of the Charitable Donations Tax Credit for those who haven't donated to a charity in the last five years⁶. If you need information on the right questions to ask before choosing a charity, Imagine Canada has a great little document called *Guide to Giving*⁷ and a balanced, factual online resource called Charity Focus⁸.

Volunteer, if you can. This doesn't just mean stuffing envelopes for the next direct mail campaign at the nearest charity or helping at your neighbourhood hospital. Your professional skills are valuable. All 85,000 charities in Canada need board members to help govern them – and they're always chronically short of volunteers to contribute their expertise. Ask around or check out BoardMatch⁹ or Volunteer Canada¹⁰ to find out about opportunities that best suit you. It's estimated that 25 per cent of all charity boards are in need of a board member right now. That's over 21,000 charity boards that are

looking to secure support from professional leaders who can help them effect change.

Look inward at your own workplace and work to reinforce or establish a caring corporate giving program. The importance of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in business is growing¹¹. Find out which social issues resonate with your workplace environment and then design programs that give your staff time to volunteer and give back. Corporate donations are a much needed sustainer of charities in Canada. Showing staff that social involvement is important to their organization is a good engagement and retention strategy.

Look outward at partnering with your clients on their CSR priorities. Consider creating a rebate program that gives a percentage of billings back to your client's charity. You build a stronger business relationship, potentially having a significant social impact and raise funds for a good cause. Cause – a “both win” scenario. Also, encouraging your staff to volunteer for charitable causes that your clients support, just makes sense.

For me, working within a non-profit environment is an extremely rewarding experience. Almost a year into learning and networking within the sector, and now working within it, I feel at home. I find it welcoming and diverse – a good representation of the Toronto I know and care about, actually. For those of us who work in the non-profit sector, I believe we do so because we can see the immediate personal impact of giving. That's certainly why I do it. There is always room for more.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.” – Margaret Mead

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- 1 Imagine Canada: <http://www.imaginecanada.ca/node/32>
 - 2 Charity Focus resources: <http://www.charityfocus.ca/EN/Pages/Home.aspx>
 - 3 Statistics Canada, *Volunteering in Canada*: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-008-x/2012001/article/11638-eng.htm#a3>
 - 4 Imagine Canada, *Understanding Volunteers*: http://www.imaginecanada.ca/files/www/en/giving/reports/understanding_volunteers.pdf
 - 5 United Way Toronto research reports: <http://www.unitedwaytoronto.com/whatWeDo/reports/main.php>
 - 6 CRA Super Credit: <http://www.cra-arc.gc.ca/gncy/bdgt/2013/qa01-eng.html#q2>
 - 7 Imagine Canada, *Guide to Giving*: <http://www.imaginecanada.ca/node/278>
 - 8 Charity Focus: <http://www.charityfocus.ca/EN/Pages/Home.aspx>
 - 9 BoardMatch: <http://www.boardmatch.org/BoardMatch/Content/Home.aspx>
 - 10 Volunteer Canada: <http://volunteer.ca/>
 - 11 University of Toronto, *The Rising Importance of CSR*: <http://www.research.utoronto.ca/corporate-social-responsibility/>
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