



## Beyond posh coffee: what charities can learn from design agencies

**From websites to business cards, designers can transform how charities and social enterprises work. Here's why it's worth the investment**

**Matt Saunders is founder and editor, Design is Political**

*Matt Saunders*

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Charities are notorious for not keeping up with technology. This is understandable: it's easier to see quick results spending money supporting service users than upgrading IT systems or developing a new website.

Design agencies, by contrast, live in a different world. I've worked as a digital designer for more than 10 years and I can tell you that the stories about creative workspaces, flashy Macbook Pros and "posh coffees" are all true.

But for all those differences, designers have the potential to transform the ways charities and social enterprises do their work.

Whether it's IT infrastructure, a new website, a social media campaign or even flyers and business cards – good design is an extremely important investment. It may appear costly in the short term, but its value is felt for months and years after.

By pooling their skills, knowledge and experience, designers and charities could reshape society. Here are some practical tips on how to develop relationships with creative teams.

## **Do your research**

Some design agencies go out of their way to state the type of organisations they prefer to work with. If you're a charity looking to hire a designer, take the time to examine their values as well as their portfolio. Ensuring your values are closely aligned should be as high up your list as you can afford it to be. mySociety and Reason Digital are two examples of creative teams engaged in work for the improvement of society in some way, and have each produced some highly effective products, such as TheyWorkForYou and Be a Legend for Teenage Cancer Trust.

## **Be clear on pro bono offerings**

Some agencies work with charities on a pro bono basis. While this is well-intentioned, it can have drawbacks, potentially resulting in sub-par work and missed deadlines.

Remember that pro bono means “for the public good” not “free” - the difference can get lost in translation if both sides are not clear about this from the outset.

Similarly, do not accept or request work on the basis of “gaining experience” or portfolio building. This is a poor way to start a mutually beneficial relationship.

## **Encourage consultation**

A good creative team, even one working on a relatively small budget, should build in some consultation time with both the charity's stakeholders and its service users, if this is appropriate. This cannot be overstated, as the team behind Samaritans Radar found out in 2014 when they deployed an app with the best of intentions, only to discover it was unfit for purpose. Knowledge is power, and only by understanding exactly what the charity is trying to do and who they are trying to help can designers come up with appropriate suggestions.

## **Have a goal, but not necessarily a path**

Designers are problem-solvers at heart. While collaboration will often yield the best results, it's sometimes appropriate to be comfortable letting go of the reins and enabling the design team to lead. They might make some bold and unexpected suggestions, but trusting these decisions is important to developing a lasting relationship.

## **It's never over**

The awkward truth about digital is that the work is never complete. A website is never finished. A social media campaign is always under constant review. Understanding this is crucial to making your project and relationship a success. A good design team will work on this basis from the outset, so don't be afraid to question fixed costs and fixed deadlines, because in this industry things are rarely fixed.

In essence, working with designers should be considered a work in progress. These relationships are hard to forge but can be truly rewarding - and make a real difference - when a good balance is struck.

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