**SMILE TRAIN DONORS *NOT* SMILING**

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**Introduction**

“Big fat liars!” Sean thought angrily as he checked his mail. He was disgusted to find yet another solicitation from Smile Train. Ten months ago Sean had donated $50 to Smile Train, intrigued when the charity had promised that “Make one gift now and we’ll never ask for another donation again.” Sean, like most individuals, had limited funds available, so he tried to do the most good possible with the money he had for charity. Smile Train focused on treating children with cleft palates around the world. Sean realized that children with this disfiguring condition could had greatly improved lives by receiving corrective surgery and believed his donation would have value. Sean’s donation had been made almost a year ago and he had received over a dozen mailings since then. He felt that the charity had betrayed his trust and not kept their word. It also made Sean wonder whether his donation had actually benefitted the children. Where had his money gone? Were other donors having the same problems with Smile Train? Sean was no expert, but he believed that Smile Train needed to change their promotional appeal.

**Background**

Smile Train was founded in 1999 and based in New York City. The charity was formed with one primary mission—to train local medical professionals to provide surgical repairs to poor patients suffering with a cleft lip and/or palate. In October 2012, *Forbes* listed Smile Train as number 73 in its list of ‘The 100 Largest U.S. Charities’ (“The 100 Largest,” 2012). To date, Smile Train had helped fund more than 930,000 surgeries in 87 developing countries (SmileTrain.org, 2013). Smile Train relied on local doctors to provide 100% free care to patients. In addition, the charity also worked with partner hospitals to assist in education and training opportunities.

Smile Train had over 1,100 partner hospitals and 2,300 partner surgeons representing the world’s poorest nations. Through these partnerships, Smile Train was able to provide more than 125,000 free surgeries for children per year. Smile Train started with China and India (with over half a million total surgeries performed in these two countries to date), then expanded into Africa. The charity also helped to create the Pan African Congress on Cleft Lip and Palate as well as sponsoring symposiums to focus on the need for improved anesthesia and post-operative care.

Smile Train had not limited partnerships solely to hospitals and physicians. To improve health care safety and quality at its partner hospitals, Smile Train had partnered with organizations such as the World Health Organization, Lifebox, and the World Federation of Societies of Anesthesiologists. In addition, corporate partnerships with companies such as Estee Lauder, Mars Retail Group, FedEx and Dubai Duty Free helped raise both money and awareness.

In 2009, Smile Train received positive publicity for sponsoring a documentary entitled *Smile Pinki*, which won the 2008 Oscar for Best Documentary (Short Subject). The story portrayed a poor girl from rural India and how a free surgery from Smile Train had life-changing effects for her. The Smile Train website offered free copies of this documentary film upon request. In other efforts to promote the mission of the organization, a number of celebrities and world leaders pledged varying forms of support for Smile Train. The list included such well-known individuals as Christie Brinkley, George H. W. Bush, Dean Cain, Stephen Colbert, Walter Cronkite, Howie Mandel, Reba McEntire, Bette Midler, General Colin Powell, and Hilary Swank (SmileTrain.org, 2013).

The Smile Train press kit cited a quote from *New York Times Magazine* that Smile Train was “one of the most productive charities, dollar for deed, in the world” (Dubner & Levitt, 2008). Smile Train used this quote heavily in many of its promotional appeals.

**Controversy**

Smile Train had come under some criticism in recent years. Although the Better Business Bureau (BBB) listed Smile Train as an accredited charity that met all 20 standards for charity accountability, multiple complaints had been made against the organization in the last 36 months. Each of the 21 complaints processed by the BBB in the last 36 months was for Smile Train not removing individuals’ names off the mailing list when requested (Better Business Bureau, 2011). Even the American Institute of Philanthropy labeled Smile Train as a B rated charity, partly for this same reason (C[harityWatch.org](http://www.charitywatch.org), 2010). Considering many individuals do not complain to the BBB, it was highly likely that the actual number of individuals receiving Smile Train advertising after requesting to be removed was much higher. Some recent consumer reviews of Smile Train, posted on [greatnonprofits.org](http://www.greatnonprofits.org) (2014), stated that:

* “Since making a modest contribution over a year ago, I had been bombarded by Smile Train for more donations! The calls and letters began over 8 months ago, and despite my numerous requests that they stop contacting me, the phone calls now occur every other day or daily.”
* “I made a donation to Smile Train about 10 months ago. I have been bombarded with constant emails and mail requesting more donations…I wrote them a letter asking them to take me off of their list and got another letter a couple of weeks later. This is a more than once a month, more like 3 times a month maybe 4 times request via mail for more donations…I will never donate again to them fearing that this constant barrage will start all over again.”
* “Gave $$ to this "charity" from solicitation that said "give money now and we'll never contact you again". What a LIE! We gave them $$ and within a few weeks had 3 more letters asking for more. We were finally able to contact them...not an easy task...and asked to be removed...still got a letter every month for a long time...now I see they are advertising on-line...this organization does not respect their donors.”

Besides the BBB complaints and consumer reviews, Smile Train had also been criticized for its financials. *Forbes* (“The 100 Largest,” 2012) listed the fundraising efficiency of Smile Train as being 82% (the percent of private donations remaining after fundraising expenses). For 2012, the fundraising costs were approximately 17% (SmileTrain.com, 2013). For comparison, the Give Kids a Smile organization, an A+ Charity and a BBB Accredited Charity, whose stated purpose was “to provide quality comprehensive dental services to impoverished and underserved children with limited or no access to care” had fundraising expenses of only 6.78% (Better Business Bureau, 2013). Furthermore, one of the promotional appeals used by Smile Train was “How Often Do You Get The Chance To Save A Child’s Life for $250?” (SmileTrain.org, 2013); however, the financials, shown in Table 1 below, don’t necessarily support this figure, based on the number of surgeries reported (number of surgeries in 2012 totaled approximately 122,500).

Table 1: 2012 Financials from Smile Train’s Annual Report

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| **Revenue** | | **Expenses** | |
| Contributions | $113,825,537 | Treatment/Training | $100,483,656 |
| Contributions In-Kind | $49,272,637 | Public Education | $32,091,773 |
| Investment Income | $9,229,573 | Administration and Overhead | $1,911,078 |
| Other Income | $2,657,468 | Fundraising | $27,637,799 |
| **Total Revenue** | **$174,985,215** | **Total Expenses** | **$162,124,306** |

After this research, Sean was extremely frustrated with Smile Train and found himself questioning why he should support them or any other charity. Was the Smile Train organization ethical in its promotional appeal or was it just a gimmick? He thought that if other donors had a similar experience with Smile Train they were likely angry too. Had his money even been used to benefit the children? Sean felt like he’d been lied to by Smile Train and didn’t believe the charity should continue to make the claim that “Make one gift now and we’ll never ask for another donation again.”

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