

# HARD TIMES



CHARITIES' ONLINE REPORTS AND ACCOUNTS ARE A GATEWAY TO A WORLD OF NEW SUPPORTERS. SO 'WHY ARE CHARITIES NOT MAKING THE MOST OF THE WEB?' ASK THE JUDGES IN THE 2009 CHARITIES ONLINE ACCOUNTS AWARDS

**O**n the whole, people in the UK are pretty generous when it comes to charity. Last year, according to research by the Charities Aid Foundation, in a typical month 28m people – 56% of the population – made a donation, while the average monthly amount they donated was £33. Businesses were also generous – contributing £1.4bn in 2007/2008.

This year, however, tells a different story. The ongoing recession continues to have an impact and the UK's 190,000 registered charities are finding themselves chasing a reducing pool of funds. They are having to rely on imaginative and innovative ways to persuade donors to part with their cash. And it's not as if there is a dearth of ideas out there.

In November last year, for example, eBay and its charity partner MissionFish, launched a new feature on eBay enabling buyers to donate small sums to charities when buying goods. The average donation was £4.50 and amounted to £700,000 in just six months. According to MissionFish this was popular 'because it's just a small donation and it's a bit less scary than signing a direct debit form in the street'.

The internet is clearly one of the most potent and cost-effective ways of getting charities' messages across. Yet, according to the panel of judges of this year's ICAEW/CAF Charities' Online Accounts Awards, it is surprising how comparatively few charities have used the technology to plead their cause in innovative and attention-grabbing ways.

'I was disappointed by the lack of progress in improving the web presentation of charities' reports and accounts over the year,' says panel chair Graham Ward. 'They are not paying sufficient attention to making their website interesting and accessible.'

## SMALLEST MOST INNOVATIVE

Interestingly, the judging panel says, it's the smallest charities that consistently come up with the most innovative and impressive designs and use of hyperlinking and html, despite their budgetary constraints.

The judges also detected an increase in the number of charities giving more thought to the annual review, although most still produced the accounts – arguably the most important section – in a dull, dry way.

'Given the economic downturn, it's more important than ever that charities are capable of demonstrating their financial accountability,' Ward says. 'When people have less to give, they will be more discerning about where they place their money. Being able to show that you are using those funds as efficiently as possible is becoming increasingly important.'

'The challenge for charities is how to bring the financial statements to life and link them to tangible activities and case studies in the annual review.'

'Charities must remember that their websites are a means of telling the world what you stand for and where you are heading in a way that will have a direct impact on your ability to secure funds.'

## THE WINNERS

### Top 100

- 1st The British Heart Foundation
- 2nd Cancer Research UK

### Income over £2m

- 1st The British Library
- 2nd The National Trust

### Income £500,000 – £2m

- 1st Charity Finance Directors' Group
- 2nd Hilton in the Community Foundation

### Income £100,000 – £500,000

- 1st Cecily's Fund
- 2nd National Association for Gifted Children

### Income below £100,000

- 1st Mexborough & Swinton Astronomical Society
- 2nd Chesterfield Philharmonic Choir

## CLEAR SKY THINKING



If you want to know whether the skies tonight will be clear enough to do a bit of star-spotting, all you have to do is visit the Mexborough and Swinton Astronomical Society's website. It's packed full of fascinating facts – like the different timings for astronomical and nautical twilight, sunrise and moonset, offers click-throughs to other interesting websites such as the International Year of Astronomy 2009, and boasts a gallery of stunning photographs.

Given the size of the society – its annual income last year was just over £6,500 – the website is surprisingly good. But the society has a dedicated

membership, says secretary Shaun O'Dell, who take the attitude that if they don't possess the skills required, they will go out and acquire them. Indeed, the society's 40-odd members designed the observatory which the society owns and runs in South Yorkshire and more recently, designed and built a new dome for it. 'We are all keen amateurs and we are very motivated and hard-working.'

Website design is one of those member-acquired skills. The three responsible for the website all work in IT but none are web designers. They have been learning as they have gone along, updating the site, now in its fourth generation, in

a process that O'Dell describes as 'like painting the Forth Road Bridge'.

It's not the first time the society has been short-listed for the awards – last year it was runner-up – and O'Dell finds the process invaluable. 'We take the feedback from the scrutineers very seriously and it has driven us to rethink how we present the accounts. We also look at what other winners are doing on their websites to see how we can improve ours.'

**Visit [www.msas.org.uk](http://www.msas.org.uk) for more information about the charity.**

## APPEALING TO THE iPLAYER GENERATION

If you click on any of the three individuals featured on the British Library's online report and accounts homepage, they come to life and talk animatedly about the importance of the UK national library to their work and the help they received. The figures include Costa prize-winning novelist Stef Penney, whose book, *The Tenderness of Wolves*, was set in Canada, a country she had never visited but was able to research in depth at the library.

At the same time, you can also find out more about Canadian literature by clicking on the picture of Canada and Caribbean curator Dorian Hayes, explore a historic map of Canada and listen to a recording of wolves howling.

These are just a few examples of the website's imaginative use of multimedia to get across the message about the library's aims and objectives. 'You can convey more in a two-minute video, intercut with sound and different backgrounds, than you can in three times as many words,' says senior press officer Ben Sanderson, who led the project to improve access to the online report and accounts when he was seconded last year to corporate communications.

The website – which allows access to highlights from the Library's collection of 14m books, 920,000 journal and newspaper titles, 58m patents and 3m sound recordings – has developed over three years and, says Sanderson, is 'a genuine team effort'.

'We wanted to take the next step and produce something that would resonate with the YouTube and iPlayer generation, while also demonstrating the

difference the British Library makes to hundreds of thousands of users annually.'

**Visit [www.bl.uk/knowledge](http://www.bl.uk/knowledge) for more information about the charity.**



## THE JUDGES' TOP TIPS

- Quick access to online reports is essential – ideally in three clicks or through the site's search engine.
- Check for basic omissions. However good your report is, these will cause it to fail at the first hurdle. Failure to sign the accounts is the most common cause for exclusion.
- Help get your message across with 'at a glance' summaries. Give readers a snapshot of key achievements, comparatives and illustrations of how the finances link to comparatives. Show how you achieve value for money.
- Adopt a simple approach to narrative reporting – 'this is what we said we'd do, this is what we've done and this is what we'll do next'.
- Reconfigure your reports to html rather than rely on extensive use of pdfs or cutting and pasting. If you insist on pdfs, break them up and provide the information page by page. No sponsor will visit your site if they can't choose the bits they want to read, there are too many pages on screen or the pdf is so huge, their system crashes.
- Security is vital. Protect your data.

**The annual Charity Online Accounting Awards recognise those charity reports and accounts which have demonstrated the highest levels of accuracy and transparency, and which communicate most effectively with their beneficiaries, donors and stakeholders. For more information, visit [www.icaew.com/charityawards](http://www.icaew.com/charityawards)**