

STRONGER
ROOTS

The Stronger Roots Program

Case Study:
DEDO Foundation

How feedback from constituents shaped DEDO Foundation's strategy towards advocacy

DEDO Foundation decided to create a communication strategy based on abstract concepts and values, without using personal stories of homelessness. This case study shows how they reached this conclusion, how they used focus groups to find out whether their intuition was right, and how the new approach changed not only their own work, but how they are perceived by municipal and other partners.

DEDO Foundation operates in Košice, supporting children and families at risk of homelessness with tailor-made solutions, following the Housing First approach. They give families in need the opportunity for housing and provide professional support to accompany them in resolving their situation, as well as working towards increasing children's chances of a full life with a family background and a safe home. DEDO also supports young

people leaving children's homes, helping them to study and develop work skills through scholarships, as well as providing facilities in half-way homes during their preparation for independent living.

WHAT THE INTUITION TOLD US ABOUT THE DANGERS OF PERSONAL STORIES

Society (and marketing experts) expect you to tell stories. Stories are easier to understand and relate to. However, sometimes they might not be the way to go. The staff of DEDO had an intuitive feeling against telling the personal stories of homeless people, their clients. They felt that storytelling, based on showing poor living conditions, may create prejudice and negative notions about people who do not want pity. They felt that this would hinder their goals: systematic change, as described in the Housing First approach, which shows housing as a human right.

As the first step in defining the narratives they want to strengthen their communication, DEDO wanted to understand how their clients, donors, partners and the public sees their cause (ending homelessness and helping those in housing poverty). As a first step, they organized focus groups. (See toolbox for more details). The feedback from these four focus groups had multiple, useful takeaways and major implications on how DEDO conducted their communication from then on.

BEING OPEN TO FIND OUT HOW YOU ARE REALLY VIEWED

The first group was their clients, the homeless people they work with, who do not perceive themselves as homeless people. They did not want the public's pity. The voices and opinions of their clients were a priority to DEDO, and after their clients' opinions became clear, DEDO were sure they would have to abandon using personal stories.

The second group, that of the donors, surprised them, as the donors were familiar with the housing first concept. This made DEDO more confident in communicating this, more complex narrative approach. The city municipality was also surprisingly understanding of the situation, which suggested a good foundation for cooperation in the future. The last group, the public's opinion, did

not surprise them, as it reflected the prejudices that are associated with homelessness.

In connection to this result, DEDO decided to build their communication on facts. They now speak about the solution of homelessness of families as a systemic solution. Through their communication, they do not try to raise resentment with the target group or evoke emotions through using children in their campaign (which is currently a common practice).

Even before, DEDO had not done much storytelling. But with the feedback from the focus groups, they had hard evidence: the clients themselves don't want to be shown this way, and donors and the city understood the more systematic human rights based approach. *"This solidified our transformation from a service-oriented organization to an advocacy organization working towards a systemic change. Instead of stories, we want to focus on data and solutions."*

TURNING STRATEGY TO REALITY: FROM SERVICE TO ADVOCACY

The change of narrative and approach was hard as the society (and PR experts) expect you to create stories. But their endgame is changing laws, and they saw that these stories did

not support that. Now, they are in line with this new narrative: focus on the systematic problem, give data, give solutions. Their fundraising also changed as a result. DEDO approached the businesses with communicating a need to create solid beautiful homes. Something that was hard to explain, since some may think their clients just need some old furniture. DEDO also decided to approach a new target group, middle-class people with real estate property who could rent out their flats and houses.

Based on the output from these groups, DEDO also created a crowdfunding campaign, which, until the end of 2020, brought in a part of the funds for the equipment and furnishings of housing units for 10 families. Regardless of the financial effect it brought, the team evaluated this as a good campaign from the communication perspective, based on feedback from the general public, the media, and an increased number of fans. Their aim was to communicate the human rights aspect of homelessness, which was a new thing in their local context, a fundamental change of style and discourse. *“We knew from the very beginning that we didn’t want to choose the path of pictures of teary-eyed children and certain emotional blackmailing. We are very glad that this*

project enabled us to go the other way, in a moral and more professional direction.”

Besides the campaign, they are already more prominently represented on the map of organizations dedicated to Housing First, and are starting to be recognized and understood not just as a charity organization. Their partnerships have also improved: municipality representatives and officials know their work better, they were also approached by the City of Košice and the KVP district, who chose DEDO as the recipient of a large food donation before Christmas, as they said, based on their professional work and multidisciplinary support to the families.

LEARNING POINTS:

- Don’t be afraid of a complicated-looking focus group study with many different target groups, the results are worth the work.
- When in doubt, asking your primary target group will lead you back to your core, and can solve the dilemmas you might have. Respect what they say or ask for.

Toolbox:

Efficient focus group to better understand how others see you cause

This was DEDO Foundation's first experience with focus groups, but they benefited from having an employee with a PhD in linguistics. The primary goal was to better understand how others perceive their topic.

After they defined the goal, they needed to pick a moderator. They agreed it had to be someone external and found an expert to do it. The key was to ask the right questions. They consulted this with a Czech partner organization (Platforma pro sociální bydlení) who also uses the Housing first approach, as well as the moderator. One question was whether to also ask about their organization, but after a consultancy with a PR agency, they were advised to focus on the topic, since the organization does not have a solid "market" position yet to be perceived well.

They agreed on 3 questions:

1. Who is, in your opinion, a homeless person?
2. How should the government, companies and the public react to / deal with homelessness?
3. What do you see as benefits and drawbacks of the Housing First approach?

They agreed that the *optimal length* is 90 minutes and there should be just 5 participants so that everyone has plenty of time to speak. The moderator should keep to a strict schedule so that everyone could speak their mind.

The next question was participants. They agreed on doing

4 focus groups with

4 target groups that are important for them:

1. The public (neighbours of their families, people on social media)
2. The city and city district officials

3. Partners and donors

4. Their clients (homeless families)

They tried to create a representative sample (diverse people by sex, age) and pick only talkative participants. They actively invited people and recruited them through an online questionnaire. The motivation of participants was very different. Especially with companies and donors, it was hard to get in contact with them as they are quite busy, and some did not even know DEDO Foundation. With city officials it was easier, they were often motivated, but some were also directed to attend the meeting. The public were proactively signing up for the focus groups. Due to the pandemic, they had to do the focus groups online (it was originally supposed to be offline). They also recorded the focus groups.

Tips for others:

1. Do not overthink it. DEDO were quite scared of how it would turn out, but their worries were unfounded.
2. It was crucial to have well-formulated questions and choose talkative participants.
3. Choose participants only from target groups with whom you work with.

This case study was written as a part of the Stronger Roots Program.

The Stronger Roots Program aims to increase the resilience of civil society organizations and their networks, strengthen their social capital and embed them in the communities and societies in which they operate. It is implemented by Open Society Fund Prague, the NIOK Foundation, Open Society Foundation Bratislava and Glopolis.

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