

Imagine Canada's Sector Monitor

Factsheet 2, Vol. 1, No. 3: Public Awareness and Policy Activity, Top-line Summary

Figure 1: Generalized information-related activities are the most common form of activity.

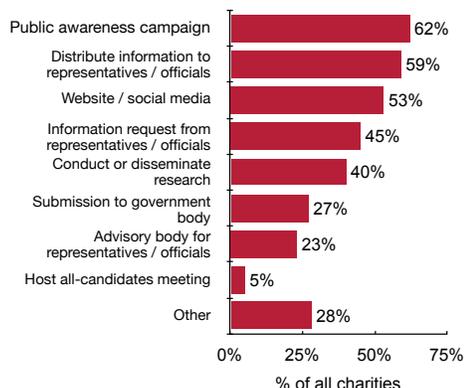


Figure 2: Charitable activities most commonly involve provincial and municipal governments.

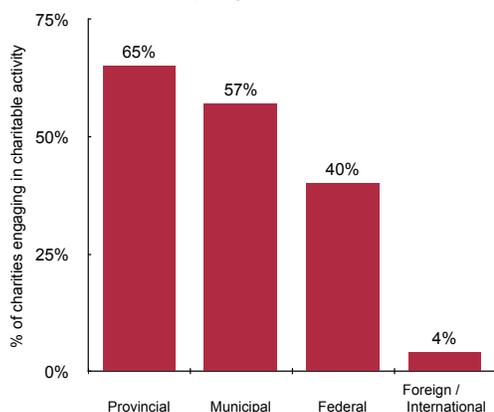
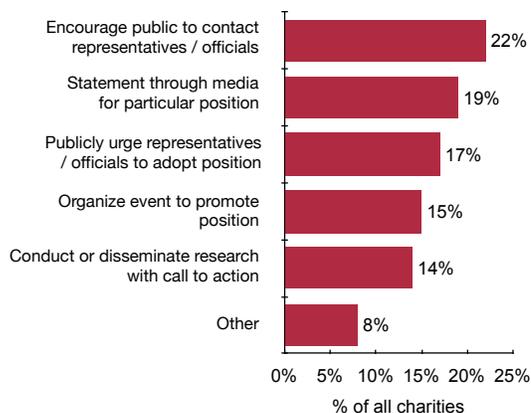


Figure 3: Charities are more likely to work indirectly to advance a position.



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Many useful resources including reports, fact sheets, and PowerPoint presentations can be downloaded at no charge from the Sector Monitor web site at: http://www.imaginecanada.ca/sector_monitor.

The third and most recent edition of Imagine Canada's *Sector Monitor* was conducted between October 28 and November 24, 2010.¹ A major focus was exploring the public awareness and policy activities of charities.

INTRODUCTION

Registered charities are limited by Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) in the types of public awareness and policy activities they can engage in. Allowable public awareness and policy activities fall into two general categories: *charitable activities* and *permitted political activities*. Activities that fall outside the boundaries of these categories (e.g., politically partisan activities, activities not related to the charity's purpose, etc.) are generally not permitted.

CHARITABLE ACTIVITIES

Public awareness and policy activities are considered charitable when they aim to increase public awareness of an issue related to the charity's purpose, but do not include a call to political action. Charities are allowed to focus as much of their resources on charitable public awareness and policy activities as they choose.

The vast majority of charities (86%) engaged in charitable public awareness and policy activity over the previous year. Organizations are roughly equally likely to seek to increase the awareness of the public and policymakers (62% engaged in a public awareness campaign while 59% provided information to policymakers; see Figure 1). Participation in more formalized means of getting information to policymakers is less common. Most charities that carry out these activities do so irregularly (35%) or only a few times a year (29%) - just 14% do them a few times a week or more.

These activities most commonly involve provincial governments (65%; see Figure 2), followed by municipal (57%), and federal levels of government (40%).

PERMITTED POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

Political activities seek to pressure the government on an issue related to the charity's purpose. Political activities are permitted if the charity's activities are non-partisan and if the charity devotes substantially all of its resources to other, charitable, activities.

¹ 3,816 charity leaders were surveyed and 1,625 complete responses were received, for a response rate of 42%. Responses have been weighted by organization size, region and sub-sector to produce more accurate national estimates.

Figure 4: Permitted political activities focus quite strongly on provincial governments.

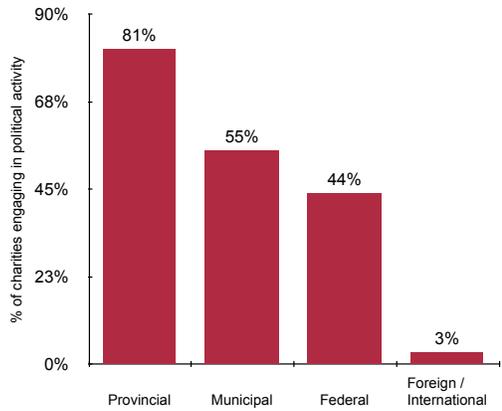


Figure 5: Charities identify the public as a more important focus than government.

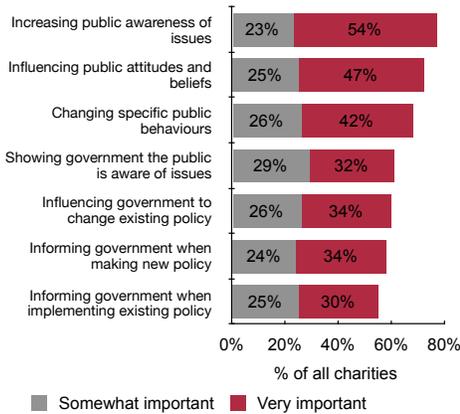


Figure 6: Lack of time is the most potent barrier - comparatively few report lack of relevance to cause.

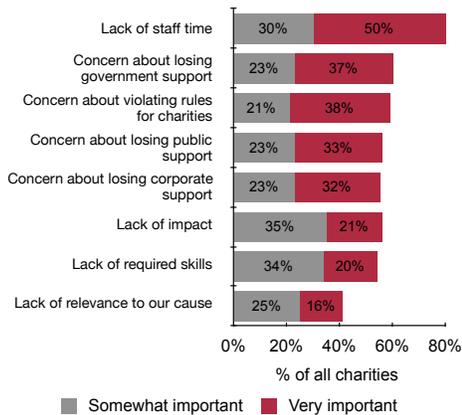
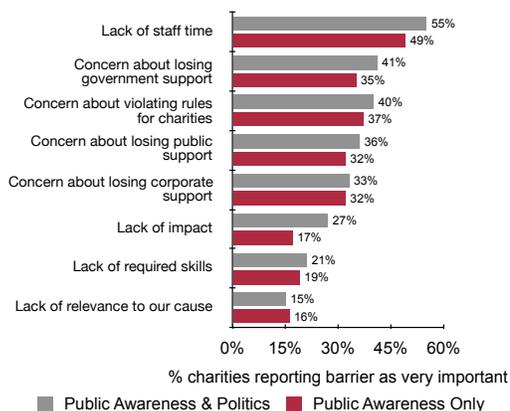


Figure 7: Charities engaging in both charitable & political activities were more likely to report barriers.



Just over a third (39%) of charities engaged in permitted political activities over the previous year. In terms of specific activities, charities are most likely to encourage the public to contact elected representatives or government officials (22%) or to make a statement to the media (19%; see Figure 3). Interestingly, although organizations are comparatively likely to make use of research in their charitable public awareness and policy activities, they were much less likely to do so in contexts linked directly to specific political actions (14%). Again, most organizations engage in these activities irregularly (40%) or a few times a year (37%) - just 6% engage in them a few times a week or more.

As with charitable awareness and policy activities, organizations that engage in political activities are most likely to focus on influencing provincial governments (81%; see Figure 4). Compared to charitable public awareness and policy activities, specifically political activities focus even more closely on provincial governments.

PERCEIVED IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC AWARENESS AND POLICY ACTIVITY

Regardless of whether their organization engaged in public awareness and policy activities, respondents were asked how important various aspects of these activities are to their cause. Respondents generally view the public as a more important focus than government. Only about a third of respondents consider various aspects of informing or influencing government very important to their charity's cause (see Figure 5). Not surprisingly, the largest organizations (those with annual revenues of \$5 million or more) are noticeably more likely than smaller organizations to view influencing government as being very important.

BARRIERS

Respondents were also asked about potential barriers to public awareness and policy activities. By far the most commonly reported barrier is lack of staff time (see Figure 6). Concerns about potential loss of support from various audiences and potential violations of the rules for charities are fairly potent barriers, while lack of impact or the required skills are common but somewhat less acute. Only a minority of charities see lack of relevance to their cause as a barrier.

Charities that engage in both public awareness and permitted political activities are more likely to report almost all barriers as being very important than are organizations that focus exclusively on public awareness (see Figure 7). Organizations engaging in both activities appear to be under more time stress, as well as more concerned about losing support from various audiences. Interestingly, they are strikingly more likely to be concerned about lack of impact.