From Comms to Engagement

How to build user-centred comms

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Intro

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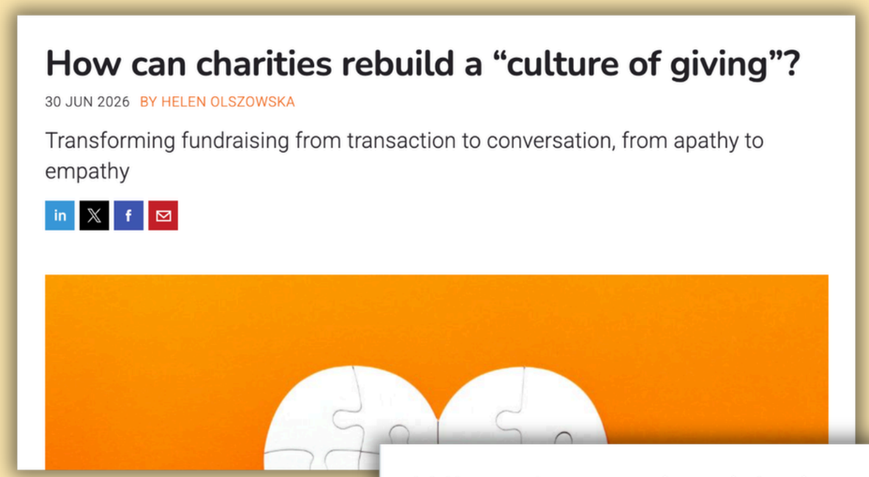



- Freelance writer for Charity Digital.
- Seven years as a freelance content marketer.
- Associate Director for Development & Outreach at Human Rights Watch.
- Ten years in fundraising and marketing roles.

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From communications to engagement

Communications	Engagement
Charity-led	Audience-led
Channel-led	Need, interest and behaviour-led
Broadcasting key messages	Tailoring key messages
Transaction	Conversation

While 83% of marketers agree that customers increasingly want two-way conversations, making that happen is a work in progress.

~ Salesforce State of Marketing Report, 2026

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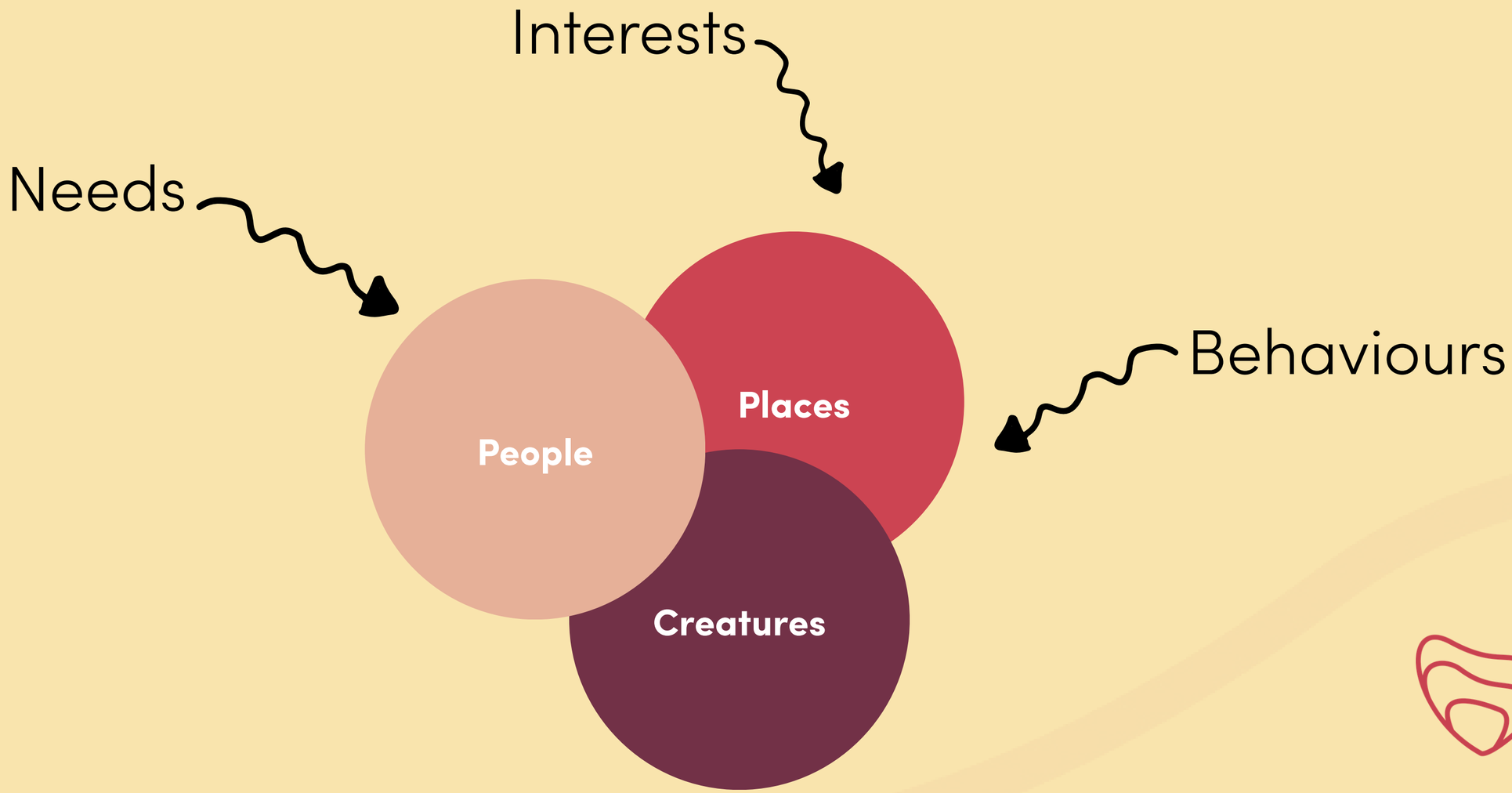
Organising principles for user-centricity



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Needs, interests and behaviours

“We’ve asked users whether they like our website and 92% say they do.”
“We speak to our audiences all the time, we know what they need.”

Explicit needs - surface level needs that are consciously recognised and spoken about, often expressing an interest.

Implicit needs - subconscious, unspoken motives that drive behaviours.



Ask only about something they have actually done, or not done, not something you hope they might do — people lie!

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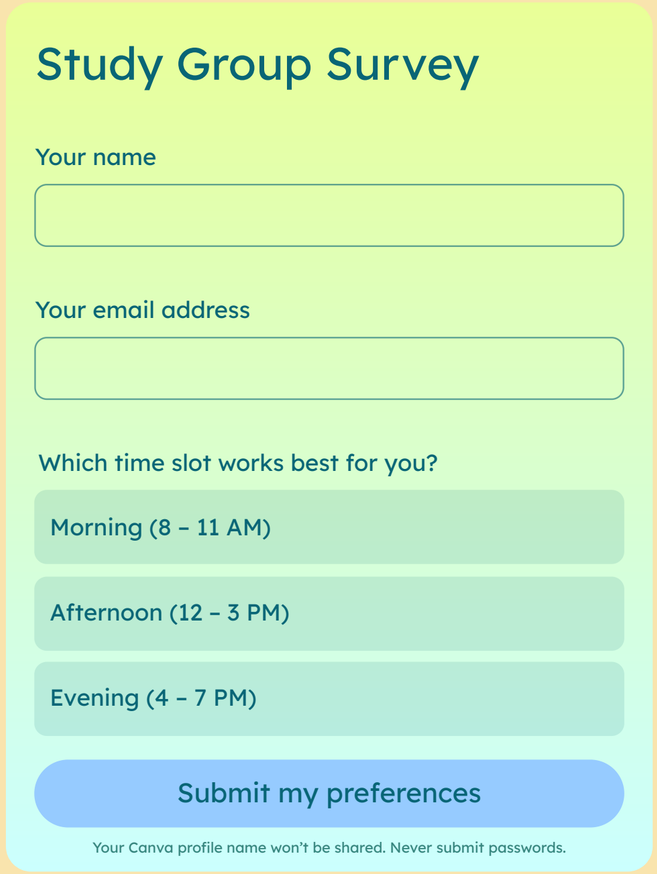
Tools of the trade

Surveys and insight interviews



Surveys
Best for:

- Scale, within one channel.
- Understanding explicit needs, like interests.
- Learning which audiences are represented.

Insight interviews
Best for:

- focus, within one audience group.
- Understanding implicit needs and behaviours.
- Learning about barriers.



Stakeholder conversations: goals, audiences

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Tools of the trade

Questions

From which to where...

✗ Which newspapers do you read?

✓ Where do you go for news about cancer prevention?

From what to when...

✗ What are your main concerns about how to prevent cancer?

✓ When you last visited our website, what did you go there to do? Were you able to find what you were looking for?

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Needs from audiences on social media

Survey → **Insight interviews** → **Stakeholder workshop** → **Analysis**

“It’s not like putting a poster up. It's a different form of communication. It's not interactive, which we know a lot of our community really, really need.”

Facebook was the right platform, but could be used in a different way to achieve goals.

Help

Audiences go to social media for help to understand their condition.

Connection

They follow to remind themselves of what other patients/families are going through and to feel part of a community.

Hope

They look for stories about new research and treatments that give them hope for the future - for themselves and the patients/families that come after them.

Foundation for content strategy.

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Needs from audiences subscribed to emails

Stakeholder workshop → **Survey** → **Insight interviews** → **Analysis**

- News - hot topics
- Positive stories
- Actionable lifestyle advice
- Nutrition

"focus on health quite useful. Also some of the positive news stories"

"the most interesting ones are on the latest hot topic"

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Who has the power?

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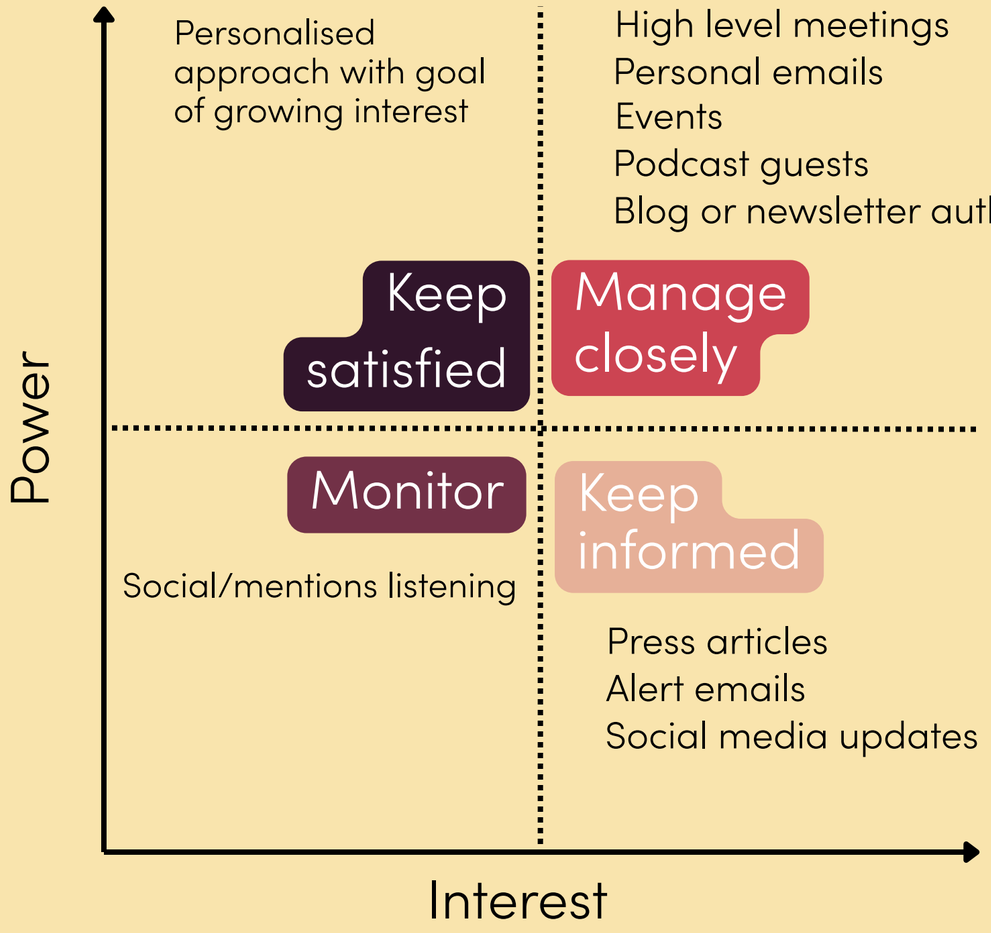
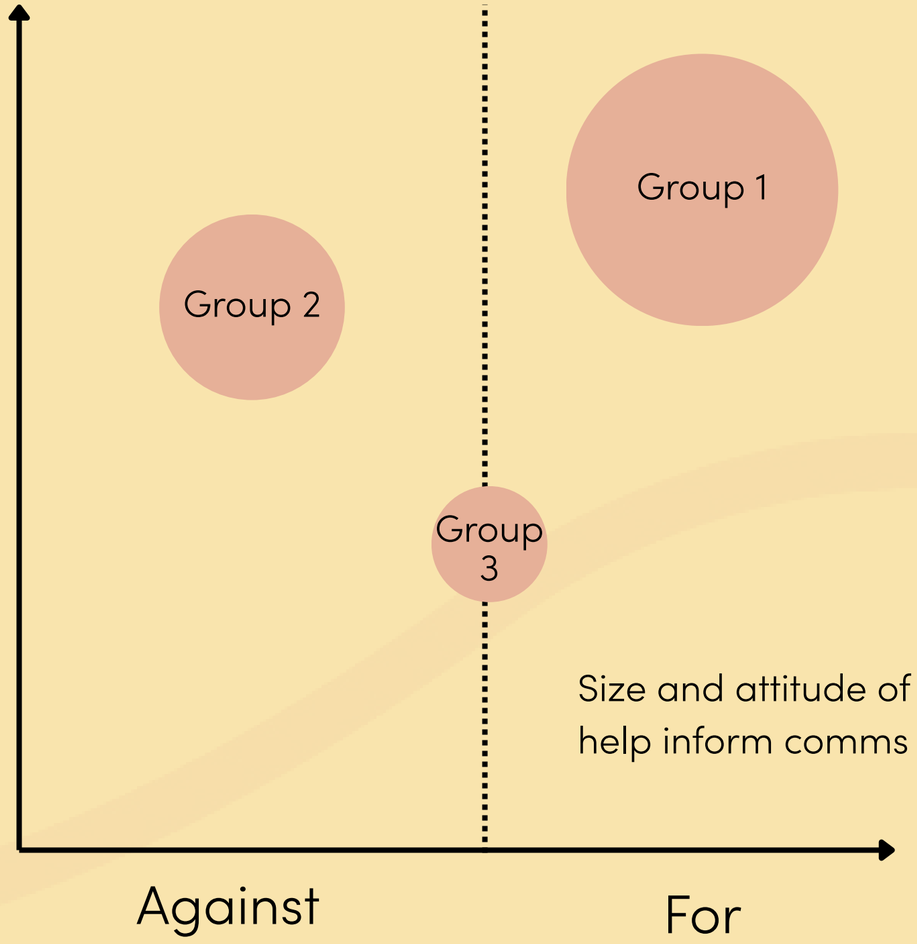
Power - interest matrix



Support-opposition matrix

Size of circle = size of audience



Size and attitude of audience can help inform comms strategy

Conversation over transaction

Who are your audiences talking to?

Social media community management

Social media mentions responses

email marketing responses

Where can audiences come together?

High-performing teams are 1.5x more likely to frequently reply to customers via email and text compared with underperformers.

~ Salesforce State of Marketing Report, 2026

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How to build user-centred comms

- **Listen**

surveys, insight research, Supporter Care, Social Media Team, mentions beyond the media.

- **Ask your audience**

focus on what they actually do, not what they imagine they might do.

- **Where not which**

for media consumption. Need over channel.

- **Understand explicit and implicit needs**

Use them to inform what you communicate and how you communicate it.

- **Who has the power?**

Organise your comms around the issue you're trying to change.

- **Prioritise conversation over transaction.**

Where can you actively respond?

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Outro!

Helen Olszowska
Content marketer & strategist



Hi ,

When is the right moment to wear a backless jumpsuit?

In the few quiet moments in and around launching a report at parliament yesterday, this is a question that's been on my mind 😂.

The answer is that there are very few appropriate moments — the jumpsuit is floral, poofy-sleeved, and very noticeable. The weather, my confidence and a fitting occasion would all have to come together at the same time for me to think, yep, I'm wearing that.

I've now spent a few months in the shoes (and occasionally the jumpsuit) of a part-time sole comms person and wrangled with a similar question: when is the right time to throw everything at a comms moment?

When there's only one of you, you have to be careful about when and how you spend your energy and expertise so you're not spread too thin.

But if you only ever play small and do the bare minimum, progress is hard.

Keep in touch!
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