

WHAT CANADIANS THINK ABOUT CHARITIES: HIGHLIGHTS OF MUTTART'S "TALKING ABOUT CHARITIES 2008" REPORT

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A. INTRODUCTION

On October 19, 2008, The Muttart Foundation ("Muttart"), a well known private foundation based in Edmonton, Alberta, released *Talking about Charities 2008: Canadians' Opinions on Charities and Issues Affecting Charities* ("Report"). Muttart commissioned Ipsos Reid Public Affairs, a leading survey-based marketing research firm, to conduct Muttart's fourth survey on public opinion about charities and issues relating to charities. Muttart published similar reports in 2000, 2004, and 2006. The results of the 2008 survey are detailed throughout the 86-page Report. Some of the key aspects that the Report examines are: Canadians' attitudes towards charities, the role charities play in Canadian society, and their fundraising and advocacy activities.

This Report is an excellent resource for charities, as it provides insight into how the public perceives charities and the issues that affect them. In this regard, charities may want to use the Report to help them compare their practices with public opinion. This *Charity Law Bulletin* provides a brief overview of the highlights of this important resource tool. For more information on the details of the survey results, the full Report is available on Muttart's website at, <http://www.muttart.org/download/TAC2008/TAC2008-03-CompleteReport.pdf>.

B. HOW THE SURVEY WAS CONDUCTED AND ANALYZED

A total of 3,863 telephone interviews were conducted with Canadians over the age of 18 across Canada between April and June 2008. The sample of individuals surveyed excluded those who themselves worked or had someone in their households work for a charity. Quotas were imposed to ensure that there was sufficient representation in each province to conduct a provincial analysis. The results were subsequently weighted according to household size and provincial distribution. The Report states that with a sample of almost 3900 people, the overall national results are considered statistically accurate within 1.6%, 19 times out of 20.

In addition to an overall assessment of Canadians' views on charities, the study examines whether or not public opinion about charities and their activities varies between provinces and other demographic variables such as gender, age, education, household income and religious attendance. It also examines whether people's opinions about charities and their activities vary according to their familiarity with charities, their level of trust in charities, and whether or not they made a charitable donation in 2007.

C. HOW THE REPORT IS ORGANIZED

The Report sets out key findings on Canadians' overall opinions about charities and their practices. The national results are presented first, followed by other differences in the findings, such as provincial and demographics. The following is a list of areas that the Report canvasses with respect to Canadians' perceptions and opinions of charities and their activities, and how these opinions have changed over previous years that the survey was conducted:

- ◆ Familiarity with and perceived importance of charities
- ◆ Trust in charities and their leaders
- ◆ Fundraising
- ◆ Information provided by charities
- ◆ Monitoring charities
- ◆ Advocacy activities

D. KEY FINDINGS

1. Familiarity With and Perceived Importance of Charities

According to the Report, most Canadians feel they are somewhat familiar with the work that charities carry out and the role that charities play. In addition, as in the previous surveys, a high proportion of Canadians believe that charities are important, play a key role in meeting the needs of Canadians, and improve their quality of life.

The Report shows that advancement in age, education, and household income corresponds positively with one's familiarity with charities. Survey results also demonstrate that Canadians who regularly (at least once a month) attend religious services are more likely to be familiar with the work of charities. Another finding that was reported reveals that as household incomes and education levels rise, the belief that charities do a better job than the government in understanding and meeting Canadians' needs tends to decrease.

2. Trust in Charities and Their Leaders

With respect to the level of trust that those Canadians surveyed have in charities, the results show that 18% have little trust in charities and only 4% do not trust charities at all. The Report further states that not only do 77% of Canadians trust charities, but they also trust leaders of charities — out of all the professions asked about in the survey, Canadians only trusted nurses and medical doctors more than leaders of charities.

The Report also provides insight into Canadians' level of trust in different types of charities. According to the survey, Canadians are most likely to have a lot or some trust in hospitals and charities that focus on children or health prevention and research. The type of charities that Canadians appear to have the least trust in include those that focus on international development and the arts.

As is the case with familiarity and perceived importance with the work of charities, trust in charities tends to increase with level of education and household income. Canadians who expressed a lot of trust in charities generally attribute their trust to reliability, integrity, accountability, and personal involvement. On the other hand, the Report also states that uncertainty regarding where the charitable

money actually goes causes some individuals surveyed to have some to no trust in charities. In this regard, trust has a significant impact on the public's perception of fundraising.

3. Fundraising

Since 2004, fewer Canadians feel that charities do not have sufficient funds to meet their objectives. However, a majority of Canadians still hold this view. The Report distinguishes that although almost all Canadians believe that it takes considerable effort for charities to raise the funds they need in support of their causes, Canadians do have reservations about certain types of fundraising. For instance, the Report points out that commission-based professionals who fundraise on behalf of the charity is one of the more contentious fundraising methods that some charities use. In support of this finding, the survey shows that a strong majority of Canadians find it somewhat unacceptable for charities to hire commission-based professionals who fundraise on behalf of the charity. Despite these concerns over questionable fundraising practices, Canadians are divided over whether or not legal limits should be set on how much money charities can spend on fundraising. Belief that there should be legal limits on the amount of money spent on fundraising increases with age.

4. Information Provided by Charities

Most Canadians agree that there is a need for greater transparency regarding charities' spending practices. As in past years, virtually all Canadians agree that charities should be obligated to disclose how donors' contributions are spent.

The Report also provides insight for charities, as it shows that Canadians continue to feel that it is a priority for charities to provide the public with information about their activities. For example, the results of the survey demonstrate that almost all Canadians think it is important for charities to provide information on how they use donations; the programs and services they offer; their fundraising costs; and the impact of their work on Canadians. The Report points out that only half of those surveyed or less feel that charities actually do a good job in providing the above-mentioned types of information.

With respect to the sources that Canadians rely on for information about charities, the Report states that those surveyed are most likely to research a charity to which they may donate by reading its printed material, despite the volume and accessibility of web-based information.

5. Monitoring charities

A further important finding is that more than half of those surveyed mistakenly think that there is no organization or agency responsible for monitoring the activities of charities. In this regard, more Canadians now than in 2000 and 2004 think a government agency should be responsible for monitoring charities' activities.

The survey demonstrates that those who made a charitable donation in 2007 are more likely (compared to those who did not) to think that activities of charities should be monitored by an independent organization or agency.

6. Advocacy activities

Another activity in which many charities engage is advocacy. The Report shows that a majority of Canadians surveyed agree that the opinions expressed by charities on issues of public concern have value because they represent a public interest perspective. In addition, a majority of Canadians surveyed agree that laws should be amended to allow charities to advocate more freely for the causes their organizations support. However, Canadians have differing views on certain methods that charities use to speak out about a cause. The Report demonstrates that a significant majority of Canadians hold the opinion that it is acceptable for charities to advocate for their cause by voicing concerns on issues such as poverty and the environment; meeting with government officials; using research results to support a message; and placing advertisements in the media. On the other hand, advocacy methods, such as holding legal protests or demonstrations and blocking roadways are generally viewed less favourably.

E. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The Muttart Foundation's Report provides the charitable sector with important public opinion survey results with respect to charities and matters that affect them. Overall, as demonstrated in past Muttart reports, a significant majority of Canadians trust charities. According to the Report, areas where charities should improve upon include providing information about their activities, especially fundraising; making available information about where charitable money and donations are spent; and increasing awareness concerning the various ways in which charitable organizations are monitored and kept accountable by independent organizations and agencies. As the Report constitutes an important resource for charities in increasing their understandings of how the public perceives them, it will ultimately prove helpful in educating charities on ways to better garner public support.