



“The message discipline seemed seamless”: Denise Charlton of Community Foundation Ireland on galvanizing political activism, communication campaigns, and strategic partnerships.

Sanne Breimer
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Sanne Breimer: Could you introduce yourself, describe the problem that you are addressing, and how you bring attention to the issue?

Denise Charlton: My name is Denise Charlton and I’m the chief executive of Community Foundation Ireland. We are a philanthropic hub, and our mission is quality for all in thriving communities. My background has been not just philanthropy, I worked in civil society for many years. I was the co-founder of Marriage Equality, and we were lucky enough to deliver Marriage Equality by referendum, which was the first time, globally, that it went for a public vote and had a successful outcome.

Sanne Breimer: Can you share an example that illustrates the impact of your work and how did you know it was working?

Denise Charlton: There was a specific question addressed in the campaign, which was a vote by the public, to change our constitution through a referendum that would extend marriage beyond same-sex couples, marriage equality for LGBT+. Although it was a specific question around marriage, it was about equality. For some that gave legal recognition, for others equality in terms

of parenting. There were lots of issues in terms of LGBT+ rights that progressed with the question answered.

One of the challenges was the 20 years of work done by LGBT+ organizations in Ireland, and another challenge was people coming together and collaborating on a specific outcome. We knew through polling that 30% would vote yes, 30% would vote no, and 40% was at play. The audience was that 40%, keeping our base of 30%, and ignoring the no at 30%.

We knew that it was not an argument we were trying to win. It was one vote that would win the referendum. It was new in terms of LGBT+ rights, to step back and say, "This is a campaign about that 40% in the middle".

Before the referendum campaign, the audience was the government and political parties, to get them to hold a referendum. Once there was a referendum campaign, audiences changed.

Sanne Breimer: Everyone learns as much from things that don't work as from things that do. Could you describe something you tried that did not work, but that did teach you an important lesson?

Denise Charlton: It is hard in a way because we were successful in the campaign, we have focused on what worked. The lessons learnt were applied [in the referendum] to repeal the Eighth Amendment, which came a few years later around reproductive rights. As we look at the prevention of child sexual abuse, it will be helpful going forward.

The first thing is it was a values-driven campaign. It looked at the context of Ireland, and the years of the Church. There had been a lot of scandals and a feeling that Ireland wanted to see itself differently. The resistance to marriage equality or the resistance to reproductive rights for women was an Ireland of the old and not of the new. It is important to understand the context you are campaigning in.

The second thing is that the values underpinning the campaign were important because they leveraged people's emotions and wanted to engage them in what was a minority campaign. It was an ask for a minority and we needed the majority to carry it. The values allowed people to connect to the campaign, and we visualized why those values were important, in terms of the messaging, the tone, and the messengers.

Other lessons were the value of evidence and polling, and understanding who was our audience. We knew 30% no, 30% yes, 40% in the middle. Devising a campaign about keeping the base and mobilizing the 40%, who were different perhaps in what they wanted, ensuring the messaging was hitting the right people, and having the evidence to do that. In terms of movement building, it was national, but we really learned internationally. For example, we had visuals of couples in love, and it was international learning to visualize the positive.

Don't talk about the problem, talk about the solution. We are you and we are all entitled and should have the same rights. International partners we worked with came to Ireland, looked at the visuals, and said, "Just having a lesbian or a gay couple on their own is making them exclusive. You need to put them in a bigger group within a family." We had to change all the visuals late in the campaign, but that learning was important.

And it was a collaborative campaign, and the learning was that frenemies, people who were your enemy, could be allies. Up to that, we had disagreed as an LGBT+ community about what was the right strategy to advance rights. Some thought civil partnership, some marriage, and it was quite a bitter divide. When the referendum was put on the table, all those groups worked collaboratively. It was fantastic to be part of it.

Sanne Breimer: Could you mention the values?

Denise Charlton: Things like inclusiveness, fairness, generosity, and tolerance evolved through the polling and the evidence, and were tested on groups. They were translated into the visuals and the advertising. On all the badges and posters, the tone was that Irish people are generous and want an inclusive Ireland, fair and tolerant. It was always calm, never aggressive, never reactive, always proactive. The research and polling asked, "Who should deliver that message?" It was not LGBT+ activists, the usual suspects, which was hard for people who fought for this for 20 years. They wanted to hear from mothers, fathers, grandfathers.

There were three stages of the campaign. The first, "I'm Voting Yes, Ask Me Why," was very much based on that type of persona. "I'm a granddad and I am voting yes because I want all my grandchildren to be equal." "I'm a mum and I am voting yes because I want all my children to be equal." That was the messaging that carried the campaign to a successful outcome.

Sanne Breimer: The international examples you mentioned, were there specific countries involved?

Denise Charlton: We probably looked to the United States the most. For me, the role of philanthropy in terms of the positive outcomes in the United States was interesting. Funders came together and funded a jigsaw of strategies. Some around litigation, some around mobilization and narrative development. They had wins in some states and not in others, the civil society also collaborated and looked at what was working and what wasn't, and they evaluated it. When we started to think about the campaign, they showed us what had won and what was helpful. It was based on love, not rights, equality rather than rights. The rights language was not as persuasive as the values language that we ended up using.

We learned from the States to recognize in the campaigning that for those who had faith, maybe marriage equality was a challenging proposition. We had a grandmother who had about 20

grandchildren and really strong faith. She talked about the challenge because it was counter to her faith. The Catholic Church was one of our biggest oppositions, but she came around and knew that her God was okay with that. Things like that helped us shortcut. We wouldn't have had the finances to do the level of research and polling.

Sanne Breimer: Aside from funding, what are the main challenges you faced?

Denise Charlton: I think retrospect is easy, and collaboration is hard, it needs a lot of time and resources. The impetus of a hundred-day campaign brought people together in a way that is more difficult when it is longer term. Getting people to collaborate and come to the table was a big challenge, and it was a big opportunity.

Message discipline was important. The campaign was like a political headquarters. It had the evidence and the messaging, it gave out all the branding, did all the promotion materials, and monitored what was happening on the doorstep. When people were out canvassing, they sent the returns back to the head office and we could see if there were difficult oppositional messages. It informed the message book for the next week. Collaboration encouraged everybody to have the same tone and values.

Chronologically, it was important to time who the key messengers were, to avoid conflicts. It was a challenge because you had to say to somebody, "We'd prefer you do not go on prime-time television. This is a better person to do that." And all we had was the persuasion to say, "Look, we believe that this person is better." That caused challenges.

Some part of the LGBT+ community would say they got left behind in the campaign. That was challenging, but making sure then that legislative change for them was prioritized post-Marriage Equality. Trying to get a diverse group to collaborate as a base and then trying to bring other people in, we needed straight allies. We couldn't deliver it by ourselves.

Sanne Breimer: As a founder of the campaign, were there specific things that you brought in that solved some of these challenges?

Denise Charlton: I was co-founder of Marriage Equality and in a way that was easier because people joined the campaign. It was two courageous women who took a case against the government. It started as a legal case, and then it became much more about building a movement.

Three organizations that had different strategies came together and formed Yes Equality, there was not one organization owning it. I looked after the money and was on the strategy group because they go hand in hand.

You have to be involved in devising a strategy to persuade people to put money in. I saw people who funded the campaign as collaborators. It is the same principle. You're trying to entice them and encourage them with a vision of Ireland that they wanted to be part of, whether they were gay or straight, and that this campaign was worth investing in because it was going to deliver progressive change for Ireland.

That's what we did, and we were very tenacious. We did not take no as a no. I understood that the first no may mean I'm not interested for now. Some big donors took five or six goes, and as the campaign progressed and the vision of a more progressive Ireland, leaving the Ireland of old behind, became more vibrant in the media and the storytelling, some of those no's turned to yes.

It was exciting, and apparent in Repeal, which is the campaign on reproductive rights, where crowdfunding resulted in women leaving five euros or 10 euros and saying they had to travel to England for a termination. I saw the opportunity to engage donors in the same way as other collaborators.

Sanne Breimer: What strategies or solutions are most effective at shifting society's view of the problem?

Denise Charlton: Storytelling was a big part of shifting the cultural norms, being clear about the messaging and the evidence that supports it. And having the messengers to tell the story that we wanted to tell was important in shifting norms. I know as a lesbian mum of two boys, it made a difference because you know that people went out by popular vote and voted for equality. When we were approaching schools, doctors, or dentists, it felt much more positive. There was more awareness of LGBT+ families than in the past.

When we first polled, it was clear that the public knew lesbians and gay men, but they did not think there were LGBT+ families. We brought a lot of visibility to LGBT+ life in Ireland and beyond. It was a catalyst in shifting awareness, inclusiveness and positivity. Ireland is not without its problems in terms of LGBT+ rights, but it has certainly shifted cultural attitudes.

Sanne Breimer: What role do partnerships or coalitions play in pushing your work forward, who are your main partners, and how do you cultivate and maintain the partnerships in the work?

Denise Charlton: It was a strategic communications campaign based on collaboration and partnership, that's how it was delivered. There were different strategies for encouraging collaboration. There were the usual mechanisms of platforms where there was a clear vision about what you were signing up for. The base of LGBT+ organizations or other civil society organizations that had worked on LGBT+ rights, the National Women's Council, and the Children's Rights Alliance, covering a range of organizations and populations in Ireland.

As the campaign began to grow legs, we needed more than that. The campaign allowed a diversity of leadership bringing collaboration. There were doctors, nurses and teachers for Marriage Equality or Yes Equality. There was tech and business for Yes Equality, anything you can think of. The mechanism was a clear vision, branding, messaging and information. People knew this was a campaign where you would get the messaging book each week and any merchandise you wanted. Everybody used the same posters and badges. People were out canvassing.

There were local groups that fed into the wider group. There was a structure that allowed for clarity of messaging, clarity of delivery, and diverse leadership. The Yes Equality group in Cork might have been very different from the Yes Equality group in Dublin, or the number of groups in Dublin, but they were all talking to the same messaging book and feeding into the infrastructure. The collaboration got broader all the time. Every time we turned around, there was somebody else signing up. It brought influencers and those who could mobilize further.

They were the tools, and that collaboration is what the money raised and funded. It funded merchandise to go out to those groups. It funded the ability to contact and the tech infrastructure that supported the collaboration and allowed people to feed into headquarters. The campaign focused on getting as many people to collaborate in a disciplined way for a specific outcome.

Sanne Breimer: Was it difficult to maintain the relationships or was it like once everybody was on board and the messaging and the structure were clear, it went automatically?

Denise Charlton: It did. People often commented that it had worked on other campaigns, and how the message discipline seemed seamless. I remember another activist commenting in the early days that she felt it was such a positive campaign and for so long, so many of us had worked on campaigns that deliver incremental change, but this was going to promote progressive change. It was exciting for people to collaborate with.

Sanne Breimer: If there's one thing that you could advise someone who wants to replicate what you did, what would it be?

Denise Charlton: We had a fantastic advisor, Noel Whelan, who is no longer with us. He passed away, but came into the campaign about 10 days out and gave us good advice. He said, "Those of you that have been working on this campaign for 20 years, you have to see it like a big concert hall and all of you filled the backseat. You've been working on it. You think about it all the time. It is your life, but most of the other seats will only fill up in the last couple of weeks before the vote, and they'll only make their mind up the last couple of weeks before the vote. So we have to be clear on who we are talking to, how we are talking to them, and when we are talking to them."

He was a well-known political strategist and offered his help. We were all voluntary advisors working on the campaign. He brought a brilliant political analysis and capability to the campaign that added value. He had clarity of thought and helped us to think through what is the campaign, what are we offering, what we are trying to achieve, and how to achieve it. And then how to time that?

We learned so much from other campaigns and could apply the lessons learned positively and negatively. For us, learning from other campaigns internationally was huge. Even in my experience, we have applied that learning of Marriage Equality to other national campaigns. We have documented lessons learned, and we got that from other countries where people said, "Look, we ran this campaign. Here is an interview on it, but also here is some documentation and if you like, I will send you some after this that we did."

Sanne Breimer: What do you think has the potential to make significant impacts in the fields in the next five years?

Denise Charlton: We are thinking about how to prevent and negate the high levels of child sexual abuse here in Ireland. What will make a difference is if we can all come into the room and plan out what a campaign would look like, learning from where we effected change before, and think about the specific ask that will give the wider progressive change in preventing child sexual abuse. The kind of collaborative planning and thinking of a long-term campaign, and if philanthropy can become a partner, we would have a shot at making a difference.

And the final is the government. Governments are important players, particularly in Ireland, where we have an online commissioner, an accessible Oireachtas and parliament. The combination of diverse stakeholders, thinking out a long-term campaign and coming together could make gains in the prevention of child sexual abuse.

Sanne Breimer: What do you think it takes for the stakeholders to get on board to care about this issue?

Denise Charlton: I think there is an understanding of the risks and the challenges concerning harm. Child sex abuse historically was seen as something very private happening to other families. There now is a more prolific realization, but I think that is step one. Child sexual abuse is systematic and prolific, and within families is one context, but there are lots of contexts where it is happening.

Building awareness of the actual reality is important. And solutions, what can we do about it? For many years going to conferences and understanding the harm, for example, of pornography, which is a big contributing factor, but not having any opportunity to look at solutions, how do you counter that? It will be important for us to do that, to be aware of the harm and people's understanding of the harm, but allow hope that something can be done and we can change it.

Sanne Breimer: What would you say about getting governments involved?

Denise Charlton: I often think when you are campaigning, it is agents of change within all the various institutions, and government is no different. When I look in the Irish context, we just have a new agency called Cuan, which is about gender-based violence, and they have a mandate around child sexual abuse and the harm of pornography. There are engaged agents of change there and in other parts of government. It's about engaging them in the campaign and seeing them as real partners.

If I go back to Marriage Equality, there were one or two persuadable politicians that said it was worth doing a referendum on LGBT+ rights. They became champions in their own right. I think when we are campaigning and we are trying to go up against forces that are profiting from child sexual abuse, we have to find advocates and agents of change across organizations to collaborate. Most people are worried about children being groomed online and the levels of abuse, and if we can come together and offer solutions, people will come on board.

Sanne Breimer: Thank you so much.

Sanne Breimer (she/her) is a freelance journalism trainer, project manager and adviser for international media organizations including SembraMedia, Thomson Reuters Foundation (TRF), European Journalism Centre, Thibi, and the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union (ABU). She founded Inclusive Journalism, aiming to educate (primarily) Western journalists about media representation and decolonisation through a weekly newsletter, online courses and retreats. Sanne works remotely and divides her time between Europe and South East Asia. Before moving into training, Sanne worked at a managerial level in national public broadcasting in the Netherlands for almost 13 years, focusing on radio, digital media and innovation. She is Dutch with Frisian roots.

** This conversation has been edited and condensed.*