Nicholas Kristof's Advice for Saving the World

What would happen if aid organizations and other philanthropists embraced the dark arts of marketing spin and psychological persuasion used on Madison Avenue? We'd save millions more lives.

In 2004, I visited the Darfur area three times, trying to bear witness to the slaughter of children and the burning of villages. I stepped over the desiccated carcasses of camels and goats to interview survivors still in hiding. I interviewed people who had seen men pulled off buses and killed because of their tribe and skin color, and I spoke to teenage girls who had been taunted with racial epithets against blacks while being gang-raped by the Sudanese-sponsored Arab militia, the janjaweed.

I was enraged by what I found and, as a New York Times columnist, wrote time and again about these atrocities on the op-ed page. Yet at first the public reaction seemed to be a collective shrug: Too bad, but isn't that what Africa is always like People slaughtering each other Anyway, we have our own problems.

My frustration was multiplied when Manhattan erupted in a controversy showing that even cynical New Yorkers can brim with empathy for a hawk. A red-tailed hawk dubbed Pale Male, one of the best-known residents of the Central Park area, had become embroiled in a housing dispute with the Upper East Side co-op on which he had a nest. The co-op removed Pale Male's nest, outraging New Yorkers and generating considerable news coverage. Now, don't get me wrong: I was on Pale Male's side, but I also dreamed that the plight of people driven from their villages in Darfur or Congo could get the same sympathy as a homeless bird. Clearly, something was wrong with the way I and other humanitarians were approaching Darfur.

So I turned to the field of social psychology, trying to understand how I could craft my writing so that it would generate a response rather than a turned page. Over the past 20 years, there have been many studies that shed light on this question, and, increasingly, I've come to believe that those of us who care about human rights and global poverty can do a far better job in our messaging. Like Pepsi, humanitarian causes need savvy marketing. Indeed, they need it far more than a soft-drink company.

Good people engaging in good causes sometimes feel too pure and sanctified to sink to something as manipulative as marketing, but the result has been that women have been raped when it could have been avoided and children have died of pneumonia unnecessarily because those stories haven't resonated with the public. So for God's sake, let's learn how we can connect people to important causes and galvanize a robust public reaction.

THE RECENT RESEARCH in social psychology offers a couple of central lessons. The first is a bit surprising: We intervene not because of stories of desperate circumstances but when we can be cheered up with positive stories of success and transformation. For example, one experiment found that people are quite willing to pay for a water-treatment facility to save 4,500 lives in a refugee camp with 11,000 people in it, but they are much less willing to pay for the same facility to save 4,500 lives when the refugee camp is said to have 250,000 inhabitants. In effect, what matters is saving a high proportion of people, not just a large number of lives. Paul Slovic, a psychology professor at the University of Oregon who has pioneered this field of research, notes that saving a large proportion of a group is very satisfying, while saving a small proportion seems like a failure even if it's a high number. All this fits in with a large body of research that suggests that people do good things in part because it feels good. The irony: Altruism creates its own selfish reward. Or, to put it another way, nobody gains more selfish pleasure than those who act selflessly.

Unfortunately, the most cost-effective aid interventions tend to be the kind that are incremental and save only a small proportion of lives and are thus least satisfying to the giver. For instance, my wife, Sheryl WuDunn, and I have recently published a new book, Half the Sky, arguing that educating and empowering women is the most effective way to fight global poverty and extremism. In the book we call on the U.S. government to adopt a program to help poor countries iodize their salt. Right now, about one-third of families in poor countries don't get enough iodine, and the result is not so much goiters as diminished intellectual capacity. Iodine is essential to brain formation for a fetus in the first trimester, and if a mother lacks iodine her child may end up mentally retarded. More commonly, children in such areas lose 10 to 15 IQ points, with girls particularly affected for reasons that aren't fully understood. This is a lifelong intelligence deficit and a significant burden on poor countries, and it can be resolved very cheaply; iodizing salt costs a couple of pennies per person per year.

Studies have suggested that iodizing salt brings real economic returns of nine times the cost and yet we don't do it. The reason is, I think, that the results are statistical, not visible. You can never

look at a child afterwards and say, “This girl would have been retarded if it weren’t for iodized salt.” All you can do is note that retardation rates fall and that, a decade later, school performance improves significantly.

In my own work, I’ve learned similar precepts the hard way. Over the years, I’ve traipsed through Africa, writing about the scourge of AIDS. I’ve reported on heart-rending scenes, such as an orphan in Swaziland, named Nomzamo, who at the age of 11 found herself running her household after her parents died, struggling to feed, clothe, and discipline her two younger sisters. She woke them up in the morning, washed their clothes and cut their hair, cooked for them when there was food, consoled them when they cried, beat them when they misbehaved. Yet these columns on AIDS sank with barely a ripple. Readers already knew AIDS was catastrophic. It was a depressing topic whose awfulness their charitable contributions could only mitigate, and if they had to be at work in 30 minutes it was time to turn the page. They didn’t really want to read a sad story about Nomzamo, because it just reminded them of all the world’s miseries.

In contrast, the columns that perhaps generated the greatest response were those about Mukhtar Mai, a Pakistani woman from a village in southern Punjab. Mukhtar is a rape victim who used compensation money to start a school, because she believes that education is the way to overcome the kind of attitudes that led to her rape. The first time I wrote about her, I was inundated with letters and more than $100,000 in checks for her. It took months to figure out how to get the money to her safely without incurring bank charges of $50 per check (particularly since many of the checks were for less than $50). Since then I’ve visited Mukhtar and written about her many times, and readers have sent a total of more than $500,000 to a fund I set up for her with Mercy Corps. She has used the money to start more schools, a women’s shelter, a legal clinic, and other programs that have made a real difference for women in southern Punjab. Readers support her because she reflects a story of hope and triumph that makes them feel good.

If one lesson is the need to emphasize hopefulness, the second is that storytelling needs to focus on an individual, not a group. A classic experiment involved asking people to donate to help hungry children in West Africa. One group was asked to help a seven-year-old girl named Rokia, in the country of Mali. A second was asked to donate to help millions of hungry children. A third was asked to help Rokia but was provided with statistical information that gave them a larger context for her hunger. Not surprisingly, people donated more than twice as much to help

Rokia as to help millions of children. But it turned out that even providing background information on African hun-ger diminished empathy, so people were much less willing to help Rokia when she represented a broader problem. Donors didn't want to help ease a crisis personi-fied by a child; they just wanted to help one person and to hell with the crisis.

As we all vaguely know, one death is a tragedy, a million deaths is a statistic. As Mother Teresa said, "If I look at the mass, I will never act. If I look at the one, I will." Professor Slovic calls the first reaction "psychic numbing." But Slovic wanted to know at what point the number of victims triggers psychic numbing. He set out to find out, and his findings were deeply depressing.

In one of Slovic's experiments, people were asked to donate to Rokia or, in other cases, to a similar hungry boy, Moussa. In each case, research subjects were quite willing to help and donated generously either to Rokia or to Moussa. But when people were asked to donate to Rokia and Moussa together, with their photographs side by side, donations decreased. Slovic found that our empathy begins to fade when the number of victims reaches just two. As he puts it: "The more who die, the less we care."

A practical application of these concepts came during the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. The white government there had imprisoned many brave activists, and there was a global campaign focusing on freeing these political prisoners. It never gained traction, however, until the organizers had the idea of refocusing it on an individual and came up with the slogan "Free Mandela!" Once there was a face on the movement, it resonated far more widely and, ultimately, helped topple apartheid.

IT'S CLEAR THAT the philanthropic community hasn't absorbed these lessons. When we want to get help, we make logical arguments about the scale of the suffering: Five million people have died in Congo! We make people feel guilty if they don't help, rather than good if they do. In particular, humanitarians often make poor countries sound like unremittingly tragic hellholes full of starving children with flies in their eyes. That's counterproductive: The challenge is to acknowledge both the desperate needs and also the very real progress in parts of Africa, the prospect of improvement in real people's lives if the help goes forward.

Any consumer-products company rolling out a brand of toilet paper will agonize over marketing. The messaging will be carefully devised, tested with focus groups, revised based on polling, tested in a particular market, tweaked, and tested again. And that's for a product whose launch makes no difference for humanity. In contrast, if an aid group is trying to raise support for a new program that could save many lives, it will often rely on a hodgepodge of guilt and statistics that limit its effectiveness. It has been said that "statistics are human beings with the tears dried off." That's precisely the problem all the psychological research shows that we are moved not by statistics but by fresh, wet tears, with a bit of hope glistening below.

Aid groups are getting savvier, and they are seeing how people want to help particular individuals, not causes. Child-sponsorship organizations like PlanUSA have always used this device, but the biggest success in recent years has been Kiva.org, which matches donors online with borrowers in poor countries who need microloans. It is very satisfying to make a $25 loan to a small shop owner in Paraguay, and so Kiva has boomed. Now other organizations are trying to figure out how to make these kinds of online direct connections as well.

When Oprah Winfrey had Sheryl and me on her show in October to talk about our book, she created a special area on her Web site to encourage people to contribute to educating and empowering women. Oprah's immediate and correct instinct was to slice and dice aid so that viewers could pay for something tangible, like $7 for textbooks for a needy schoolgirl, $29 for a girl's school uniform, or $30 for a year's supply of sanitary pads for a Ugandan schoolgirl (who is more likely to drop out without them). She raised $3.5 million in a week.

For my part, over the years I've learned to focus on individuals in my columns. Sure, I would do my reporting to find out about the general situation, but much of my time would be spent scrambling to find one particular person to build my column around. I learned that readers cared above all about girls, so when I came across a young man with a compelling story, I would apologize and ask him if he knew any girls with similar problems.

I searched for positive, heartwarming accounts of triumph, although in Darfur these were hard to come by. Ultimately, Darfur did catch the public's attention and rise to a place on the global agenda, partly because organizations got better at telling stories of individual Darfuris. Hundreds of thousands of American students and church and temple members joined the Save Darfur movement, protesting, fasting, or otherwise supporting a people halfway around the

world who mostly didn't look like them, who belonged to a different religion, and whom they'd never heard of a few years earlier. For me, it was a reminder that emotional connections are possible even with the most remote suffering.

Another test case of a new "marketing" approach came as my wife and I were writing Half the Sky. We wanted to call attention to sex trafficking, acid attacks, maternal mortality, yet we knew a focus on such a litany of horrors would go unread. The solution we came up with was to find stories of women who had overcome adversity rather than succumbed to it. We looked for heroes, not victims. We told of gang rape through Mukhtar, for example, who is notable for what she achieved after her rape. We explored sex trafficking through the story of a teenage Cambodian girl who was imprisoned in a Malaysian brothel but who, after escaping, became a very successful businesswoman with the help of an aid group, American Assistance for Cambodia.

So far, this positive approach seems to have worked. Half the Sky became a New York Times bestseller and went through seven printings before it was three weeks old. Young people particularly seem to want to move from reading about problems to addressing them, so we started a Web site for them, halftheskymovement.org. We're also developing an online video game and television documentary to bring new people to the cause.

Many of you readers travel to developing countries, and you're the ideal marketers for humanitarian causes. But if you're trekking in the Himalayas, come back not with stories of impoverished villages but rather ones about a particular 12-year-old girl who, if she received just $10 a month, could stay in school. Come back with photos of her or, better, video that you put on a blog or Web site. Make people feel lucky that they have the opportunity to assist her, so that they'll find helping her every bit as refreshing as, say, drinking a Pepsi.