

Leader Profile: Scott Harrison

Scott Harrison is the founder and lead of Charity: Water. The mission of Charity: Water is simple — to provide clean water to everyone in the world. However, it is the vision of the organization that has revolutionized its industry: to reinvent charity. At the time of Charity: Water’s inception, public opinion of charities as a whole was predominantly negative; in a talk Harrison gave at CreativeMornings New York,¹ he explained how 70% of Americans believed that any money donated to charity went to waste. In light of this, Harrison constructed his business model to address this need and in turn, created a new culture of conducting charity for this generation.

Background

Scott grew up in a middle class family in Philadelphia and moved to New York City at the age of eighteen to attend college at New York University. He quickly found himself with a job as a club promoter and began indulging in a lifestyle that befit his career: involvement in drugs, alcohol, and promiscuity. After a decade of this work, Harrison came to a sobering realization that his life was ultimately purposeless. This propelled him towards a turning point that resulted in his enlisting in a yearlong commitment with a missions organization.

It was this experience abroad that opened Harrison’s eyes to the needs of the world outside of the United States. Using his degree in journalism, Harrison chronicled his time in Liberia and sent these photos to his previous club promotion email chain. Though a good number

¹ Scott Harrison, “Scott Harrison: The story of Charity: Water,” presentation, *CreativeMornings New York*, YouTube, April 15, 2019, video.

unsubscribed from this listing, many others showed shock, awe, and interest in knowing how they too could help. With this, Harrison discovered that people were in fact interested in helping those in need and returned to New York City with the mission of founding Charity: Water.

The Negative Perceptions Towards Charity and a New Business Model

Harrison quickly discovered people's skepticism towards involving themselves in charity, something he deemed highly ironic. The reality was that there was a need in the world, people were interested in addressing that need, however the organizations in place to bridge these two parties were not trusted. This affected the way Harrison set up the business model of Charity: Water; a core value instilled early on was the need for transparency. He set about tackling this issue of mistrust in three ways: 1) developing a new way of doing finances, 2) using technology to show where each dollar is being invested, and 3) creating a positive branding for the organization.

The financial model would be simple: 100% of the funds donated would go towards the actual work of the organization. This meant setting up a separate source of funding for the less attractive overhead costs: administrative costs, office rent, staff salaries. Thereafter, the Charity: Water team chose not to use any paper methods to disseminate news; instead, they engaged social media to show visuals of exactly how much money each project cost. They quantified the distance the donations went through pictures of the actual materials purchased and put large money quantities into tangible means of being understood (i.e. \$100 goes towards providing a child with clean water for a year). Moreover, Charity: Water's use of the internet spread to a quick dissemination of the organization's mission and they became the first charity to hit over 1 million followers on Twitter.

Finally, Harrison knew he wanted to distinguish the way Charity: Water branded itself from their contemporaries. Traditionally, charities have promoted their mission through the means of guilt and shame, but such methods leave consumers feeling manipulated. Rather, Harrison wanted to convey a message of hope and to even use lighthearted means of helping a people who has never struggled with access to clean water understand the importance of water. He invested in professional designers, media campaigns, and partnerships with big tech companies as even Saks Fifth Avenue. The positive messaging and attempts to communicate the need for clean water in a relatable way proved hugely successful.

The Influence of Charity: Water in the Field of Charity

Charity: Water's model of conducting fundraising has been replicated across the board by various organizations. Instead of asking for an arbitrary dollar amount, many other charities have begun to quantify specific needs. For example, your \$50 donation will go to purchasing a specific item for a group of people. Harrison's model of tracking the donations has also been replicated. One such example is Operation Christmas Child, the shoebox ministry for Samaritan's Purse. Although begun in 1993, it wasn't until after the example of Charity: Water that they started to allow donors to track where their shoebox donation goes. This tracking includes videos of the children abroad receiving gifts and allowing for ministries and groups to follow the journey of the donation from the U.S. to its destination.

These methodologies for fundraising are something that's common place today. The expectation and example of transparency in donating to causes is in large part thanks to the culture that Charity: Water has installed in this new generation. Today, Charity: Water continues its mission and has gone to create more social media accounts for specific countries, drilling

machines, and thanking donors directly on YouTube. The direction of Charity: Water remains the same: to continue until everyone in the world has access to clean water.

Implications for Ministry

There are several implications from Harrison's business model that can be transferred to ministry. First, Harrison constructed a tangible and measurable mission: providing clean water to everyone in the world. With such a clear and tangible mission statement, it's easy for people to conceptualize not only the end goal of the organization, but how they themselves can buy in to the vision. For ministry, often times the programs run and events taken place do not have a clear goal. More often than not, when I speak to one of my students about why they come to church, the answer is almost always, "Because my parents made me." However, the mission of all believers is succinctly laid out by Jesus himself: to go and make disciples of all nations. Harrison makes sure to have all promotions be easily traced to the mission of Charity: Water through branding and repetitive reinforcement. The same can be said for the way my ministry is conducted. How does small groups fall into the Great Commission? How about seasonal retreats?

So often I hinge my leadership on teaching and preaching, but studying on Harrison's business model reminds me of the importance of modeling practice. Rather than mere abstract doctrines and theologies, high school students especially need practical outlets for them to experience the Gospel. These outlets are best conducted when the goal is simple and clear and people are more prone to jump on board when it's not motivated out of guilt or duty, but rather hope.