

Understanding the real ROI of our association Citydogs4Streetdogs: A small charity demonstrates it can be done effectively and efficiently

Gabriela Gustafsson (www.citydogs4streetdogs.com)

Like all smaller charitable associations, ours is dependent on various constituents for financial support as well as relying on the volunteers and help from our community in the form of workforce, know-how, time, endurance and passion. With these relations of dependency come expectations of achievements and accountability. In order to ensure the sustainability of our operations, we need to reach our goals, be able to show mission success and the real return on everybody's investments. The focus lies heavily on transparency and trust, which we take seriously in everything we do.

Citydogs4Streetdogs was founded in 2011 by three Swiss founding members who courageously decided to start up a shelter for homeless dogs in Romania. Seeing the misery of the dogs during a business trip was too hard to walk away from, and that was the moment when hope and love started to grow hand-in-hand with the plans of building a shelter and finding a team of local staff. Four years later, we now have an association that rescued over 270 dogs, created a shelter for 150 dog residents and employed local staff of professionals to run the daily tasks. All this, and ultimately changing the lives of so many dogs and their new owners, was achieved through the creation of awareness and fundraising through social media, fundraising events and educational visits to the shelter. The Swiss association has grown into an efficient Board of five honorary members, and a stable core team of nine honorary members who all work for our charity tirelessly beside their everyday work. Our team at the shelter outside of Bucharest consists of seven local professionals.



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Our mission statement is very short and straight to the point: to heal the dog-human relationship. Not an easy task. The dog is human's best friend, and would not exist without us. Our paths have been intertwined for thousands of years and we have co-existed through close relationships. All goals we set up come back to our mission: to heal the dog-human relationship. We, like so many other charitable organisations, work to improve the conditions in our society and to make the world a better place. But abstract notions like that are hard to measure in quantitative terms and often pose a challenge to the association when trying to report on mission success and ROI. If we would ask our investors, it is very likely they think there is a lack of clarity in our mission statement, which for us is the very essence of clarity. Nevertheless, we need to meet the expectations of our investors. Thus, a prerequisite for continued success lies in offering them more metrics on ROI.

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To make the somewhat intangible mission statement and goals easier to transfer into an annual report, several quantitative surrogate measures can be used. Together these surrogate measures point towards mission success or, at least, mission success on an operational level. The collection of data for quantitative measures may be challenging for smaller organisations with limited resources. The typical underlying pain points for charitable organisations are a lack of professional staff, time and money. Inadequate technology and equipment are other hindrances for collecting data. After four years of operation, we are now at a point where we have established procedures and standards of working that enable collecting data. Not only does this data show our investors the progress and the ROI, but it also helps us follow up on our development and to reach the quality we strive for in our activities. In addition to all the traditional financial data, data for our logistics and social media, we also collect data on the medical and health status of our dogs, puppy mortality rates, socialization program advancements, successful adoptions, training and support needs post-adoption, replacement of adopted dogs and last but not least employee, adopter and volunteer satisfaction rates. These metrics help to report on how we are doing with achieving our mission: healing dog-human relationship. It is crucial that the data is simple to collect, universally understood, easy to communicate and transparent.

Measuring our impact with quantitative measures shall not overshadow our daily work and real ROI, or take away too much of the scarce resources of our workforce. Even though we want to be able to convey our achievements in neat numbers to our investors and constituencies, we also want to make sure our focus and main performance lies in getting the work done and keeping our hands dirty. The two, somewhat contradictory, key aspects are transparency and trust. The demand for accountability and transparency is increasing in the non-profit sector, but it should not hinder the efficiency and the creativity of the charitable organisations in their actual work. Thus, a certain degree of trust is needed from the investors: trust in us as a charitable association to create value beyond the figures in our annual report and data collected throughout the year.

At the risk of sounding too naïve and emotional, what we see from our work with the dogs and the people, is that we are creating a ripple effect of love. Not only do we rescue dogs, treat them, train them and find homes for them, but we also see family members finding each other again, new friendships forming, children learning to trust and respect dogs, and our community of people who want to help and make a difference, growing.





A story can start with a small newborn puppy found hanging in a plastic bag by our shelter in the middle of the winter and end with that dog forcing a father and son to forgive each other and support each other to overcome a death in the family. Because what we have learned is that our dogs that we save are not only the most grateful of dogs but also the most intelligent and sensitive ones. For them to be happy we have to be happy and at peace. What could be said about the value creation in charitable contexts is – the more you give the more you get!

One could and should ask, when talking about ROI in charitable contexts, what the return really is and to whom? Is it a return for the investor, for the beneficiary, or for ideally everyone? This is what we discuss with our investors, and find that this mutual understanding in itself already creates transparency and trust needed for our cooperation. Social investments are about doing the right thing and getting the feeling of doing the right thing when seeing the impact around you. When you see the return of your investment, both in numbers in the annual report and as ripple effects of love in people around you, these are the moments when you do not ask what the meaning of life is, why it is worth fighting the endless misery in our world, and what your role is in it all. Because you have that feeling, the understanding of doing exactly what you are supposed to do – the right thing. If you had not wanted that feeling more than you wanted your money, you would not have made the investment to begin with. You can feel your return, and that is the real impact for us.

Gabriela Gustafsson completed her Master's degree in Economics at HANKEN Svenska Handelshögskolan in Helsinki, with the focus on Humanitarian Logistics and Performance Measurement. Since then she has moved to Zürich, Switzerland where she has both been working in the field of logistics as well as for Rotary International in the Europe and Africa Office. With her background she is especially interested in what the non-profit sector can learn from the business world and how to bring efficiency and accountability into charitable projects. Her free time she divides between sitting on the Board of Citydogs4Streetdogs improving the conditions of street dogs in Romania, and spending time with her two dogs and offering training support to the adopters of street dogs.