

Nonprofit Groups Aren't Shielded From Rise in American Cynicism

By RONALD ALSOP

Americans' cynicism isn't limited to big business: Even do-gooder groups are viewed with suspicion these days.

For the first time in their annual reputation study, Harris Interactive and the Reputation Institute asked people whether they trust nonprofit philanthropic and activist groups more than companies. It turns out they do – but not by much.

The survey last fall found that more people trust the information they receive from nongovernmental organizations on such global issues as the environment, poverty and human rights – 15% compared with 3% for companies. But the other 82% reserve judgment, saying their level of confidence would depend on the issue and on the specific group or company providing information. Trust in NGOs is highest among women and people younger than 40.

Which groups merit the most trust? Two relatively young organizations – Doctors Without Borders and Habitat for Humanity, both founded during the 1970s – outranked such long-established groups as the United Way, Red Cross and Goodwill Industries.

“If there are trouble spots that need medical services, Doctors Without Borders goes right in and helps,” said Lewin A.R.W. Edwards, a 29-year-old embedded engineer in Forest Hills, N.Y. “The group seems less bureaucratic with fewer middlemen than other organizations. Everything I hear about them in the press and on TV shows has been positive.”

Never underestimate the power of the media: The reputation of Doctors Without Borders has grown stronger partly because it has been

written into the scripts of such popular television programs as “Will and Grace.”

On the other hand, the United Nations ranked near the bottom (No. 17) following the extensive negative coverage it received last year when many member nations opposed going to war against Iraq. “In my mind, the U.N. is completely political and anti-justice,” said Keren Stein, a 62-year-old artist and writer in Fort Worth, Texas. “I haven't liked how it has behaved since the attack on America on September 11. It stalled so long in Iraq that Saddam Hussein had time to hide all of his weapons.”

But the Red Cross seems to have recovered relatively well from a spate of bad publicity. It ranked fourth on trust just two years after it was embroiled in controversy over its handling of donations after Sept. 11, 2001, and its president resigned under pressure.

Some respondents gave low ratings to the United Way (No. 12) because they aren't sure they want to support all of the organizations it funds. “I don't like to give money to the United Way because I worry that some of its money will go to organizations that are pro-choice on abortion,” said Jason Purcell, the 33-year-old president of a technology firm in Murray, Ky. “By directly supporting narrowly targeted organizations rather than an intermediary such as the United Way, my wife and I can be certain that our donations are being used to promote the activities and values we believe in.” They support local church programs for the needy, as well as national groups such as the Parents Television Council.

More militant organizations, including People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, Greenpeace and Global Exchange, were rated lowest for trustworthiness. “I have a very negative image of Greenpeace,” said Darrell Kahler, a 36-year-old assistant manager at a food-production plant in Nebraska. “Their tactics are too radical and strike me as kind of anti-American.”

But John Passacantando, executive director of Greenpeace US, believes his group's nonviolent civil disobedience is actually very much in the American tradition – from the Boston Tea Party to the lunch counter sit-ins of the civil-rights movement. “We've been exposing polluters for 33 years and then doing the hard work of nonviolently stopping the destruction,” he says. “It's not how you win a popularity contest but it is how we protect the planet.”

As for PETA, Debra Stoinoff, a 25-year-old pharmacy technician in Forked River, N.J., believes it “has no qualms about how it gets its message across as long as it gets press coverage.” Its campaign against fur coats, she said, “seems like a temper tantrum to me.”

PETA doesn't apologize for its aggressiveness. “Our job is to unapologetically confront animal abuse head on and win; that's what we do and we do it well,” said Lisa Lange, vice president of communications. “If it makes some people uncomfortable that we are often ‘in your face’ with the facts about animal abuse and if PETA doesn't win popularity contests as a result, we can live with it.”