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MARKETING

Selling A Cause? Better Make It Pop

With competition fierce, charities are finding that savvy marketing is a must

The Empire State Building will glow red for an evening in February. Niagara Falls will run red for a day. And on Feb. 3 newscasters will don red dresses. It's all part of a grassroots campaign to remind women of heart disease risks that has drawn employees at thousands of companies to hand out Red Dress pins plugging the American Heart Assn.'s National Wear Red Day. Backed by marketing hustle worthy of a new car rollout, recognition of the pin could come to rival awareness of the pink ribbon as a symbol for breast cancer research.

With big-name endorsements and flashy events, the "Go Red for Women" effort will use all the tricks of a big ad campaign for a shampoo or an SUV. Increasingly, nonprofits are finding it's a game they must play. Amid an explosion of causes competing for attention, even trusted charities like American Heart have had to rewrite their fund-raising playbooks to cut through the din.

A decade ago marketing was a foreign term to most nonprofits. Donors judged a group's success by how much of its budget went to good works vs. fund-raising. The Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation changed the landscape, positioning itself as a favorite marketing partner of big companies from General Motors Corp. ([GM](#)) to Whirlpool Corp. ([WHR](#)), driving annual revenues to \$180 million in 2005. But many nonprofits have been slow to follow. "The M-word was not considered a good thing," says Tom Peterson, vice-president for marketing at Heifer International, an anti-poverty group that lets you send animals to the needy via catalog. It recently landed an appearance for one of its goats on NBC's *The West Wing*. Says Peterson: "It was as if we were losing our soul."

That view is changing now that there are more than 1.2 million nonprofits, spurring stiff competition for support. Not even the 82-year-old AHA can depend on its name recognition to survive. At American Heart, fund-raising had long been a grassroots activity. Volunteers organized walks, and folks raised money from neighbors. Then, eight years ago, Wall Street veteran M. Cass Wheeler became CEO of the Dallas-based group. Armed with consumer research, he woke the place up to marketing. "People trusted [that] we did what we did well, but they were not sure exactly what we did," recalls Wheeler. Moreover, while women walked and raced and cooked to fight breast cancer, few understood it was heart disease that was more likely to kill them.

Wheeler cut the 56 field offices to 12 and built a marketing department. The AHA had previously relied on free public service announcements. But competition for the shrinking pie of free ads has become fierce. So, starting in 2003, Wheeler invested \$12 million with ad agency Campbell-Ewald Co., best known for handling Chevy cars and trucks. TV ads, posters, and pamphlets with folks who had lost loved ones to heart disease were wrapped around a new slogan, "Learn and Live," replacing the ossified "Fighting heart disease and stroke." Says Campbell-Ewald President Jeff Scott: "It's more of a call to action."

Spending money to advertise has paid off. Public support for American Heart reached \$540 million in 2005, up from \$326 million in 1998. In two years, some 366,833 people have logged on to the Learn and Live quiz (at [americanheart.org](#)), which helps people identify heart attack risks. Meanwhile, Wheeler hired marketing agency Cone Inc. to design the "Go Red" campaign. With about \$1.5 million behind it over two years, it has returned \$40 million in contributions and drawn activists from more than 9,500 companies.

Of course, nonprofits considering big branding initiatives walk a tightrope. While they need to get noticed and show marketing savvy to companies whose support they seek, good causes can't appear too slick. Nonprofit umbrella group Independent Sector found that charities operating too much like businesses turn off potential donors. Ruth A. Wooden, president of nonprofit think tank Public Agenda, says organizations need to adopt what she calls the Pier 1 strategy. "It's got to look modern and hip," she says, "but it can't be too expensive."

By Jessi Hempel

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