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Brand Aid

The American Red Cross took a centralized approach to protect its brand message



American Red Cross

The Problem

Through its more than 700 local field offices throughout the United States, the Washington-based American National Red Cross is, in its own words, a “premier emergency response organization” that is well-equipped to aid victims of war and natural disasters both domestically and worldwide. However, until recently, Red Cross marketers were ill-equipped to protect their most precious asset: the Red Cross brand.

Each of the Red Cross’ field offices had its own marketing strategy, which resulted in many different versions of Red Cross marketing messages throughout the country. And after the economy went south in 2008 and 2009, it became apparent that having separate local marketing strategies didn’t make financial sense either, according to Andrea Koslow, senior director of brand and creative marketing at the American Red Cross. To generate marketing materials, local offices were relying on internal resources, which were slim, or on volunteer agencies that would try to put their own spin on the creative, risking further brand dilution.

“It was not ideal to have redundant expenditures in articulating the brand in 700 ways,” Koslow says.

The Fix

Working with Beachwood, Ohio-based marketing agency BrandMuscle Inc., which specializes in localized marketing strategies, the Red Cross developed Brand Central, a Web portal for local Red Cross chapters that offers standardized templates for outdoor, print and TV advertising, as well as for internal communication materials—all of which can be customized for local use.

Brand Central provides local marketers with Red-Cross-approved photos and artwork, as well as ready-to-use marketing brochures, Web banners, print ads, radio scripts and pre-recorded TV spots. Chapters can access materials by campaign type or media type, or by using keywords such as “fundraising,” “Haiti” or “CPR,” and a work center allows the chapters to view and save their customized materials.

The Red Cross rolled out the tool by training individual chapters on how to use it. “We made sure that the divisional vice presidents were on board with the tool, understood it, could advocate the use of it and were wowed by it,” Koslow says. The Red Cross still has monthly training sessions as it tweaks the tool periodically to make it easier to use based on feedback from local offices. “[Local offices] embraced the tool from the start. Now the chapters can reach out to their communities in their own voice, with professional-looking material that’s easy to use and efficient,” Koslow says.

When flooding put Nashville in disaster mode in May 2010, Lamar Advertising Co., a Baton Rouge, La.-based outdoor advertising



firm, donated billboard space to the Nashville Red Cross chapter and made the billboards available within a week. The flood’s disastrous effects on the city made it essential that the Red Cross launch its marketing messages as quickly as possible, so through Brand Central, Nashville’s marketing manager downloaded an outdoor advertising template and artwork and delivered it to Lamar for circulation within 15 minutes, according to Philip Alexander, president and CEO of BrandMuscle.

Many for-profit companies use Web portals similar to Brand Central, and the Red Cross developed its template-based branding system by taking a cue from the work of its corporate partners, Boeing and John Deere. When developing the portal, the Red Cross was clear about using best practices that worked for for-profit companies, according to Alexander. “They said: ‘We’ve come out of a competitive environment, so we don’t want to look at standard nonprofit solutions. We want to look at solutions that are being used by very competitive brands,’” he says.

Richard Yaffa, president and CEO of New York-based Media Ventures Group Holdings, a marketing firm with nonprofit clients such as March of Dimes and Big Brothers Big Sisters, says that many nonprofits are using the same marketing strategies that for-profit companies use. “Given increased competition for fundraising, not-for-profits are being pressed to be

more efficient and create greater consistency, much like their for-profit brethren,” he says, adding that tools like Brand Central are essential for large organizations like the Red Cross. “When you have many local chapters, any brand wants consistency across different regions [and] to make sure that what they say nationally can be customized locally.”

Yaffa rates the Red Cross’ Brand Central a success from a branding standpoint. “If you have different messages going out from the national office and the local office, [they] need to be nationally significant but locally relevant, [and] this is,” he says.

Metrics

Since Brand Central’s adoption in April 2010, 96% of all Red Cross field offices and 100% of offices in its most high-potential donation markets are using the brand portal, Koslow says. Although a total figure on cost savings for local chapters won’t be available for a few years, Koslow says that so far the savings have been “pretty radical,” with fewer field offices using staff hours and material resources on redundant activities.

“By freeing up our field units from creating individual marketing campaigns, we strengthen our brand, and we give them more time to deliver on our mission and raise money to fuel our economic engine,” Koslow says. “Instead of being 700 Red Crosses, we’re one Red Cross.”

COMPANY	THE AMERICAN NATIONAL RED CROSS
HEADQUARTERS	WASHINGTON
PARTNER AGENCY	BRANDMUSCLE, BEACHWOOD, OHIO
PROJECT LAUNCH	APRIL 2010
RESULTS	BRAND CENTRAL NOW USED BY 96% OF ALL RED CROSS FIELD OFFICES AND 100% OF OFFICES IN HIGH-POTENTIAL DONATION MARKETS