

LIVESTRONG

FOUNDATION

Organization: LIVESTRONG Foundation

Category: Crisis Communications

Title: "From the Crisis Trenches: Blazing a New Trail in Communications"

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OBJECTIVES:

In 2012, the world watched as Lance Armstrong's fabled cycling career crashed. Caught in the crossfire was the LIVESTRONG Foundation, the highly rated non-profit Armstrong created to improve the lives of people affected by cancer. With every new development in the cycling scandal, media turned to the charity for its reaction. As it was reluctantly pulled further and further into the coverage, the stakes couldn't have been higher for the non-profit.

During the week of October 15, 2012, the media scrutiny surrounding Armstrong reached fever pitch when the United States Anti-Doping Agency made public all the evidence it had gathered against him in a report, dispelling any remaining doubt that Lance had misled the world, as well as his colleagues at the Foundation. In an effort to inoculate the Foundation against further fall-out, Armstrong resigned as chairman of the organization. His resignation, however, occurred during a week devoted to the Foundation's highly anticipated and visible 15th anniversary celebration, which included a star-studded gala, a 4,300-person bike ride through downtown Austin with its annual Team LIVESTRONG Challenge, and a host of press arriving to cover the festivities.

In November, the Foundation retained a firm to conduct public opinion research to inform its strategic communications plan moving forward. The research revealed that the Foundation's highest communications priority had to be advancing clarity about its mission – and what impact the Foundation makes. The findings led to the development of two immediate primary goals – the what and the who:

- The first was to clarify that the LIVESTRONG Foundation exists to serve people and families struggling with cancer, not a celebrity athlete.
- The second was the prioritization of three prime target groups to receive that message: women, caregivers and people under the age of 40.

In January 2013, during the six days of notice the non-profit had leading up to Armstrong's exclusive world-wide interview with Oprah Winfrey, the two-person communications team orchestrated a communications plan for the Foundation with two distinct goals:

- Reassure patients who rely on the LIVESTRONG Foundation's free services that its doors would remain open.
- Reinforce that the Foundation was disappointed and misled along with the rest of the world.

STRATEGY:

Given the wide-spread media attention, taking a quiet, heads-down approach during and after the crisis was not an option. The communications team formed a plan to address questions with dignity and candor. The heart of the rapid response plan was open and transparent communication with donors, stakeholders and the media about Armstrong's resignation and cheating admission and what it meant for the Foundation's future. With every interview, press availability, news release and blog, the Foundation planned to use the crisis to its advantage by drawing attention to the free support services the non-profit provides to cancer patients, survivors and their families. The message was simple: WE CAN HELP.

Even in the midst of the crisis, the Foundation was also building a longer-term plan based on the findings of the public opinion research. It was determined that moving forward, a sharp, sustained focus on clarity would have broad, possibly even radical, implications for the Foundation's image, positioning, voice, communications strategy and continued success.

TACTICS:

On October 17, 2012, the Foundation issued a statement announcing Armstrong's decision to step down as chairman of the board of directors and the immediate appointment of Jeff Garvey to fill that role. To achieve comprehensive communication of this key development, the Foundation provided CEO Doug Ulman and Communications VP Katherine McLane to national and international television, radio and print media throughout the week.

In a bold move, the Foundation seized the spotlight to reach out to all of its stakeholders with a campaign to solicit their support. The resulting funds broke short-term development records and gave the Foundation a tangible form of support to point to.

While dealing with the crisis at hand, the Foundation immediately began a rebranding effort that included:

- An official name change from the Lance Armstrong Foundation to the **LIVESTRONG** Foundation
- Updates to all public facing materials including the website, printed collateral as necessary and the boilerplate
- Upgrades to marketing materials advertising the Foundation's free patient support services featuring actual patients, caregivers and survivors
- A refreshing of the **LIVESTRONG** Foundation's mark

The Foundation issued a statement on January 16, 2013, to address the influx of media inquiries leading up to Armstrong's confessional with Winfrey. Immediately following the interview, which aired on Jan. 17, the Foundation issued a final statement responding to Armstrong's confessions of cheating throughout much of his cycling career and its disappointment at being misled.

The communications team instituted disciplined policies that allowed the organization to cement the separation from Armstrong in the minds of reporters and the public: no more comments on any developments in Armstrong's legal, personal or professional life. The Foundation had to chart its own strong, independent course forward.

EXECUTION:

For the six days leading up to Armstrong's critical sit-down interview with Winfrey, the communications team worked around the clock executing the plan, crafting surrogate communications talking points and schedules for national news programs, booking the Foundation's CEO on the *Today Show* and National Public Radio, crafting and placing a *USA Today* op-ed and delivering talking points for board members, staff, donors and supporters.

The Foundation's response to all interview and information requests during this time included a succinct and focused 'About the **LIVESTRONG** Foundation' document containing information about the organization's services, number of people served, funds raised, advocacy milestones, financial status, and a preview of the Foundation's future plans and priorities. Its contents were echoed via every channel available to the Foundation.

To generate positive media attention for the **LIVESTRONG** Foundation's mission, the communications team created key moments that elevated the voices of cancer patients and engineered announcements to reinforce the Foundation's status as one of the most highly rated non-profits in the U.S. The team also crafted a communications plan that is fielding Foundation representatives to key venues and media opportunities throughout the nation this spring and summer.

EVALUATION OF SUCCESS/RESULTS/ROI:

The week of Lance Armstrong's resignation and the Foundation's 15th anniversary celebration:

- The Team **LIVESTRONG** Challenge drew more than 4,300 participants compared to 2,698 people in 2011.
- *15: An Evening with LIVESTRONG* raised \$2.5 million in funds, making it the largest fundraising night in Austin history.
- Online donations between Oct. 17-19 were nearly \$240,000, double what donations were for Oct. 10-12, with the average donation increasing 13 percent.

Statements issued by the Foundation the week of January 14 saw a record number of media impressions averaging nearly seven million per announcement – a sign it had people's attention.

The effectiveness of the **LIVESTRONG** Foundation's communications and marketing strategy will be measured at key moments throughout the year through polling, supporter focus groups, in-depth interviews and surveys. Bearing in mind its key targets, it will focus on broad-swath outreach to women and Americans under 40, as well as micro-targeting to caregivers. Course adjustments will be made in rapid order to amplify the Foundation's effectiveness throughout an initial 12-month horizon.

However, the true tale of the Foundation's survival will not be told in just one year. The non-profit has outdated perceptions to overcome. Trust to build. Supporters to reassure. In many ways, it is starting from scratch. That takes time, dogged commitment and enormous effort.