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## How LIVESTRONG has survived

JANUARY 15, 2013

tags: Communications, Crisis Communications, LIVESTRONG, Marketing, Nonprofits

The way things are going, by the time the Lance Armstrong interview with Oprah airs, most of us will already be tired of hearing about it (if we're not already). Goodness knows, it's a story that's been months in the making, with most folks in the cycling world – including recreational/fitness cyclists like myself – having long ago accepted the dark truth.

But there's another world – a more important world – that's also sent into turmoil: the world of the cancer fighters and survivors who found in Lance the inspiration they need to carry on. And that world hangs on one word: LIVESTRONG.

So what happens to a brand when its founder and living icon falls from grace? How does an organization manage such a situation? As it has many times, LIVESTRONG created an example for other organizations to follow.

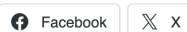
Over the past few years, there's been no avoiding the incredible marketing machine that is LIVESTRONG. Its quick mastery of social media alone demonstrated an ability to leverage resources and opportunities quickly and wisely. Nothing was done carelessly; everything was done with a consistent message and strong brand presence.

So what becomes of all that now? Probably very little, because in recent months LIVESTRONG has undertaken a steady and focused program to prepare for this week. And that's the example other nonprofits (or any organization) facing a crisis can follow. Let's take a quick, simplified look at some lessons LIVESTRONG can teach those of us who lead or communicate for nonprofit organizations.

- ★ **Prepare.** Lance never won a major bike race without a well-designed, long-term and strategic plan for preparation (yes, that plan apparently including cheating, but, even in that it appears, Lance was incredibly methodical and disciplined). In dealing with this crisis, LIVESTRONG appears to have followed that example, preparing and following a plan that probably has been more than a year in the making.
- ★ **Shift the focus.** LIVESTRONG used to be focused almost entirely on Lance Armstrong. Over time, however, that focus shifted, and over the last couple of years Lance has been remarkably absent from much of the organization's marketing. No doubt, he was still involved, but the public face became less and less associated with Lance and more focused on the brand itself.
- ★ **Disconnect.** Lance long ago handed over daily leadership of LIVESTRONG to CEO Doug Ulman. In October he stepped down as the organization's chairman, and in November he resigned from the board of directors. We've long believed that an organization's reputation rests in large part on the reputation of its leaders. LIVESTRONG recognizes that and, as a result, has distanced itself from Lance and his reputation as a cheater.
- ★ **Master the message.** Everybody at LIVESTRONG sings from the same song sheet regarding the whole doping issue, but more importantly, they continue to push the focus onto the organization's work helping survivors. You'll never see a LIVESTRONG interview or blog post that doesn't somehow refer to the many people LIVESTRONG helps and the number of people who need its services.
- ★ **Press forward.** No one has ever, for even a moment, given any hint that LIVESTRONG might "go quiet" during this crisis, or that it might slow down its work to take a lower profile. No: The organization has pressed on, publicizing its mission and work without pause, which simply serves to show the effectiveness of the points I noted above. Having asserted the brand as something apart from Lance, the organization has no need to step back. It can do its good work regardless of what becomes of its founder and one-time icon.

Will LIVESTRONG emerge from this crisis unscathed? Probably not. But the organization has minimized the damage and will certainly survive. Why? Because it followed a clear-eyed and well-defined process to this day. And that's what it always takes to succeed, in good times or bad.

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