



American Humane empowered

by Robin D. Rusch

Why would an organization go through the trouble of rebranding if its position and mission aren't changing? In the case of American Humane, there were a number of compelling reasons involving confusion over its name, inconsistency in representation, and a desire to reconnect with the public.

Like many old line brands, the logo, colors, and other representations of the American Humane brand were not being used consistently across departments. Kathryn Strickland, director of public information at American Humane, explains that "Our old brand had suited us well for 25 years. But one of the problems was not everyone in the organization was using the same logo. There were no guidelines, lack of consistency -- it wasn't resonating."

But reaching the right audience for a non-profit organization that works to prevent violence and cruelty toward children and animals poses other challenges. American Humane wanted to remain relevant in both areas without confusing its audience. In choosing a design of a child's hands lifted up to form a bird, American Humane hopes to suggest the idea of child and animal uplifted together. According to the organization, the blue is intended to convey nobility, strength and power, while green represents energy, vitality and growth. The new design incorporates the shield concept as a frame around the hands, reworked from the previous design of a simple human form silhouetted against a shield.

American Humane's name has also been scrutinized. Too often the public mistakenly referred to the organization as the American Humane Society (in fact, it's the American Humane Association). Typically entities are reluctant to change their name, particularly in American Humane's case, having been in existence for 125 years. However, if the name is too similar to another organization or does not have a strong recall, the public may not recognize the organization's accomplishments and relevance. American Humane wanted to reduce confusion with its competition, which includes the Associated Humane Societies, Humane Society of US and American Society for Prevention of Cruelty of Animals (ASPCA). "In a lot of media relations we'd get great coverage and a wonderful article and then it would say 'American Humane Society.' So we just decided it made sense to drop 'Association' from our formal title," says Strickland. The new name will represent the organization in most communication and "Association" will be added for legal contracts and documents.

The tagline was also refreshed from "empowering children and animals since 1877" to "empowering action since 1877." While the revised tag is less cumbersome on the tongue and the new design reinforces the child-animal connection, there is no longer a direct reference to whom exactly American Humane is suppose to benefit. Kelly Major at branding agency Monigle Associates describes the decision-making process behind changing the tagline. "One of the brand attributes that was most important was the idea of empowerment. And we felt

that was a bigger deal even than 'protecting children and animals.' This isn't an organization that has clinics or shelters or hospitals. They enable and empower hospitals, clinics, shelters to do their work. So we felt like the best strategy was in creating a tagline around the idea of empowerment."

American Humane struggled with the usual issues a non profit or small business faces when contemplating an exercise in branding. A major obstacle was money. How could the organization keep costs down without jeopardizing the project? Although many agencies do charge non profits for work, some do so at minimal cost and others work pro bono.

There is also audience reception to consider. What if the public imagined that defenseless animals and children were left unguarded while the organization focused its attention to the brand? Or what if the press depicted American Humane as a clueless organization dropping barrels of money on pricey consultants? Like all non profits, the possibility of being mistaken as frivolous or wasteful is a huge barrier to these sorts of projects. Keeping costs at a minimum is always the number one concern.

American Humane was fortunate that it was able to find an outside partner, Monigle Associates, which agreed to take on the job pro bono. The decision to consult for free, Major says, was unique to the circumstances of this particular project. One of the considerations was the quality of the request. "[American Humane] had clear deliverables. A lot of times you get an RFP that doesn't reflect what they are asking for. Kathryn [Strickland] and her team had a clear set of deliverables."

This just left execution and implementation up to American Humane – no small amount of work and resources. American Humane contributed weekend and evening hours to the project, and will implement the new brand slowly by phasing out old printed material first to avoid waste.

Strickland describes the collaboration with an outside agency as extremely beneficial to the overall outcome and acceptance of the project. "The best part about it was having an outside partner for me to talk to. [The rebranding] was a lot more than I ever dreamed; I had never been through this process before. I had an internal team, but having that outside partner to give me advice along the way [was invaluable]."

So far Strickland describes the external response as positive. Internal acceptance appears to be more of a mixed bag. Most of the techniques American Humane is using to gain acceptance center around educating the staff. Time was reserved before the external launch to introduce the new brand internally and answer questions. As the brand becomes more of a reality to the staff, Strickland and her team expect more questions. In addition to presenting staff with personalized packets with communications material, the branding team will visit with each department to talk more specifically about the changes.

To those who might consider reworking or evaluating their own brand, Strickland's spontaneous remark at the end of the interview seems especially encouraging. "It was a fun

challenge."

[24-Feb-2003]