

The Case for Cause: Lessons Learned from the Ice Bucket Challenge

Summer 2014 will undoubtedly be remembered as the summer of the ice bucket, as friends, family members, colleagues, business and government leaders, and pop culture icons threw down the frosty gauntlet in support of the ALS Association (USA), the Motor Neurone Disease Association (UK) and other organizations worldwide focused on amyotrophic lateral sclerosis or Lou Gehrig's disease — each adding his or her own creative spin on The Ice Bucket Challenge. In fact, the viral campaign has so far engaged more than 3 million donors around the world in raising more than \$100 million dollars, making it one of the most successful fundraising campaigns in recent history.

More than just a social media success story, the Ice Bucket Challenge provides valuable lessons for professional services firms interested in taking their CSR and citizenship initiatives to the next level.

#1 Authenticity Matters

Charitable giving and citizenship activity should be authentic. The Ice Bucket Challenge wasn't started by a public relations firm or a fundraising expert, but rather by a group of young people who wanted to show their support for a friend with ALS.

To create an authentic, relevant citizenship program within the workplace requires just that sort of personal passion and creativity. The most successful philanthropic programs are built inclusively based on input from across the organization — both in terms of the causes you support and the ways in which you support them. Social responsibility initiatives should be people-driven, including firm-wide voting opportunities, cross-functional steering committees and leadership roles for diverse internal champions.

#2 There's Nothing Quite Like Friendly Competition

The Ice Bucket Challenge harnessed several important participation and enthusiasm drivers — namely the power of the dare and the chance to out-do other participants in front of an audience. The spirit of rivalry that was at the core of the campaign spurred more and more individuals to get involved in increasingly wild and wacky ways. People had fun being part of a national movement and taking the effort to the next level.

For service firms, the lesson here is to encourage friendly rivalry and creativity and provide a public forum for both in order to maximize participation and the positive feelings associated with it. Imagine if junior associates could challenge senior partners, or if different office locations were able to compete to make the biggest impact. Make your efforts entertaining, inclusive and imaginative and you'll see your efforts pay big dividends in terms of both social benefit and human resources.

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#3 Provide Multiple Ways for People to Show Support

The original concept behind the Ice Bucket Challenge was that when the gauntlet was thrown in your direction, you could choose to make a \$100 donation or get soaked. As it turned out, most people opted to do both, as well as to go a step further to post the videos and proof of donations on social media.

The lesson? Within your organization, you have all sorts of team members with varying capacities to give based on their financial resources, time and interest. The key to a successful charitable initiative is to develop a platform that allows them all to participate in whatever way suits them best — each person contributing to the success of the overall program in his or her own way.

#4 Make it A Family Affair

As the Ice Bucket Challenge progressed, adults and kids of all ages began to challenge each other, and families often responded to challenges together. Many parents reported that the activity allowed them to broach the subject of giving back and helping others in need with their children in a meaningful new way.

Your people are very busy, and often the reality of adding charitable activities to an already overloaded family schedule hinders participation. But what if you allowed your team members to involve their families and friends in the firm's philanthropic efforts? What if children and spouses could take part in helping you reach your established community milestones, and take pride in your successes? The positive emotions that have been proven to accrue back to workplaces that provide meaningful opportunities to help others would be exponentially enhanced.

#5 Invite Others to Join The Effort

The Ice Bucket Challenge spread like wildfire because each participant invited others to get on board. Those that did rise to the occasion not only felt connected to a social movement, but also felt more connected to the people they knew who had also chosen to participate.

Think about the relationship building potential that a citizenship initiative offers. A public commitment to a cause program will help build enduring relationships with all of the stakeholders that are critical to the firm's success — both with those inside the firm, and outside with clients and prospects. Connections with peers and clients that are based on characteristics highlighted by charitable work such as trustworthiness, leadership, credibility and likability are deeper and more enduring. Imagine how charitable activity could bring your entire organization together. And, further, imagine how a collaborative philanthropic effort could cement your relationship with your most valued clients.

#6 Rally Around a Single Social Issue

Except for the handful of donors who participated in the ice bucket portion of the challenge but chose to give their donation to a non-ALS charity, virtually everyone who took part in the effort did so to have an impact on ALS. Throughout the course of the campaign, it was easy to tell the story, track its success and allow each individual to see take pride in his or her personal role in moving the needle for the cause — i.e. “my gift helped raise a record-breaking \$100 million and spread awareness in connection with this important issue.”

The lesson for professional services firms lies in the power of finding common ground. Successful initiatives are founded on a shared cultural passion. From the mailroom to the most senior executive, what social issues inspire your people? By concentrating your firm's collective time and money on one cause, your gifts will do more good for you, the organizations you choose as beneficiaries and the core issue itself.

The summer of 2014 may be remembered as the summer of the Ice Bucket, but by reinvigorating your firm's citizenship program with these best practices, 2015 will go down in your firm's history as the year you began to realize an entirely new level of ROI from your social investment.



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