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Keeping the Livestrong brand strong after 14 years

In-house marketers own strategy but outsource execution to others

Premium content from Austin Business Journal by Sandra Zaragoza , ABJ Staff

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When Livestrong set out to “change the way the world fights cancer,” it also became an innovator in cause-related marketing.

As it turns 15 years old next year, the nonprofit is as ambitious a marketer as ever, having bolstered its in-house marketing team that intends to leverage branding opportunities, get the word out about Livestrong’s services and drive revenue to fund its efforts to help people fight cancer.

In the last few years, **Missy Douthit**, executive vice president of advocacy and engagement, set out to assemble an in-house marketing team with expertise in social media and retail. Douthit was brought on at the height of the Livestrong band phenomena for her retail skills honed at **Neiman Marcus** and Golfsmith.

Douthit hired **Shannon Sinunu**, who previously worked in marketing for Banana Republic, as director of marketing strategy and creative services. The organization’s newest team member is **Travis Rimel**, who is director of new media.

While Livestrong is a globally recognized brand, one challenge it faces is having people understand exactly what it does, the marketing team said.

Last year, it brought in \$48.4 million in revenue from donors, events, cause marketing and merchandising. About 81 percent of \$35.7 million in expenses went directly to Livestrong’s programs, including education, global advocacy and government relations. On Sept. 20, **Lance Armstrong** addressed world

leaders at the U.N. Summit on noncommunicable diseases. This year, the foundation launched its Patient Navigation Center at its East Austin headquarters to assist low-income people fighting cancer — a model it hopes to prove then replicate in other cities.

On the marketing front this year, the nonprofit partnered on the Livestrong Sporting Park in Kansas City, which is billed as the first philanthropic stadium in the world. A portion of all stadium revenue, including money from ticket sales and concessions, funds Livestrong.

Staying relevant

While it has established an in-house marketing team, the organization plans to continue working with different creative agencies instead of selecting an agency of record.

“We want to outsource creative and execution, but the strategy we need to own,” Douthit said.

Livestrong’s marketing collaborations tie back to Austin-based Milkshake Media, which helped develop the Livestrong concept. Over the years, local and global agencies have helped stir the pot, including The Butler Bros. from Austin, global agency Ogilvy & Mather and Wieden + Kennedy of Portland.

“The talent we have in Austin has been very influential in how we approach marketing,” said **Katherine McLane**, Livestrong’s communications director.

One challenge for the marketing team is ferreting out branding opportunities. And some have questioned whether a nonprofit should be engaged in this level of marketing partnerships.

“We were so fortunate that we’ve had great supporters. ... Our door is knocked on by really great brands that want to be associated with us, but it’s tricky,” Sinunu said. Branding “is difficult work, but we choose to endeavor in that because it’s one way to diversify our income, as much as an email campaign.”

One of the foundation’s key licensing arrangements is with Nike. It also has revenue-generating partnerships with Oakley, RadioShack, American Century Investments, Giro, Trek and Thinksport.

The Livestrong brand, with its global recognition and goodwill, is in a power position when it comes to forming these types of alliances, said **Adam Butler** of The Butler Bros.

“The Livestrong brand became bigger than cancer; it became about hope for people. It’s a pretty powerful tonic that draws not just individuals, but companies and agencies,” Butler said. “It’s a phenomenon, not just a brand.”

Another challenge for Livestrong is connecting to various audiences, whether it's those affected by cancer, donors, legislative decision makers or consumers.

Although social media has become a critical tool for reaching audiences, Livestrong doesn't use it to sell products or simply build a fan base, Rimel said.

"I think we've been able to leverage social media in a way that a lot of businesses or organizations don't," Rimel said. "If you explore our Facebook page, it's people sharing their intimate experience of fighting cancer or giving tribute to people that they know have fought cancer. It's a sharing platform in the most intimate sense of the word."

Asked whether allegations of blood doping and other negative media attention faced by Livestrong's founder, Armstrong, has hurt the nonprofit's brand, the marketing team said it has not seen a significant decline in donations or interest from high-profile brands. The foundation continues to add supporters every year, the team said.

"We've been fortunate that Livestrong has a very personal meaning to a family that is fighting cancer or somebody whose loved one is battling the disease. A person in that position cares about the services we provide and the community that we can offer," McLane said. "I think the last thing that person cares about is news from the cycling world."



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