

Silicone bracelets let us wear causes on our sleeve

By [Anita Manning](#), Special for USA TODAY

It all began with a simple yellow band. Not a band of gold. It was silicone.



By H. Darr Beiser, USA TODAY

Lance Armstrong's LIVESTRONG bracelet inspired a trend in which everything from a personal cause to your favorite sports team can be worn on your wrist.

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It bore the word LIVESTRONG, and it launched a cause-awareness campaign that has been copied, emulated, praised, mocked and commercialized in the years since Nike and the [Lance Armstrong Foundation](#) produced the first 5 million yellow bracelets in 2004.

They sold for \$1 each to raise money for cancer survivors.

Now, 80 million wristbands and 80 million dollars later, it has become an example of what foundation president Doug Ulman calls "the democratization of philanthropy."

- **PHOTOS:** [Read their wrists: bracelets' many messages](#)

Anyone with a dollar can participate.

Colors for good causes

A sample of the colors of cause-related wristbands offered by advocacy groups on their websites to raise awareness, money:

Red: [American Heart Association](#), with heart-and-torch logo and the words "Today's The Day I Save Lives." Sold five to a package, \$8.50 (\$6.50 for youth size bands)

Orange: ASPCA, bearing Web address [aspca.org](#). \$5.99 each.

Blue: Cystic Fibrosis Foundation band says "Breathe." In adult or youth size, \$2 each.

Blue and white: Autism Speaks, "Autism Speaks; It's time to listen." Bag of 10 is \$5.

Green: American Cancer Society, "Celebrating Hope," liver cancer awareness. Eight-pack, \$3.99. (Many other colors offered for other specific cancer awareness causes.)

Purple: Alzheimer's Association, "a reason to hope," five-pack, \$4.99.

"Across age and income groups, geographies and cultures, the bands accelerated the transformation of philanthropy from an activity dominated by relatively few people with excess money or time into a form of expression and participation available to anyone, anywhere," he says in a blog essay.

The idea of cause bracelets didn't originate with silicone bands. In the 1970s, Vietnam War-era POW-MIA metal wristbands helped Americans remember those imprisoned in [Southeast Asia](#), says pop culture observer Edward Schiappa, chairman of the communication studies department at the [University of Minnesota](#).

Now, wristbands are sold all over the Internet by companies and non-profits to promote concepts including animal welfare, support for troops, Christianity, college sports teams, disaster relief efforts, anti-hunger campaigns, anti-bullying, anti-racism and disease awareness.

They're used as fundraisers for high school bands and church groups and as fashion accessories in colors bright and dull. They are vehicles for advertising beer and body shops and for declarations of friendship or school spirit. They're given as favors at parties and worn to display concepts from peace to puppy love. Any new event in the public consciousness is likely to be reflected in a wristband: On eBay, you can get [Occupy Wall Street](#) bands in at least six colors.

Cause-related bracelets are a statement, Schiappa says, "like wearing a peace sign button or an American flag, only more specific in what the wearer is identifying with." For some, they're something to collect, he says, and while they started as a fad, they've moved well beyond that, he says.

A sure sign of that is that they've been made fun of. "When something is so popular that it is mocked, that tells you it has made its mark," Schiappa says.

That mark was made when Comedy Central's Stephen Colbert broke his wrist in 2007 and, in a gentle takeoff on the LiveStrong campaign, began selling "WristStrong" bands to raise awareness of the "epidemic of wrist violence." He promoted them on his show, *The Colbert Report*, and successfully badgered celebrities such as [Matt Lauer](#), [Arianna Huffington](#) and [Al Gore](#) into wearing them in public. Colbert donated proceeds to the [Yellow Ribbon Fund](#), a Bethesda, Md., non-profit that helps injured military service members and their families. It was great fun, but the outcome was nothing to laugh at. "The very first check we got from them was for \$171,000," says fund director Mark Robbins. The fund has received \$275,000 from wristbands, part of a total of \$430,000 Colbert has donated.

Other non-profits use wristbands as complements to more prominent symbols of identity.

The American Heart Association has its "Go Red for Women" campaign and sells items with a red-dress logo. At Susan G. Komen for the Cure, it's the pink ribbon.

For a simple idea, the now-ubiquitous silicone bands "have been incredibly successful and continue to be so," Schiappa says. "They are now part of our culture."