

How San Diego Blood Bank Made a Difference in Life

By

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About the Author

Mary Walter-Brown is the owner of Brown Ideas, a strategic marketing firm specializing in multi-media marketing solutions. Mary has a diverse background with more than 17 years of experience in television news, corporate video production, public relations and marketing.

As the Marketing Manager for the San Diego Blood Bank I struggled with many of the same challenges that marketing professionals around the world grapple with – how do you create a compelling enough message to motivate the public to do something that could be out of their comfort zone. In this case, we weren't asking people to purchase a product or service; we needed them to donate blood. Unlike Apple's iPod or Sony's PlayStation, there would be no fancy gadget to provide hours of entertainment - only the knowledge that a blood donor's efforts may have saved someone's life. On top of that, marketing to people in Southern California proved to have its unique challenges because there are so many options distracting the consumer. Donating blood was taking a backseat to surfing, sailing and shopping!

Before our journey began with NextLevel Thinking, the San Diego Blood Bank was constantly struggling to maintain an adequate blood supply for the hospitals it serves in and around San Diego County. Supplies dropped so low in the summer and around the holidays that the organization often resorted to issuing emergency pleas for blood through the media. These appeals caused momentary spikes in collections but never produced the sustained donating trends that we desperately needed to establish.

Organizationally, we determined that something had to change in order for the San Diego Blood Bank to be able to fulfill its mission in the community. The previous strategies hadn't delivered the results we were looking for – to collect and maintain a consistent supply of blood for area hospitals. To do this, we needed to recruit new blood donors and increase the number of donations our existing donors were giving each year.

The decision to bring NextLevel Thinking in to help us craft a new strategy came from seeing the impressive results the firm produced at Gulf Coast Regional Blood Center. During my initial conversation with Eric Poerschke, NextLevel's managing partner, he asked me if the San Diego Blood Bank was ready to do what was necessary to change the culture at our organization and ultimately pave the uphill road to success. He cautioned me that it wouldn't work unless we were completely committed to executing every aspect of the program that we would design together. Our CEO was convinced that we needed to make a change, so we took the plunge.

When NextLevel came on board we began an investigation and analysis exercise to help us review our existing marketing and PR practices. We discovered many interesting things about our organization during that process that would begin to shape the restructuring of our strategy. I believe the most dramatic realization was that we weren't cultivating a relationship with our donors, mainly because we were missing opportunities to communicate with them. Through more analysis (yes, it often felt like group therapy) we realized that we hadn't been confident enough about ourselves, and our cause, to create that meaningful relationship with our donors. We also found that our organization wasn't visible enough in the community and that the public didn't realize the importance of donating blood and the impact it could have on someone's life.

NextLevel helped us realize that our organization had something special to offer; something many other non-profits lacked. We could provide people the chance to make a

difference in someone's life by donating blood. From that discovery, the Difference in Life program was born.

In order to achieve our goal of recruiting new blood donors and increasing the number of donations by our existing donors, we created a multi-platform recruitment and retention strategy incorporating email, mail, telemarketing, website development, radio/television advertising and internal customer service outreach. Every communication touch point was integrated with each other so the messages were all consistent. By utilizing these various communication mediums we found that we were able to start "connecting" with our donors using one or more of the methods that were most convenient to them. We were sensitive to the fact that we needed to cultivate a respectful relationship with our constituents so we decided to limit our contacts on a monthly basis.

We used email, mail, telemarketing and customer service outreach to communicate with existing donors and made a significant investment in radio/television advertising to appeal to new donors. We created a simple story and some easy steps that would explain how people could "make a difference in life." All we asked is that they donate "one more time each year." For new donors, that meant one donation. For an existing donor, it was one additional visit. To put a face to our cause, we began sharing the stories of real blood recipients and blood donors in San Diego whose lives had been impacted by the act of donating blood.

It was also important that the program offer opportunities for everyone to make a difference in life - so we created programs for individual blood donors, for businesses/organizations who host blood drives, for those who choose to volunteer their time and those who opt to make a financial contribution. Like our touch point communications, each of these sub-programs were integrated with one another to maximize the effectiveness of the overall program goal.

In order for this program to be successful, it had to become a part of the culture at the San Diego Blood Bank – an organization that opened in 1950. Change didn't come quickly for many of the employees who'd spent their careers building the framework of the previous strategy. But, with the support of our CEO and other directors, the employees began to believe in the Difference in Life program. We instituted a customer service training program for the nursing staff to get them excited about the many new benefits they would be offering donors. In addition, we hosted new commercial viewing parties for the employees and offered updates about the program in every employee newsletter. We invited staff members to participate in various Difference in Life teams so they could offer input and help craft the strategy. Every department was given the opportunity to contribute.

Within one year of launching the Difference in Life program, the San Diego Blood Bank increased collections by 10%. In addition, donor satisfaction surveys improved dramatically and our number of first time donors increased. We stopped issuing emergency pleas for donors and began maintaining a consistent supply of blood.

Within three years, we'd increased collections by 26% and began tackling other challenges like managing an ever-growing inventory of blood products. During those three years, we experimented with many different tactics for improving our results but we never deviated from the core strategy. Although the program is far more complex than when it started, it still relies on the integrity of the multi-platform messaging that was created at its inception.

In conclusion, if I could advise other marketing professionals who would like to see these kinds of results, I would encourage them to jump in with both feet and truly commit to executing the strategy you develop. Don't cut corners or try to save a few pennies in the short-term. Your long-term results will pay dividends. I can say with complete certainty that we would not have experienced the success we quickly realized if we would have sacrificed one component of the program. Although the multi-platform communication model can be cumbersome to manage, it is the most effective way to ensure your message is received. And, ultimately, that's what makes a difference.