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News, Advice, and Resources for Nonprofit Workers

A New Name Can Give a Charity a Louder and Clearer Voice

By Heather Joslyn

THE FOUNDERS of Washington Shakespeare Company chose the troupe's name 22 years ago to signify civic pride: This would be a group of homegrown professional actors, not the New York pros who filled the stages of other local productions.

In the intervening years, the nonprofit theater company gained attention for its cutting-edge versions of the classics. In one notorious 2007 production, "Macbeth" was tweaked to emphasize the primitive passions of its characters. To make it seem as though the murderous Scots had "emerged from the primordial ooze," says Christopher Henley, the artistic director, actors performed clad only in body paint, which gave the production a reputation as "the all-nude 'Macbeth.'"

With such daring as its calling card, Washington Shakespeare Company seemed to have outgrown its plainly descriptive name. Also, it sometimes found itself confused with a similarly named local troupe. So, its leaders sought a new name: something that described the nonprofit's mission yet also was singular and unforgettable.

In August, the Washington Shakespeare Company rechristened itself WSC Avant Bard.

Response to the new name has been mostly positive, says Mr. Henley, though sometimes listeners "groan like you would at a bad pun."

But then, he adds, "they go and tell it to their friends."

A 'Sense of Identity'

In recent years, organizations with a variety of missions have renamed themselves—or, if they haven't legally changed their name, they have "re-branded" it for common usage. In one high-profile case, YMCA of the USA has neither renamed nor rebranded itself officially but has simply embraced its nickname, the Y, in a more public fashion this year, says a spokeswoman.



DOUG GIFFORD/SCFTA

Segerstrom Center for the Arts announced its new name, which honors a family of donors, at a splashy public event in January.

Nonprofit officials who have been through the renaming process say that the experience can benefit an organization if the new name is chosen with care and if it is unveiled in a way that intrigues potential supporters without alienating existing ones.

Renaming a charity can provide a group with "a renewed sense of identity and an opportunity to deepen a relationship among staff, the board, partner organizations, clients, donors, and so forth," says Howard Adam Levy, principal of the Red Rooster Group, a branding consultant in New York that works extensively with nonprofit clients.

Mr. Levy adds, "It starts a process: What is the organization all about? What are our values? What is our history? Why did we start doing this, and

why are we doing this now?" (For advice on carrying out that process, see below.)

Inspire and Galvanize

The burden of bearing a name that has outlived its usefulness, Mr. Levy says, "is like walking around with a limp leg. When the pain gets unbearable enough, then an organization will say, 'Hey, we can correct this. We can run now, we can sprint, we can compete better.'"

Because nonprofits rarely have the resources to devote to marketing that for-profit companies do, he adds, a charity's name bears a lot of weight. It has to convey the group's mission but also "excite and inspire and galvanize people," Mr. Levy says. "It has to have pos-

itive connotations and avoid jargon. It can't be too long or people will wind up abbreviating it. It does a lot." And, in a tough economy, when marketing resources are even scarcer than usual, nonprofits may have less tolerance for an imperfect name.

Charities change their names for many reasons. Some groups, like WSC Avant Bard, say the original name no longer fully represents what the organization does or is too similar to another group's name. Sometimes a nonprofit seeks a more streamlined name because its original moniker is simply too long, clunky, or vague.

Beautiful Simplicity

Sometimes the original name uses antiquated or politically loaded words that make the group seem out of step with modern times. United Negro College Fund, for instance, founded in 1944, commonly goes by UNCF now.

In July, Campus Crusade for Christ International announced that it will simplify its name early next year to Cru.

The 60-year-old charity's own surveys found that 20 percent of people who said they were open to the group's Christian message were less interested in the organization itself when they heard its original name. And further study revealed that the words "campus" and "crusade" were hindering its mission, according to a statement on the group's Web site.

"Campus" signaled an exclusive interest in ministering to college students, which didn't fully describe the group's work. And, said the statement, "the word 'crusade'—while common and acceptable in 1951 when we were founded—now carries negative associations."

The charity chose Cru, a common nickname for its campus chapters, from a list of 1,600 alternatives in an effort to "accomplish a greater level of

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In-Depth Planning Can Help a Nonprofit Group Settle on a Distinctive Name

CHANGING a charity's name can give it a new opportunity to catch the attention of potential supporters. Following are some suggestions for making a smooth transition, from experts who have participated in changing nonprofits' names:

Do the homework. Researching how the current name is perceived and what problems it may be causing an organization should inform the subsequent discussion about new names, says Jerry Silverman, president of the Jewish Federations of North America, the New York umbrella group that changed its name in 2009 from United Jewish Communities. "Don't take shortcuts," he advises.

Set aside plenty of time. Changing a group's name can take months, even

years, to plan and implement. "It takes more time and costs more money than you think it should," says Julie Chapman, head of 501cTech, a Washington nonprofit that offers technology help to other charities. Her group changed its name last month from NPower of Greater DC Region, and she estimates that the nearly 18-month process cost her group about \$40,000, a figure that experts say can range widely depending on an organization's scope.

"There are a lot of administrative and legal aspects," says Ms. Chapman, who leads a nonprofit with 16 employees. "None of those things are that difficult, but for an organization that is leanly staffed, that's a pretty big time impact."

Talk to lots of people. Gifts In

Kind International, in Alexandria, Va., went through a two-year transformation under its new CEO, Cindy Hallberlin, embracing the power of digital communication to help more charities gain quick access to its donated goods. After the changes, says Ms. Hallberlin, the group's old name seemed obsolete. "It's like losing 100 pounds and then putting on your old clothes," she says. "It doesn't fit."

In its search for a more up-to-date name, she says, "we went about talking to all our stakeholders." The group talked to donors, partner charities, and its own board members and employees and asked for help brainstorming. The nonprofit eventually settled on Good360, which it began to use in April.

"It has layers of meaning," notes the

charity leader—"Good" referring to both a product and a philanthropic intention and "360" alluding to "the circle of giving."

When the Washington Shakespeare Company began thinking about changing its name, the group consulted with board members, local volunteers with expertise in marketing, and focus groups, says Christopher Henley, the nonprofit theater troupe's artistic director.

If his group, which eventually settled on WSC Avant Bard as its new name, had made its selection without those opinions, he says, "It could have been like New Coke: Thanks for changing something and making it worse."

Convey the group's current mis-

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Announcing a Name Change at a Public Event Helps Spread the Word

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sion. House Ear Institute, a medical charity in Los Angeles, changed its name in April to House Research Institute, a transformation it began considering 10 years ago, as the now 65-year-old group found its mission expanding beyond its original charge of helping people who have hearing loss. Increasingly, the organization found its research overlapping with neurological concerns, such as autism, says Daniel M. Graham, executive vice president for development, marketing, and communications.

A bonus, he says, is that it's been easier for the organization to recruit scientists with the new, broader name. And, he says, "it appeals to a larger donor constituency. Obviously, if

"Recognize that you're trying to appeal to people at first glance."

your name is 'ear,' people think, Gee, if I don't have an ear problem, why would I consider supporting an ear institute?"

Research alternatives. Make certain no other group has the name, or a name close enough to cause confusion, and make sure the Web domain name is available, says Howard Adam Levy, principal of the Red Rooster Group, a branding consultant in New York that specializes in nonprofit clients.

Participants in Good360's efforts to brainstorm new names, says Ms. Hallberlin, discovered that more than half of its preferred selections had already been snapped up.

Think through logistics—

and cost. Even if an organization changes its name legally, says Mr. Levy, it should consider whether to implement the change all at once or phase it in. Do an inventory of all of the group's materials that bear its name, he says: "There's a long list that extends from stationery, newsletters, publications to your signage, your vehicles, uniforms, nametags, [donor] premiums. Really see the full scope of what you've invested, and what you'd need to replace." Remember that partner organizations, vendors (such as banks), and supporters will need to be notified.

The House Research Institute held costs down by running an online contest asking designers to submit possible logos for its new name. "There's a lot of talent out there—and a lot of unemployed talent, I might add," says Mr. Graham.

Make a plan for unveiling the name. Some experts suggest tying the announcement of a new name to another big event that the organization already has on its calendar, such as an anniversary celebration, a gala, or a conference.

For example, WSC Avant Bard announced its new name this summer while simultaneously announcing its latest season of productions and introducing a revamped Web site. The House Research Institute chose the occasion of its 65th anniversary this year—along with the start of a new \$65-million fundraising drive—to announce its name change, says Mr. Graham.

Notify supporters—and the press. In addition to using social media and press releases, conferences and other events can present opportunities to notify a large and interested audience of a name change, experts say, and



**Campus
Crusade
for Christ**



Campus Crusade for Christ International recently announced that it will change its name to simply "Cru" in January.

piggyback on news-media coverage that would be occurring anyway. The Jewish Federations of North America unveiled its name at its annual general assembly, says Adam Smolyar, the group's senior vice president for strategic marketing. Since then, he says, it has promoted the name at events like TribeFest, a gathering for young Jews the federation hosted in Las Vegas earlier this year.

The Orange County Performing Arts Center, in Costa Mesa, Calif., announced its new name, the Segerstrom Center for the

Arts, at an event in January that showcased the center's outdoor plaza, the music of the trumpeter Chris Botti, and the family of longtime donors that the new name was designed to honor. Prominent supporters already knew about the name change, having been consulted during the process, says Terrence Dwyer, president of the Segerstrom Center.

Any event that announces a name change should be "aligned with your institutional messaging and your long-range goals," says Mr. Dwyer. The organiza-

tion prides itself on its diverse offerings being available to everyone, he says. "By having a large outdoor event, we were able to invite a broad spectrum of the community to attend," he says. "We were able to create that sense of openness and inclusiveness."

Be patient with strategists. A group should plan to spend at least six months actively reminding supporters of its new name, says Ms. Chapman, of 501cTech. But don't assume that will settle the matter. "Some people will probably, for a very long time, call us by our old name," she says. "I presume that for some people, we will always be NPower."

Have fun. Though the issue a charity works on may be serious, its name should allow for a little "sexiness," says Mr. Levy. "A lot of nonprofit names are very serious," he says. "But if you're trying to reach a wide audience, recognize that you're trying to appeal to people at first glance. If the name is the 'United Coalition Against Hunger for Middle America,' that's not as quick and easy as 'Feeding America,' which has the mission embedded in it. It pays to get out of the normal nonprofit realm when thinking about naming, because it is an opportunity to capture the hearts and minds of people."

—HEATHER JOSLYN

Some Charities Seek New Names to Better Align With Their Missions and the Modern Era

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effectiveness in ministry," says Steve Sellers, vice president for the United States operations of the Orlando, Fla., group, in a written statement. (The group declined *The Chronicle's* re-

quest for an interview because, it said, its name-change process is still under way.)

United Jewish Communities, which was named following the merger of three groups in 1999, had a different problem: Potential supporters had little familiarity with the name.

Research commissioned by the New York umbrella association of Jewish philanthropies in 2008 found that while about 50 percent of those polled were likely to have heard of their local Jewish federation, only about 10 percent recognized United Jewish Communities and its mission.

The results were similar for respondents of both genders and all generations, adding up to a "dismal" verdict, says Adam Smolyar, the group's senior vice president for strategic marketing.

To give the group a more defined identity, United Jewish Communities became the Jewish Federations of North America in 2009.

"There's beauty in its simplicity," says Mr. Smolyar. "It tells you everything you need to know: We're Jewish, we're a federation, we're from North America. It's not a convoluted, acronym-like name. By being

descriptive, it needs a lot less explanation and therefore a lot less marketing behind it."

No Panacea

But getting to that beautiful simplicity can be a long and winding road, and it's a journey that won't benefit every organization, says Julie Chapman, president of 501cTech, a nonprofit in Washington. The group changed its name last month from NPower Greater DC Region, to solve trademark issues and better signify its mission of offering technology help to charities.

"If it's something you don't need to do, I probably wouldn't do it," she says. "It's very time-consuming. And, at the end of the day, these jobs are all about achieving the mission. And does that rename or that rebrand really help you deliver better on the real work of your organization?"

She advises charity leaders not to look to a name change as a cure for a group's deeper problems. "Changing your name and having a new logo isn't going to save an organization that's in trouble," she says. "But for one that is operating well and is effective, it can help sharpen the focus."



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