

American Lung Association Rings in Holiday with Merry Christmas Seals Re-Branding Campaign

By Nancy Pekala

How do you take an old, iconic brand and make it new again? The American Lung Association did just that by re-branding its well-known Christmas Seals program, a 100-year brand. The re-branding effort was part of a major repositioning of the entire organization and incorporated a number of key elements in order to create awareness among new target segments. Recently, in an exclusive interview, *Marketing Thought Leaders* spoke to Carrie A. Martin, Vice President of Communications and Marketing for the American Lung Association, as well as Reji Puthenveetil, president of Group Newhouse and Chief Marketing Advisor for the Association, and Jeffrey Boal, Partner & Founder of PlowShare Group, Inc.

Marketing Thought Leaders: *The American Lung Association has undergone a major re-positioning of its organization which also included a re-branding of its iconic Christmas Seals program, a 100-year brand. Can you address the objectives for the broader re-positioning program?*

Reji Puthenveetil: The Lung Association really has three major objectives. The first is eliminating tobacco use and tobacco-related illnesses. The second is improving the air we breathe, that we don't worsen or cause lung disease and the third is to reduce the burden of those who do have lung disease for the patient or the family.

For the most part, people associate the Lung Association with that first objective of eliminating tobacco use. What we found is a lot of work we do in the area of clean air—advocacy and legislation—is unknown to many people. In the last 18-24 months, we've attempted to broaden people's understanding of what the organization does and create a greater sense of engagement and relevancy.

This whole effort involves rebranding the organization from a graphics perspective and includes marketing techniques and positioning, especially from a Christmas Seals perspective, in order to create a new level of engagement for a lot of people.

MTL: *What prompted this 2009 initiative and what primary goals did you establish for the re-branding campaign?*



Carrie Martin: What prompted it was the value of the Christmas Seals brand. We knew there was value in the brand because we had been doing it for 100 years. It's still the Association's most successful direct mail fundraising campaign of the year. We confirmed the value of the brand and worked with Reji and Group Newhouse to conduct some market research. What we found was that Christmas Seals has about 60% awareness. But not surprisingly, older people are more aware of Christmas Seals while younger people are less aware. This probably has something to do with the fact that the Lung Association really hasn't invested in the marketing of the Christmas Seals campaign outside of mailboxes during the last 20 years. So our overarching objective was to increase our direct mail revenue and acquire new donors. But we also wanted to introduce the campaign using other media in order to expand our reach so we worked with Memphis-based agency Red Deluxe on the approach which involved retro marketing. At the end of 2009, you may recall, a few for-profit companies produced some vintage marketing campaigns to sell things like cereal and soft drinks and what they found was that this retro approach really resonated with the broad demographic so the older people really liked the nostalgia of the products while younger people thought vintage was young and interesting so we took that approach to the campaign.

***MTL:** Who was the target audience for this campaign and how did that impact your choices when it came to crafting various elements of the program?*

Martin: The typical Christmas Seals donor via the mail was a 68-year-old woman. We not only wanted to appeal to her but attract a new generation of supporters and we needed to do it on a very limited budget. We considered 2009 a growth year. This year, in 2010, we're working with Porter-Novelli to more narrowly define our target audience. We're looking at cause-conscious donors--mainly female, aged 35-54 whose top causes are health research, the environment and promoting healthy lifestyles which all tie into the mission of the American Lung Association.

***MTL:** What were some of the other unique tactics that were key to the re-branding of Christmas Seals, including those involving emerging and social media?*

Martin: The real inspiration for the campaign and the creative link that ties all of the elements together was the public service advertising. We wanted the public service advertising to not only live on TV and radio and in print media but also online. Red Deluxe came up with the unique idea to bring three of our vintage Christmas Seals to life in television PSAs using real actors and sets. We created print and radio PSAs, all of which directed people to www.christmasseals.org which we redesigned to reflect our new vintage approach to the new overall PR effort. We were able to use Christmas Seals images on the site from the past 100 years and we developed a Facebook application so that fans could collect and share Christmas Seals online. If people weren't on Facebook they had the option of sending a seal to a friend using an e-card. Our goal in 2009 was to really establish a presence using social media related to Christmas Seals and to create a more effective online presence by redesigning the website.

We also used Twitter throughout the season to drive people to our Christmas Seals shop. We developed a merchandise strategy where we created some promotional gifts using the iconic Christmas Seals images. We reignited a Christmas Seals tradition by engaging a celebrity to serve as chairperson of the Christmas Seals campaign. The Lung Association has a long history of working with celebrities like Shirley Temple and Cary Grant and we were excited to work with S. Epatha Merkerson last year as well.

MTL: We know that The Plowshare Group played a key role in executing this campaign. Can you talk about the role the organization played?

Jeffrey Boal: Our principal role in the re-branding effort was to create significant pro bono media time and space so we used traditional PSA distribution strategies and really aggressive media outreach and follow-up tactics to create donated media. We believe very largely in reconnecting with the media several times during the campaign's lifecycle to help make sure the PSAs get the best possible chance of airing.

We're also very careful to isolate our best media prospects so we only targeted those media who had a history of using PSAs. The challenge we had to overcome in creating donated media opportunities for the Lung Association was the period of performance for the campaign. Because it was the Christmas Seals campaign, we had to build participation exclusively in November and December and public service advertising typically builds audience reach and frequency over much longer periods, say 6 to 8 months. Furthermore, 2009 was a challenging year for all media prospects and, in particular, the print industry. Despite this, the campaign was embraced by the media and really exceeded our goals. In the end, what we all perceived was a disadvantage and constraint of holiday turned out to be an asset because we're providing media with highly relevant PSA materials that reflected holiday spirit and complemented holiday programming. All of these factors made it easier for the media to say "yes" to include this campaign in their rotation.



Also, radio and TV PSAs ran in markets across the country and full-page print ads ran in Good Housekeeping, County Living Times and Cosmopolitan. We received \$2.7M in media participation. Given our modest distribution budget, we produced an immediate return of investment of 67 to 1. This year, we're trying many of the same approaches and tactics as last year but with greater intensity.

MTL: Can you share some of the results of the 2009 re-branding efforts? What kind of insights did they provide when planning the 2010 campaign?

Martin: We were really pleased with the 2009 revitalization of the Christmas Seals campaign. It was great that when we launched the campaign, it was featured in the business section of the *New York Times* and being a nonprofit, it was particularly newsworthy that we took this vintage approach that some for-profit companies had seen success with in the last year.

We established some objectives related to the goals of the campaign. We were pleased that we were able to increase visitors to www.christmasseals.org by 31%. We were able to increase page views by 76% on the site and also time on the site by 15%. We increased our overall online giving by 3% and had an earned media value of \$2.8 million. Regarding social media, last year, the Christmas Seals campaign helped drive a lot of this. We've increased our number of fans by 300% so we're really looking to establish more roots in social media and grow our support base there.

Boal: The big change for 2010 regarding the distribution and outreach tactic is volume. We realized from the 2009 campaign that we could turn distribution dollars into media dollars pretty effectively. We're ramping up the volume in 2010 and using digital distribution tactics to precede the media with the campaign. We have a short window of opportunity in November and December so we needed to create a lot of excitement before the campaign releases to the media. We sent out a Christmas tree air freshener for the cards as a teaser to the media with this year's campaign. We've also employed aggressive in-person media visits prior to the campaign and focused on print media for those pre-release in-person media visits.

MTL: *What were the biggest challenges your organization needed to address to successfully plan and execute this campaign?*

Martin: There were two main challenges—budget and organizational buy-in. Our CEO, Chuck Connor, came to the Lung Association from the Red Cross and it's always great when a CEO really values spending marketing dollars and knows that marketing supports the bottom line of the organization. We had a small budget to work with and that was a challenge. We knew a year or two investment was key to continuing the re-branding momentum. The last time we created advertising to support the Christmas Seals campaign was 1996 so people weren't used to seeing us outside their mailboxes.

Also, from an organizational buy-in perspective, people had gotten out of the habit of using communication and marketing tactics to support the fundraising campaign and we really needed to revert the culture back to when that was commonplace in the organization.

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