

The Donate Life Rose Parade Float: how an innovative, integrated public awareness campaign effectively reaches a worldwide audience

M. STADTLER, B. STEWART, T. MONE

OneLegacy, Los Angeles, California, USA

KEYWORDS - Donate life, parade, float, awareness

SUMMARY - The continuing growth in the United States organ transplant waiting list has motivated the donation and transplantation community to adopt creative techniques to inspire people to choose to be organ and tissue donors. Among such efforts, perhaps the most innovative and far-reaching is the entry of a donation/transplantation-themed float in the world-famous Tournament of Roses Parade. Spearheaded by OneLegacy, the organ procurement organization located in Southern California, and supported by more than 50 organizations nationwide, the Donate Life Rose Parade Float unites the nation's fragmented donation/transplantation community to promote a single, positive message that effectively reaches tens of millions of parade spectators, national and worldwide television viewers.

INTRODUCTION

Since 2000, the United States organ transplant waiting list has grown by an average of approximately 3,000 candidates per year. In an effort to meet the consistently growing need for donated organs, the donation/transplantation community expends substantial effort to increase the public's willingness to donate. Among these efforts are programs to educate and inspire the public through mass media. Given the enormous cost of purchasing advertising, organizations responsible for generating public awareness of the need for organ and tissue donation rely heavily on public service announcements (PSAs) and media coverage of human interest stories to communicate the value of donation. The Coalition on Donation based in Richmond, Virginia and affiliated with the United Network for Organ Sharing, pools "education assessments" from member organizations (including organ procurement organiza-

tions, transplant centers, tissue and eye banks) to fund an integrated PSA campaign with electronic, print and out-of-home creative elements. The campaign has met with considerable success, although the media environment in the United States often relegates the airing of PSAs to less desirable time periods and sub-optimal frequency. On the public relations front, transplant-related human interest stories appear somewhat routinely on a local and regional basis, and on occasion a regional story will command national attention. However, more often than not, such widespread coverage focuses on negative coverage. The past year has seen national coverage of transplant candidates advertising for directed donation and for-profit websites that match living donors with recipients. Several years ago a case involving mismatched blood types during a heart-lung transplant received wide press coverage. It is rare that multiple national media outlets cover a positive story about donation and transplantation.

METHODS

In the midst of this ongoing public education challenge, in April 2001 lung recipient Gary Foxen sent a letter to OneLegacy, the organ procurement organization (OPO)

Mailing Address: Maria Stadler, Procurement Transplant Coordinator, OneLegacy Inland Empire, 1701 Orange Tree Lane, Redlands, CA 92374, USA; e-mail: mstadtler@onelegacy.org

-serving a seven-county area of Southern California, in which he shared his idea to inspire people to donate life by entering a donation/transplantation-themed float in the Tournament of Roses Parade. Quite simply, he was so moved by the difference that his transplant had made to his life that he wanted to give thanks by sharing his joy via a floral parade float.

Each New Year's Day, the world focuses its attention on Pasadena, California, home of the Tournament of Roses - a festival of flowers, music and sports unequaled anywhere in the world. A century-old tradition, "America's New Year Celebration" has as its centerpiece the Rose Parade, the third-most-watched entertainment event in the world. Nearly one million people flock to the five-mile route to watch the parade, which is nationally televised by a many broadcast and cable networks including ABC, NBC, CBS, Telemundo, Univision, HGTV and regional networks. Telecasts of the 2004 Rose Parade were seen in approximately 16 million U.S. households by more than 40 million viewers. International television coverage expands the viewing audience by tens of millions more. In addition, the parade is the subject of scores of media stories each year, creating an opportunity for parade participants to be featured in parade-related media stories that extend the audience to millions more readers and viewers.

Upon receiving the letter from Mr. Foxen, OneLegacy executives saw the possibility that the representation of organ and tissue donation in such a wholesome, positive, universally loved event as the Rose Parade - alongside such "Main Street, mom-and-apple-pie" American icons as marching bands, equestrian units and "Kodak moments", no less - would be a bold step towards making donation a natural thing to do. Our presence would offer the opportunity for individuals to at least think about organ and tissue donation and talk with their families about their wishes in the comfort of their own home.

However, OneLegacy's senior leaders were initially skeptical that (1) the venture could be funded, and (2) even if it were funded, the privately-held Tournament of Roses Association would be comfortable with the idea of organ and tissue donation being represented in such a traditional, celebratory event. However, OneLegacy employees Karen Libs, then the executive assistant to the chief executive officer, and director of communications Bryan Stewart saw the potential for leveraging a high-profile appearance on the internationally-televised event to generate media coverage and build relationships within the donation and transplantation community.

After securing top management's support of developing this opportunity further, four key foundational principles were established to guide decisions going forward. First, OneLegacy positioned the float project as a national, not regional, promotional campaign. While the float's project-

ed budget of \$125,000 plus \$75,000 in support costs could have possibly been funded solely by Southern California organizations, such substantial local support was not seen as sustainable. More importantly, OneLegacy saw the importance of entering the float under the Coalition on Donation name - and eventually the "Donate Life" brand - so that it could be promoted by any donation - or transplant-related organization across the country, thus expanding the campaign's reach and solidifying its support base. Our goal was not to promote an organization; it was to inspire people to donate life.

The second principle was to submit our application to the Tournament of Roses only after we had achieved two-thirds of our fundraising goal and had secured a broad base of partners. It was imperative that the Tournament of Roses view us as a prime applicant whose base of support could bring value back to the Tournament of Roses. OneLegacy committed to fund \$75,000 of the initial costs, so although we were well on the way from day one, we still had a hill to climb.

The third guideline was to present organ and tissue donation in a positive and celebratory yet reverent way. In the world of marketing, delivering a message that is relevant yet unexpected can have an especially strong impact. Given that ours would be one of more than 50 floats in the parade, we needed to ensure that we stood out from the crowded field. We foresaw that parade spectators and media alike would be surprised to see an issue often associated with death presented with confidence and joy.

And finally, it was determined that the float would focus on our float riders - after all, donation and transplantation is first and foremost about the people it touches. By carrying a large number of riders, we enabled organizations in all regions of the country to be represented on the float, reinforcing the objective of making the program national in scope. We also made the decision to limit riders to donor family members, living donors and recipients of organ and tissue transplants so that our float riders would be seen collectively as truly special.

These guiding principles were designed to set the stage for rapidly establishing an organ- and transplant-themed Rose Parade float as a national, broadly supported, annual tradition that would deliver a positive human interest story via a major media event.

The planning committee was established by OneLegacy, whose initial pledge of \$75,000 gave the project much-needed momentum from the outset. In addition, OneLegacy committed to supervise all aspects of project implementation, including float theme and design, float rider selection, partner communications, volunteer recruitment, promotional merchandise, and a national public relations campaign.

The fundraising campaign was initiated with a presentation to the Board of Directors of the Coalition on Donation, which offered their endorsement and permission to

enter the float under the Coalition on Donation name. (In the second year, the float would be entered as “Donate Life” in support of the Coalition’s call-to-action signature brand.) This was followed by an appeal to OneLegacy’s sister members of the Association of Organ Procurement Organizations (AOPO), then to other organizations involved in the donation/transplant field.

The initial fundraising appeal to AOPO members in June 2002 was not successful. Only one organization - liver research firm Vesta Therapeutics, which deserves mentioning for its early commitment - signed on as a contributing partner. Not to be deterred, the opportunity was presented again, this time via email and during the September-October annual budgeting period. By December 2003, 35 official partners had pledged their support, enabling the committee to move forward with submitting an application to the Tournament of Roses. Eventually, the first-year fundraising base would include 56 official partner organizations, including the Coalition on Donation, U.S Department of Health & Human Services, organ/tissue recovery organizations, research foundations, for-profit companies, six transplant centers and two recipient support groups.

A key element of our application to the Tournament of Roses Association was the assertion that we wanted to not only benefit from our association with the parade, but also bring added value to the parade. We felt our combination of novelty as a public health issue, compelling float rider human interest stories, and broad base of support would bring added awareness of the parade to many regions of the country.

At the time we submitted our application, we invited The Deputy Surgeon General of the United States, donor husband and father Kenneth P. Moritsugu, M.D., M.P.H., and Olympic medalist and liver recipient Chris Klug, to anchor our float rider contingent. Once our application was accepted, we extended an offer to all official partners for them to sponsor individual float riders by covering their travel expenses to Pasadena. Fortunately, exactly ten partners stepped forward to sponsor the ten slots that were made available. They were offered few guidelines for selecting their float riders; we trusted that they would select people with compelling stories. The remaining ten slots were selected from Southern California, enabling OneLegacy to achieve representation from local donor families, transplant centers, research foundations and recipient organizations as well as ensure ethnic diversity among the rider contingent.

As a convention, float participants are encouraged to relate their float themes as closely as possible to the parade theme, which in 2004 was “Music, Music, Music.” After much deliberation, the committee selected as our float theme “A Symphony of Life,” encapsulated in the official float fact sheet as follows:

“Organ and tissue donation and transplantation creates ‘A Symphony of Life’ uniting donor families, grateful recipients and their loved ones across the country - and provides a living bridge to the future. A symphony brings many people together in a coordinated manner to create beautiful music; ‘A Symphony of Life’ joins people who have been touched by organ and tissue donation and transplantation, which allows the music of life to continue for donor families and those facing life-threatening illnesses.”

The committee then prepared a creative brief to the float builder, Phoenix Decorating Co., suggesting as a central design element a bridge, which has proved to be an appropriate, easily understood metaphor for donation and transplantation: a bridge between death and life, tragedy and hope, grief and recovery. We also challenged Phoenix Decorating’s designers to design a float that would create a visceral emotional response among the parade spectators.

It should be noted that on top of its steel-and-foam infrastructure, literally every square inch of a Rose Parade float must be covered in organic materials: flowers, seeds, leaves and other vegetation. Such labor-intensive decorating requirements necessitate a large number of volunteers to decorate in the month of December, when a total of 104 hours over 14 decorating shifts bring the floats to life. Thus, concerted efforts were made to recruit volunteers beginning immediately after the end-of-summer Labor Day holiday in early September.

Capping the planning process was a local, regional and national public relations campaign. Press releases were timed for maximum effect: the float design was unveiled at the Coalition on Donation and AOPO national meetings in June, the lead float riders (Dr. Moritsugu and Mr. Klug) were announced in early September, and the remaining float riders were announced in early October. Simultaneously with the October press release, a website was unveiled that made all relevant media information easily accessible.

RESULTS

From a quantitative and qualitative standpoint, the 2004 Donate Life (nee Coalition on Donation) Rose Parade Float was an overwhelming success. The float was seen by 800,000 parade spectators and approximately 30 million American and 200 million worldwide television viewers, while the float and its riders were the subject of approximately 70 television, newspaper and radio stories nationwide in large- and medium-size media markets that reached many millions more readers and viewers. In addition, approximately 700 volunteers personally participated in decorating the Donate Life float.

Media placements in national and local media produced some 70 articles and stories, with every out-of-state float rider featured in their region's major daily newspaper or in one or more television network affiliate news programs - in most cases both. Clearly, local media were inspired to follow our float riders' emotional pilgrimage Pasadena.

From a financial standpoint, with an equivalent value in 30-second commercial television advertising of approximately \$210,000, due to extended narratives of the Donate Life float the value of the U.S. broadcast coverage alone was in excess of \$500,000 and far exceeded the overall financial investment.

In terms of intangible benefits, the degree of emotional investment and connection to the float, as documented on video and unsolicited comments, was startling. Several riders called it "the experience of a lifetime." Official partners "all cried when it rolled by" and felt "awe to amazement to sheer happiness that the organ and tissue donation message was getting out to such a broad audience." One had heard "more buzz from people (who are not involved in the industry) about organ donation since the parade than I have - collectively - in years."

Among those touched by donation, "The smiles on the faces of those aboard the float touched my heart as a recipient. I envisioned myself and my donor family on that float." A donor mom felt "compelled" to decorate in her son's honor. A television viewer wrote that seeing it "really gave me a warm feeling in my heart," while a newspaper reporter said that "it is always great to take a step back and do a story about life, love and happiness."

Also notable were anecdotal comments from longtime members of the Tournament of Roses gathered in the VIP seating areas. They were most impressed - even surprised - that we were able to present such an uncomfortable issue as organ and tissue donation and transplantation in such a meaningful, memorable, positive way. The Donate Life float in The Tournament of Roses Parade accomplished our mission on the personal level for donors, families, and recipients; on the professional level by bringing the disparate transplant and donation community together; and on the national level by sharing the message that donation and transplantation is part of the fabric of our world and that families and communities all benefit from the gift of life.

CONCLUSION

By many accounts, the Donate Life Rose Parade Float is the single most effective promotional campaign in the history of donation and transplantation in the United States. The overwhelming success of the project was the

result of a number of factors that are transferable to other promotional campaigns, both in the United States and worldwide. These include the importance of combining resources among organizations, which both amplifies the reach of the program as an aggregate and distributes the financial burden; focusing on promoting donation rather than the organizations that promote donation; the careful, strategic approach to fundraising, implementation and crafting the message of the float itself; and an enormous effort on the part of one organization, OneLegacy, charged with the ultimate responsibility of bringing the project to fruition.

The Donate Life float returned to the Rose Parade in Pasadena in on January 1, 2005 as "Many Families, One Gift" presented a park scene with 23 float riders. To support the parade theme "Celebrate Family," the Donate Life float's riders consisted of 11 family pairs, each one touched in a unique way by organ and tissue donation and transplantation - literally "many families" touched by the "one gift" of organ and tissue donation. We also proudly decorated the Eastman Kodak Company float, which through a gracious gesture by Kodak featured photorealistic "floralgraph" images of organ donors. Media coverage of donor families decorating and celebrating the images of their loved ones added many millions of impressions, hopefully inspiring even more people to donate life.

Future objectives for the float's annual parade appearance include personally involving donor families and recipients in the float experience even from distant locations, incorporating a blood donation story among the float riders, and using the float as a new and positive image that emotionally draws in hospital staff in a way that inspires them to support the donation process. In addition, having seen the power of the float to generate media coverage and given that the Rose Parade is televised internationally, there seems to be potential for the float to have international representation among the float riders and partners, thus helping to inspire people to donate worldwide.

For more information about the Donate Life Rose Parade Float, please visit the official float website by going to www.onelegacy.org and clicking on the Donate Life/Rose Parade logo in the upper right corner. A link to the 2004 float website may be found on the 2005 float homepage.

REFERENCES

- ¹ The Museum of Broadcast Communications, <http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/C/htmlC/cost-per-thou/cost-per-thou.htm>