

The ALS Bucket Challenge: The Good, the Bad, and the Money

Cheryl B. Ward, Middle Tennessee State University
Diane R. Edmondson, Middle Tennessee State University

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Introduction

“C’mon, c’mon...” Josh muttered anxiously as he checked his social media, “maybe someone challenged me today.” Josh Bryant was a typical teen who was constantly on social media and had been waiting impatiently for someone to issue him the “Ice Bucket Challenge” for Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS). As he watched the videos that other teens posted, he wanted to participate as well. Not being challenged was bringing back bad memories of being picked last in gym class, provoking that same sense of social exclusion he experienced when he was younger. Josh did not understand why some people were challenged multiple times while others were not invited to participate.

The ALS Association had challenges to deal with as well. Having no way to anticipate the immense popularity of the Ice Bucket Challenge, the organization was not prepared for the overwhelming response of the social campaign. Although the incredible increase in donations and attention brought to the ALS cause were very welcome, these same factors also created many new issues for the organization. The ALS Association realized they needed to go back and evaluate the pros and the cons of the Ice Bucket Challenge, acknowledging that they were not exactly sure how to handle the immense success of the fundraiser. Could they continue to build on the success of this social media campaign?

Background

The ALS Association was the only non-profit organization dedicated exclusively to fighting Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS), more commonly known as “Lou Gehrig’s Disease.” ALS was a neurodegenerative disease with no known cure which impacted about 30,000 Americans. The disease affected nerve cells, eventually leading to total paralysis, without impacting the mind of the individual. Life expectancy was usually two to five years from the point of diagnosis. The goal of the ALS Association was to help support those individuals living with ALS, and to help find a treatment and cure for the disease. In a typical year, the ALS Association’s budget was approximately \$25 million. In fiscal year 2014, the association spent 28% of its operating budget on research (ALS Association, 2014).

The Ice Bucket Challenge

The ALS Ice Bucket Challenge was one of the most successful social media fundraising campaigns in history. The process was simple and had wide-spread appeal across all races, ages, and genders. A challenge was issued to an individual to participate in the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge. That individual then had 24 hours to either donate \$100 to the ALS Association or to douse themselves with a bucket of ice water. Many people opted to do both. The challenge was videoed and posted to social media. The challenger then selected three other people to challenge to do the same. Typically, hash tags such as #IceBucketChallenge and #ALSIceBucketChallenge were used to share the video among social media users.

While the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge did not begin as a dedicated awareness campaign, it quickly grew into the most successful fundraiser in the association's history. There is not a definitive origin for the Challenge, but it is most widely attributed to former Boston College baseball player Pete Frates, who had ALS. Frates started a personal campaign to leverage his social network, including friends and family, to help create awareness for ALS patients. According to Frates, "The story right now goes: You've got ALS, have it for a little while, a long while, but either way, the end is always the same. ALS always wins. So in order to rewrite the end of it, we need to raise awareness, money." (Steel, 2014). He was able to successfully garner interest from celebrities and sports figures which helped launch the Challenge on a national level. The ALS challenge quickly became a point of pride and social standing; everyone wanted to be included in the fun. Throughout the summer, such well-known public figures as Oprah Winfrey, Zac Efron, Taylor Swift, Justin Bieber, Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, Lady Gaga, Chris Hemsworth and Justin Timberlake, all took the Challenge. The end result was a prime example of how the Challenge successfully used social media for social good.

Incredibly, from June 1 through August 17, more than 28 million people participated in the Challenge in some way on Facebook (videos, comments, likes), including almost 17 million videos. Twitter had over two million posts in just over two weeks and YouTube had more than a billion views (a record) related to Ice Bucket challenges. The campaign raised over \$114 million for the ALS Association (CBS This Morning, 2014).

The ALS Association after the Ice Bucket Challenge

The ALS Association could be looking at months, or even years, of national media scrutiny as a result of the extraordinary success of the Ice Bucket Challenge. New donors would want to see results from the funds raised; however, results from scientific research were typically slow in coming. Ken Berger, CEO of Charity Navigator, warned that a rush of capital brings higher scrutiny, ratcheting up expectations for the organization. While the charity currently had a 4 of 4 rating from Charity Navigator, they will have increased pressure to perform in the future—and will be under significant social scrutiny as they did so (CBS This Morning, 2014).

Not everyone was a fan of the social media campaign. According to *Vice's* Arielle Pardes, “There are a lot of things wrong with the Ice Bucket Challenge, but most annoying is that it’s basically narcissism masked as altruism” (Steel, 2014). In a similar tone, Dr. Lyn Day, a psychologist, stated, “If you don’t do the ice bucket dump then somehow you’re not a good person. I don’t think anybody intends to send that message but I think that’s the message we receive which is a bit unfortunate... It’s wonderful to raise awareness. It’s wonderful they are raising money. I just want people to keep perspective” (Jadhon, 2014).

Some unfortunate events also occurred as a result of the Ice Bucket Challenge. Tragically, one firefighter in Kentucky died after exposure to electricity from a power line (Fantz, 2014). He and three other firefighters were on a ladder spraying water on a group of college students below who were trying to pull off the Ice Bucket Challenge. In another incident, a 15 year old autistic teen thought he was participating in the Ice Bucket Challenge and had a bucket of urine, cigarette butt,s and feces dumped on him while being videoed. That video was then uploaded to social media. Diane, the teen’s mother, said, “The bucket challenge is supposed to be raising awareness for this disease and now they’ve turned it into a sick joke... He was embarrassed because he did not know what the contents were until afterwards, and then he didn’t want anybody to know. They used his phone to tape it and they put it up on Instagram” (Yan & Baldacci, 2014). While these actions were outside the control of the ALS Association, they nonetheless became associated with the Ice Bucket fundraiser as they made national news.

Conclusion

Commenting on the Ice Bucket Challenge, Barbara Newhouse, President and CEO of the ALS Association said, “We have never seen anything like this in the history of the disease. We couldn’t be more thrilled with the level of compassion, generosity and sense of humor that people are exhibiting as they take part in this impactful viral initiative...It just became craziness. Good craziness, but craziness” (ALS Association, 2014). However, the ALS Association must now evaluate the Ice Bucket Challenge, looking at the pros and cons of this summer campaign. Some individuals, like Josh, felt frustrated as they were excluded from the social media event. Others may not have wanted to participate, but felt social pressure to conform. The simple challenge ultimately became quite complex.

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