Maybe It Is About the Bike: The LIVESTRONG Community and Lance Armstrong Allegations

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Nancy Hardy stood at the finish line of the 2011 LIVESTRONG Challenge, handing out yellow roses to cancer survivors as they completed their bike rides. The hundreds of volunteers, families, and friends who had gathered to celebrate their loved ones who had been affected by cancer inspired her. She had accepted a job as a consultant for the Lance Armstrong Foundation (LAF) the week before and she now realized the significant challenge that lay before her. Hardy was not only a well-known strategic management and public relations consultant with an impressive list of celebrity clients, but she was also a cancer survivor. She was familiar with the good work the LAF did for the cancer community, and she was eager to have the opportunity to use her experience to help the LAF navigate its current challenges.

The LAF was created in 1997, when top-ranked professional cyclist Lance Armstrong was diagnosed with testicular cancer. His treatment was successful, and he created the foundation, while he was still undergoing treatment. In its first year, the LAF’s total revenues were less than $250,000. Armstrong returned to cycling in 1998 with an appearance in one of his foundation’s signature events: a professional criterium held in Austin, TX. The next year, Armstrong won his first Tour de France, which he won six more times before retiring from professional cycling. Since that time, the LAF has grown into a major player in global cancer policy and a leader in cancer survivorship issues. Today, the LAF is perhaps best known for the LIVESTRONG wristband, which was introduced in May 2004. Armstrong wore one of the wristbands during his sixth Tour de France victory, and soon the wristband was seen on celebrities and politicians and promoted on the Oprah Winfrey Show. By 2011, more than 65 million wristbands were sold to benefit the LAF.

The wristbands and the creation of the LIVESTRONG brand helped to create a sense of distance between the LAF and its founder. In the early days of the LAF, the organization was inseparable from Armstrong. The foundation bore his name, its logo included an outline of a cyclist, and the publicity it received was directly tied to Armstrong’s celebrity and success in the Tour de France. With the creation of the LIVESTRONG brand, the LAF began to cultivate an identity of its own that did not rely as heavily on Armstrong. This move would become especially important when Armstrong announced his retirement. There was concern that when Armstrong retired – a move that was expected to remove Armstrong from the public eye – the progress and momentum of the foundation would be negatively affected.
The popularity of the LIVESTRONG wristbands led the LAF to rapid growth. From 1997 to 2003, the total amount raised by the LAF was a little more than $11 million. In 2004 alone (the year the wristbands were introduced), the LAF generated revenues of more than $39 million. In 2005, the Foundation expanded and rebranded its signature event. The result was the development of the LIVESTRONG Challenge, a series of LIVESTRONG activities across the country, each of which included a participant bike ride, road race, gala dinner, and expo. This addition helped annual revenues peak in 2005 at $52 million. As the profile, revenues and programs of the LAF grew, the staff multiplied as well, going from 14 employees to 67 in a 5-year span.

However, there is no question that the fortunes of the foundation were closely tied to Armstrong and his image. After his retirement, revenues stabilized, with revenues totaling $31.7 million in 2006, $31.1 million in 2007 and $32.6 million in 2008. When Armstrong returned to professional cycling in 2009 (in an unsuccessful bid to win his eighth Tour de France), LAF revenues increased 28 percent to $41.7 million.

In May 2010, federal authorities began investigating doping allegations against Armstrong and other cyclists from the United States Postal Service-sponsored cycling team. Authorities issued grand jury subpoenas to several members of the team, and while the activities of the grand jury are sealed, possible issues under investigation include drug distribution, money laundering, fraud and tax evasion. In January 2011, Sports Illustrated writer Selena Roberts1 reported the following accusations: (1) Armstrong used HemAssist, a drug that was shown to increase oxygen levels in blood in lab animals; (2) USPS team members used private airports to avoid stringent customs checks; (3) the USPS was linked to Dr. Michele Ferrari, an Italian doctor who was banned from the sport of cycling for doping allegations; and (4) Armstrong had three suspicious drug tests. Three years earlier, Sports Illustrated had used Armstrong as a foil to Roger Clemens, after the famous MLB pitcher was accused of using human growth hormone2. In that article, Roberts referred to Armstrong’s “halo effect,” noting that his efforts on behalf of the cancer community insulated him from his own doping allegations. She wrote, “[Clemens] might have saved himself with righteousness. And this is where his parallel life with Armstrong ends, where their tall Texas tales diverge: Roger has no moral cover. He can’t borrow Lance’s halo” (p. 70).

In February 2011, Armstrong announced “Retirement 2.0,” which was his final retirement from the sport. While this occurrence alone could potentially have negative repercussions on the foundation, the allegations of doping were even more worrisome. Doping allegations were frequently levied against Armstrong over the course of his career, but he consistently denied doping and pointed to the fact that he never had a positive drug test. His response to his critics was captured a decade earlier in Nike commercial, in which Armstrong says, “This is my body. I can do whatever I want to it. I can push it, study it, tweak it, listen to it. Everybody wants to know what I’m on. What am I on? I’m on my bike, busting my ass six hours a day. What are you on?”

In May 2011, Armstrong continued to proclaim his innocence after 60 Minutes3 aired an interview with Tyler Hamilton. Hamilton, one of Armstrong’s former USPS teammates, publicly stated that he had first-hand knowledge that Armstrong had doped in the lead-up to at least three of his Tour de France victories. Another former teammate, Frankie Andreu, appeared before the grand jury, and media reports suggested that he also confirmed Armstrong’s use of performance-enhancing substances.

Amidst new doping accusations and his retirement from the sport, Armstrong’s personal image has suffered. His $score, which is a Nielsen rating that factors in audience awareness, overall appeal, and 46 specific personal attributes, peaked at 775 in July 2005, and was at 197 in April 2011. However, this score is only an indication of the negative impact the doping allegations have had on Armstrong himself. The potential impacts on the LAF are well-illustrated by comments left on a public bulletin board post about the 2011 LIVESTRONG Challenge event.

From a cycling Internet forum, the following exchange was posted about the Austin event5:

JM:

It’s a couple months away, but anyone planning to do the LIVESTRONG Challenge in Austin?