Selective SERVICE

MAKE SURE YOUR GOOD INTENTIONS COUNT. STORY BY NICHOLAS DRAKE

Every thing is in its right place. Golden brown pancakes slide easily off the griddle. Maple syrup oozes over sweet butter, down stacks topped with brown sugar, whipped cream and juicy strawberries. The capacity crowd loves it. A few happy foodies kick it up a notch by adding chocolate flakes to their breakfast bonanza.

Along with hot cocoa, orange juice and coffee, the event has an even tastier twist. It’s a fundraiser for a boy suffering from a costly yet treatable health challenge. Everyone feels good about everything. The classic pancake breakfast is a resounding success. Area news media cover it in detail, including the boy and his family being handed a US$25,000 check by the event chairperson.

What if—in this hypothetical anecdote—the boy has Type 2 diabetes. He likely avoids most sugary foods. But the event on his behalf is laden with the stuff. Ironic? Insensitive? No big deal?

What’s that old saying? No good deed goes unpunished. Helping others shouldn’t be so hard. It’s nearly impossible to avoid offending someone these days. Still, when you belong to a service organization, you might need to strike a balance between being overly cautious and making decisions that could be seen as tactless, demeaning or damaging to the person or group you’re trying to help.

“What kind of message you’re putting out there is even more political with nonprofit organizations than public companies,” says Scott Robertson, CEO and founder of Robertson Communications, a public relations and marketing agency in Rancho Santa Margarita, California. “Nonprofits often depend on volunteers and community goodwill, so they can’t afford to offend. The bar is much higher.”

The best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry, as Scottish poet Robert Burns aptly put...
“One sure way to know if a person or group wants your help is to simply ask.”

it, yet some mistakes could have been avoided. Here are a couple of actual scenarios to consider when laying out your plans.

Teaming with Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure seemed like a swell idea to raise funds for breast cancer research, but the fast food restaurant chain KFC and their newly fashioned pink buckets of chicken quickly ran afoul of basic public relations ingredients when critics pointed out that maintaining good body weight was first on the American Cancer Society list of recommendations for prevention. “Eat more chicken to cure more cancer” was a recipe for disaster for both KFC and Komen. The media onslaught attacked everything from carcinogen levels in grilled chicken to the high number of fast-food restaurants in low-income neighborhoods.

Celebrating National Women’s Day in Africa seemed like a reasonable way for Bic Corporation to tout a pen designed especially for female hands, yet some consumers dubbed it condescending and pandering. Bic further embraced the day with a tweet to “look like a girl, act like a lady, and think like a man.” The backlash left an indelible mark.

KNOW THE NEED

The landscape of good intentions is littered with casualties. What steps can you take to avoid becoming one? A good place to start is to fully know the need. Who are you helping and why? How are they best served? Do they actually want your help? It’s not enough to embrace an idea because it makes everyone feel good. How will the recipient of your service be affected?

If you want to support Special Olympics, for example, learn the ins and outs of what the organization’s 4.5 million worldwide athletes really need. Apply that same strategy to any group you might be interested in helping.

“Special Olympics is not about us and them, it’s about all of us,” says Amie Dugan, director of marketing for Special Olympics in North America. “When volunteers and communities embrace this view, eyes are opened and hearts and minds are changed. People with intellectual disabilities combat stigma and isolation. The interaction athletes experience with volunteers is a valuable bridge between isolation and inclusion.”

Volunteers, for example, sometimes approach Special Olympics athletes with a mixture of pity, trepidation and overeagerness. That can be remedied by knowing the need of the athletes.

“The last thing our athletes want or need is pity,” Dugan says. “Pity only further marginalizes and minimizes people with intellectual disabilities. They tend to be juvenilized by others. Interact with athletes in accordance with their chronological age. While some may need special accommodations or things explained more slowly or more than once, never speak down to them. Respect and encouragement are what they need.
Scott Robertson of Robertson Communications in Rancho Santa Margarita, California, offers these five tips for embracing the needs of individuals and groups you’ve decided to support.

1. Ask … instead of assuming you know the needs of the person or organization you want to support.
2. Know why. “Make sure you are laser-focused on why you would want to support a cause or person,” Robertson says.
3. Focus. Remember to focus on the individual or group you are supporting.
5. Heed your PR. Public perception is important. Ignore it at your own peril, or use it to your advantage. “Public relations can be a double-edged sword,” Robertson says. “It can help you cut through with your message. But it can also cut you if you don’t think things through well.”