

## Got Branding?

*Consistent messaging can increase public and political support for innovation in child welfare, but the right business and communications strategies are essential to overcome fragmentation and territoriality.*

*By Michael Smith*

**W**HEN YOU BUY A CONTAINER OF MILK, do you think about whether it came from Elsie's Dairy Farm or Bob's Milk Company? Probably not. Thanks largely to the popularity of the national Got Milk?™ campaign, you focus on the need and desire for milk in your everyday life. The hugely effective, multi-faceted branding campaign—funded jointly by America's milk processors and dairy farmers, the Milk Processor Education Program and Dairy Management of Chicago—has educated consumers on the product's benefits and raised the collective level of milk consumption.

Is there an equally effective campaign to raise awareness of neglected and abused children and families in the child welfare system and stimulate public involvement?

There could be—if the key players in the child welfare field would come together to agree on a common goal and craft a consistent message that speaks to the public as a whole. Working together to develop a more creative messaging strategy is particularly important because it would give financially strapped government agencies and non-profits an opportunity to pool limited resources. This in turn would help cover the high costs of a national advertising or public relations campaign.

To succeed, child welfare agencies and non-profits must find ways to leverage the support of branding and marketing experts to develop a successful communications strategy. The field must also expand its vision to include advertising, public relations, media and corporate partners to fund sustained marketing campaigns that positively impact awareness and public opinion.

Indeed, the child welfare field can learn a lot from consumer marketing.

One of the most significant challenges in improving outcomes for children and families in the child welfare system is the lack of a comprehensive, consistent message about how the public can help.

### **Starting From Scratch**

Part of the problem is that there are so many complex issues and so many ways the public could help, it is difficult to know where to begin, what audience to target, what the most salient issues are, and which messages resonate most. Given the enormity of the child welfare industry, this lack of basic market research about awareness and attitudes toward its various components is unconscionable. By contrast, managers within smaller consumer- and business-oriented industries have ready access to detailed, up-to-date information about their current and potential consumers' thoughts, feelings, needs and wants.

Another concern is that child welfare agencies and organizations rarely have the financial resources or expertise to launch sophisticated, large-scale public awareness campaigns or even targeted advertisements. And while few are willing to admit it, territoriality often makes it difficult for the multitude of child welfare players to develop and deliver a cohesive message.

Why is it so difficult to establish a united front? The relative scarcity of financial resources makes the competition for support and maintenance of a strong organizational "brand" especially fierce. This struggle for survival and public recognition in an already saturated social issue "market" makes the child welfare field even more fragmented. And this fragmentation is exacerbated by the complex combination of funding streams and



eligibility requirements at the national, state and local levels. Disparate and sometimes conflicting public policies and negative media attention don't help the cause either.

The goal, then, is to take a page from the consumer marketers' book, working together to gather essential research and resources and deliver a consistent branding message. Ultimately, this will prove crucial in breaking down barriers and building public awareness and support for innovation in child welfare and other social services.