

# Building the Rotary Brand

K.R. Ravindran  
RI Director

Management specialist Jim Collins asks whether Harvard truly delivers a better education than other universities. Perhaps, but the emotional pull of Harvard overcomes any doubt when it comes to raising funds.

Does the Red Cross truly do a better job of disaster relief? Perhaps, but it gives people an easy answer to the question, How can I help? Is the Cancer Society the best mechanism for conquering cancer, or the Nature Conservancy the most effective at protecting the environment? Perhaps, but their brand reputations give people an easy way to support a cause they care about.

Today, the question we need to ask ourselves is, What does Rotary mean to others?

We agree that the Rotary emblem should represent humanitarian service. But to achieve that, we need the world to recognize that we are the premier organization for outstanding humanitarian service. That is easier said than done!

Similar to major corporations like Apple, which means innovation, or Coca-Cola, which means a cold, thirst-quenching beverage, or Toyota, which means quality, long-lasting cars, we need to build the brand of Rotary.

True, Rotary does not have billions of dollars to spend on marketing and advertising. But we have what others do not: 33,000 Rotary clubs and 1.2 million Rotarians worldwide, a tremendous resource that sometimes transcends even those of large, prestigious corporations.

In fact, I have a theory that I use when negotiating a corporate deal for Rotary. If you go on the basis that just 300,000 of our 1.2 million Rotarians are doing Rotary work in a day, and say we value their service at just US\$30 each per day, what does it come to? That's right — \$9 million per day! That is what we bring to the table, and that is our strength.

And so, one of the most vital challenges confronting you and me is to mobilize this power and raise the public image and awareness of Rotary.

True, we cannot afford to blanket the public with paid advertising on a massive scale. But if we can capture the imagination of the public with high-quality and innovative projects, and if we can tap into the connections and talents that we already have at the grassroots level, our PR resources will be multiplied, and we will achieve significant results.

As the Chartered Institute of Public Relations says, "Public relations is about reputation — the result of what you do, what you say, and what others say about you." This does not mean that we should not, or do not, spend any money on public-image building. In fact, the RI Board, through the PR Division, has lent credible support to our PR drive by making available to Rotary clubs and districts millions of dollars of funding for innovative public relations projects. And during the past few years, Rotary International has received hundreds of media clips from around the world. Increasingly, Rotary has been in the news.

We have also noted a trend where clubs and districts take the RI-produced Humanity in Motion public service announcements and create regionalized versions for use in their own communities. If you have not done so yet, you are encouraged to customize the Humanity in Motion materials so that they are culturally appropriate to your needs.

Let's look at just a few of the many Rotary public relations success stories in the last year.

These iconic buildings you see on the screen — the Sydney Opera House; the House of Commons in London; the African Trading Port in Cape Town, South Africa; the Colosseum in Rome — have appeared in the media and in magazines, in calendars and in catalogs, in brochures and in booklets around the world. On 23 February last year, these buildings were lit with a simple message that Rotary has made its own — End Polio Now — and all attracted media and public attention. Many Rotarians, dignitaries, and journalists attended lighting ceremonies, and the events were covered in local and national media.

There are other examples of PR successes. The 18 districts in France hosted various outreach events all in one week, including an advertising campaign on city billboards, at major radio stations, and in magazines. And, by reaching out to the media to gain coverage in news articles, they raised awareness of what Rotary is and does.

Another example comes from a district in the United States that created a website for visitors to learn about Rotary and link to clubs in the area. The site was successful because the district first placed Humanity in Motion television, radio, print, and billboard ads in its communities, all directing their audiences to this user-friendly website.

District 9200, including clubs from Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, created a multinational television campaign in advance of the district conference. The campaign was supplemented by Humanity in Motion billboards localized with district information and by "Rotary information days" that increased awareness of Rotary and its programs.

A district in Taiwan worked with local business contacts to air Rotary's 30-second public service announcements on screens strategically placed near elevators in 500 building lobbies. Some 700,000 people viewed the Rotary video messages.

And 23 districts in Brazil worked together to produce and broadcast a weekly 30-minute national cable television show, reaching nearly 32 million viewers. Each episode featured on-location reporting from Rotary projects all across Brazil.

Unfortunately, there is no single defining action, no grand program — not even PolioPlus — no killer innovation, no solitary lucky break, no miracle moment alone through which the strong work of our organization can spread. Rather, it needs a multitude of high-quality projects all over the world, coupled with good public relations. The quality, the depth, and the usefulness of the projects gives Rotarians the best possibility of building up Rotary's brand equity. That brand equity, in turn, improves our ability to raise funds for ourselves and for our Rotary Foundation and, for that matter, to attract quality new talent to our ranks.

Your challenge, then, is to go back to your districts and build positive Rotary awareness. During your next break, stop by the RI Public Relations booth and pick up a flash drive of various PR tools, including Humanity in Motion materials, to help you and your district public relations coordinator during your year.

Before I close, let me share with you a project from my home country, Sri Lanka, a story of raising Rotary awareness and Rotary's brand equity.

The tsunami of 2004 decimated half the country. Nearly 60,000 people died. Rotary Sri Lanka knew it needed to do something substantial. We gathered that over 100 schools were destroyed that day. Fortunately, it was a Sunday, so there were no children in those schools. But the emotional scars that were left behind and the mental trauma the children went through would remain forever. We decided, therefore, that we would build high-quality schools to replace some of those that were destroyed.

We called the project Schools Reawaken — Building What Can Never Be Destroyed. The tsunami could take away the schools of those children. It could take away their homes and possessions. It could even take away one and sometimes both their parents. But it would never be allowed to take away their spirit, and this spirit was what we set out to build.

It was a gigantic task. We faced many obstacles, the least of them being the need to raise massive capital and finding large tracts of land. But we succeeded in dealing with every obstacle that came our way. In the span of just 36 months, we had successfully completed 20 schools at a cost of \$12 million. We enabled 15,000 children to go back to a better school than the one they had before.

Each time a new school was ceremonially opened, we had a full-page, nationwide advertisement that not only gave the public details of the school but also proclaimed in broad headings that “Rotarians keep their promise.” Advertisements cost money, and our expensive full-page advertisements were paid for by a bank. Apart from donating \$1 million, the bank also supported us with the office infrastructure needed to run the project.

Truly, this must go down as one of the great projects of Rotary, with an administrative cost of under 3 percent.

Now, why am I telling you this story? Not because it was a great project, although it was. Not because we did it so efficiently, although we did. But because it was a public relations coup! The tsunami attracted many nongovernmental organizations from all over the world. They made many promises and undertook many projects, but only a handful of them truly delivered. Rotary delivered, and its fame spread.

When our frustrated government assembled the various donors to evaluate the progress of the projects undertaken by these NGOs that had made little progress, it was Rotary they invited to make a presentation and to explain to them how to run a big project transparently, efficiently, and cost effectively. We had not only built schools; we had, in the process, built the Rotary brand.

When dengue fever hit the capital city of Colombo, it was Rotary that the municipal office turned to for help with the awareness programs. And after the end of the recent hostilities in my country, when the government enlisted the private sector in the rebuilding process, one project was to set up an elaborate vocational training center to rehabilitate militant and other youth. It asked one of the big international advertising agencies to raise the funds and partner with it on the project. This agency agreed to come in, on the condition that it could invite Rotary to be its partner.

Yes, my friends, in my country the Rotary brand is strong, and the Rotary emblem stands for humanitarian service to others. So it can in your own country too!