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Housing Works builds AIDS awareness

[Craig McGuire](#)

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Tackling the twin tragedies of AIDS and homelessness, Brooklyn-based Housing Works relies on a robust communications and marketing engine to remind the mainstream that while this horrific crisis has abated, it's actually still worsening in the most troubled segment of the population.

"The biggest communication challenge we face is the general public has this sense that AIDS has somehow been addressed," says Charles King, Housing Works president and chief executive. "But AIDS is still raging, people are still dying, and not just on the other side of the world."

Incorporated as a tax-exempt, nonprofit organization in 1990, Housing Works was founded by a handful of members of the activist group ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), advancing beyond grassroots campaigning and civil disobedience to prompt the government to take responsibility for the thousands of homeless dying from AIDS in New York City.

"The demographics for AIDS in the US have changed dramatically since the 1980s and [AIDS] is now a disease overwhelmingly affecting people of color, the poor, the disenfranchised," King says. "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and family, including food, clothing, housing, medical care, and necessary social services."

Today, Housing Works is the largest community- and minority-based AIDS organization in the country, providing services to low-income and homeless New Yorkers living with HIV/AIDS, including housing, medical care, job-training, legal services, mental health services, and drug treatment.

"The communications department helps get the word out about our programs and our political advocacy," says director of communications, David Thorpe. "Getting attention for our programs plays an important role in raising money, and getting attention for our political endeavors plays an important role in convincing the public and elected officials to adopt policies to help people living with HIV/AIDS."

Housing Works is also distinctive in that it is not entirely beholden to traditional fundraising channels, as it pioneered a "social entrepreneurship" model for nonprofits and operates a successful chain of upscale thrift shops and a Bookstore Cafe that generate millions in revenue, adding another dimension to communications.

"The businesses offer us a unique and powerful marketing avenue," says Chris Sealey, SVP of marketing. "But, it is challenging to integrate our communications into our business endeavors, ensuring a rewarding retail experience for customers, while not hitting them over the head with rhetoric."

Meanwhile, in addition to promoting several annual events, the Housing Works marcomms team is currently involved in a major campaign to convince elected officials that housing is the best way to end the AIDS epidemic and put more money into rental assistance (many studies have shown that housing reduces the likelihood that people will engage in behaviors that spread HIV).

Ironically, Housing Works' greatest strengths - its complexity and diversity - are also the sources of its toughest communication challenges.

"From our volunteers and staffers, to our clients, to our programs, you won't find a more diverse organization," Sealey says. "Then when you think of the audiences we have to inspire to action, you get a sense of the breadth of communications and marketing we have to maintain."

However, Desiree Younge, senior program officer at the Robin Hood Foundation, which funds and supports poverty-fighting organizations in New York City, including Housing Works, thinks it is up to the challenges.

"They communicate their message very well and are effective at bringing it to the mainstream, have great branding, and their social enterprise is unique," Younge says. "They have a great advocacy machine; always seem to always be at the forefront of the issues; and have a national presence, which also makes them effective."

In the end, despite the social enterprise and range of outreach programs, King sees the program as an advocacy for the disenfranchised and isn't shy to take to the streets.

"Our goal goes way beyond serving people with AIDS and HIV and advocat[ing] for action to address the pandemic," King says. "For us to do that, we have to effectively communicate in a powerful way, whether that's to power brokers or civic leaders or the general public. Our goal is to move people to action."

At a glance

Organization: Housing Works

President and CEO: Charles King

Headquarters: Brooklyn, NY

Annual Operating Budget: \$45 million

PR/Marketing Budget: \$351,887

Key Trade Titles: *Women's Wear Daily, Chronicle of Philanthropy, Crain's Health Pulse*

Marcomms team:

Christopher Sealey, VP of marcomms; David Thorpe, communications director; Ian Crowther, design director; Keith Mancuso, business mktg. director; Diana Scholl, staff writer

Marketing services agencies:

Housing Works receives deep discounts from many agencies, among them:

Staple Design (graphic design and visual communications); Filmworks Brooklyn (film and video production)