The Importance of Image for a Non-Profit Organization
By Jeffrey T. Spiegel, CPA
119 Paddington Circle
Smithtown, NY 11787
631-724-1725
jtscpa@gmail.com
www.jeffspiegelcpa.com

In today's business and economic environment image can be the difference between success and failure. This is true in for-profit entities and more so in non-profit organizations. Non-profit organizations rely heavily on individual donations, which are given based on the reputation, or image of the entity. The public perception of the organization, the quality of the work it does, how much of every dollar donated actually goes to the exempt purpose on which the entity was founded, these are all important factors used in determining whether to give to a charity or not.

Over the last number of years there have been many instances where an organization received negative press, some justified and some unfounded. There are various reasons for these attacks ranging from mismanagement of operations and funds by executive staff members to incorrectly associating a legitimate charity with an illegitimate one. These reasons, as well as many others, all have one thing in common; they attack the image of the entity. I was associated with a major national non-profit organization for many years on its Board of Directors and we had to deal with the effect of poorly run copycat charities many times over my terms of service. There is nothing more devastating than having to deal with negative press because of something you had nothing to due with and have no control over. Most well run organizations will have disaster recovery plans ready to do damage control covering various circumstances ranging from negative publicity to loss of funding because of terrorist activities.

The image that a non-profit entity projects is directly related to the funding that it receives. There is such a glut of charities in the world today, covering all imaginable causes from animal rights to disaster assistance that it becomes very difficult to be able to decide what a worthy cause is. A charity needs to have a purpose and mission that tugs at the hearts of the general public and needs to present that image in a positive fashion to illicit the donations needed to continue to function.

How to do this is not always an easy thing. In the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11 many worthwhile charities suffered as everyone's focus turned to the victims of the attacks and to rebuilding and fighting terrorism. It has taken a lot of time and effort for many charities to regain their foothold in obtaining a portion of the donated dollars. The building and enhancement of image is accomplished through the use of well constructed and managed web-sites, a good public relations team, positive press and all of the options which are regularly used by for-profit businesses. The big difference is that a non-profit may have a more saleable "product" based on what it is that the charity does. It is more of an emotional issue and there is a lot more that you can do to effect the emotions of the public.

What many people forget is that charities are businesses and for the most part should be run as a business. The "products" that are offered by a non-profit organization are better than those offered by for-profit companies. The image projected and the packaging of the "product" is all-important in the survival of the charitable organization. A non-profit entity needs to have the right people in place to assist in the creation and projection of that image. The image needs to be managed properly and not abused or the image of the entity and the purpose for which it exists will suffer and possibly not be able to recover.