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Tag, you're it: How one nonprofit created a tagline

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The happiest place on earth.

The ultimate driving machine.

You're in good hands.



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Chances are, you know exactly which company stands behind each of these brand taglines. All these examples convey the promise of something bigger than merely visiting a theme park, driving a car, or having insurance. They speak briefly and creatively to a more meaningful benefit from engaging with the company—exactly the kind of tool that so many nonprofits (including mine) could use.

Like many organizations, Easterseals DC MD VA offers a range of programs and services to fulfill its mission. Beginning in 1945 with a focus on helping children with disabilities, our vision has expanded and today we serve children and adults of all abilities, as well as military veterans and their families. Conveying the breadth of programs we offer in an intensely crowded market is no easy task.

Breaking through to potential clients, donors, and employees creates a complex matrix of messaging. Therein lay the appeal of developing a tagline, which—if done well—would strengthen our brand recognition, grab audience attention, and pique interest in what we do.

State your goals clearly

We began by partnering with a team at Capital One, a company experienced in developing effective branding—the “What’s in your wallet?” folks. The first thing they did was help us identify our goals for a tagline. It should:

- Be inclusive of all audiences served by Easterseals.
- Be short, clear, and easy to recall.
- Help distinguish Easterseals from other similar nonprofit organizations.
- Make it easy for audiences to understand Easterseals’ mission.
- Reflect Easterseals’ values.

For nonprofits not fortunate enough to have a personal connection to a powerhouse like Capital One, naming your goals is still a great place to start. Find an objective partner that can help you cast a wide, but actionable, net around what you’re hoping to achieve. Look to the marketing programs of nearby universities. Grad students in particular are hungry for real-life experience. Pitching your tagline development to an ad agency as a pro bono project is another option. Large shops may be willing to do it to enhance their corporate social responsibility, while smaller agencies may see working with a nonprofit as a way into a new market.

Gather input from supporters and beyond

Our next step was to brainstorm for words and terms that felt genuine to our organization. We talked to program participants, employees, and donors, asking them to describe their experiences with Easterseals, and we listened for concepts that came up repeatedly. We heard words like *hope*, *empowerment*, and *inclusion* over and over.

The Capital One team synthesized what they heard and presented us with about two dozen tagline ideas. If you're working with a grad student or a small agency, you may have to perform this step yourself. If that's the case, keep the exercise fun. Over a pizza lunch, invite staff to blue-sky some taglines, using the keywords as inspiration. There are no right answers at this stage. What you're going for is simply a list of potential taglines—knowing that there's still a lot of refinement ahead.

Armed with our list, we spent the next several weeks gathering reactions from Easterseals leadership and external advisors familiar with our work. From this input, we added new ideas and removed others from consideration.

We deliberately included a wide range of people in these discussions, not only to gather many ideas, but also to cultivate buy-in for the final choice. The process wasn't always smooth. For instance, one person felt strongly negative toward the word *inclusion*, feeling that we were bowing to “woke” culture. Be prepared to have one-on-one conversations with allies who raise objections. Listen to them and be willing to negotiate. Ultimately, we decided that the concept of inclusion was so central to our mission that we retained a form of the word in our tagline and have taken steps to show how we live the concept.

Refine and gather more input

Following these conversations, we whittled our lengthy list of possible taglines down to just five ideas, each conveying a distinctive concept:

- Giving help and hope to our community since 1945.
- Hope at the crossroads.
- Including Individuals. Empowering Families. Strengthening Communities.
- More than your neighbor. Your partner in hope.
- Uplifting community. Empowering you.

The Capital One team then moved into user testing—essentially focus groups representing the general public. Again, you may have to manage this step internally. One question I recommend including is, “What do you think the organization using this tagline does?” For Easterseals, the “Including Individuals. Empowering Families. Strengthening Communities.” tagline drew the most positive responses. Users suggested it would belong to an organization that served a variety of needs and was embedded in the local area. The callout to families and communities drew especially favorable feedback. One user even noted the tagline suggested the organization offered people hope, without using the word.

Ensure you’re on firm legal ground

Although user testing clearly indicated a preference for one of our considerations, we weren’t ready to declare victory just yet. Instead, we used this feedback to further refine our list and explore whether we could trademark any of the remaining ideas. Trademarking protects a tagline, but also ensures that we aren’t infringing upon any other organization’s mark. We began with a “knockout” legal search, which can be done for free on the [U.S. Patent and Trademark Office \(USPTO\) website](#). Our knockout search determined that the phrase “Your partner in hope.” was not a viable option because a nearly identical registration is held by another nonprofit.

Our top choice—“Including Individuals. Empowering Families. Strengthening Communities.”—did get a legal green light and so we chose to move forward with that tagline. We engaged an intellectual property attorney to file paperwork with the USPTO to conduct a more comprehensive search. While this isn’t a required step for trademarking and does come with costs, it is standard practice and offers high assurance that your organization can claim ownership of a mark.

Plan the rollout carefully

Once the trademark registration process began, we were clear to begin using the tagline publicly. We began by rolling it out to staff. Our internal team had been using all-staff meetings to keep colleagues updated on the tagline’s development, so it was natural to use this forum to reveal the final choice. We unveiled a new version of our logo with the tagline attached and premiered a [short, lively video](#) that connects each element of the tagline with our work. The video was also featured prominently in a social media campaign that introduced the tagline to our followers.

Critical to our rollout was leveraging ongoing efforts to reach external audiences. Among our tactics were:

- Adding the tagline to all staff email signatures.
- Adding the tagline to materials used by our board of directors when they are engaging with the community on our behalf.
- Creating retractable banners with the tagline for use by staff while tabling at community events.

In all, our journey from conception to trademark filing took about 18 months—and the trademarking process continues. Each step, from articulating our mission in a new way to hearing people's experiences with Easterseals, sparked valuable conversations. While we continue to receive positive feedback on the tagline, the process itself gave us insights that have helped refine our messaging and achieve our marketing goals.

Paula Moore joined Easterseals DC MD VA in 2021, bringing 20 years of experience in the nonprofit sector. As Vice President of Communications & Marketing, she is responsible for all strategic communications, including media relations, marketing and advertising, digital media, and more. In 2023, her team earned a gold medal Merit Award for its effective use of social media.