

CONTAGIOUS

Nike Chalkbot /

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Sometimes, the best ideas are the simplest. At the Tour de France each year, cycling enthusiasts chalk messages of support on the side of the course to encourage and communicate with the competitors. Armed with this insight, Nike set about acting as a conduit for the tradition to a broader audience than just those lining the streets of the Tour, whilst promoting the Lance Armstrong Foundation (LAF) – the charity founded by the sport’s very own Lazarus to raise money and awareness in the fight against cancer under the LIVESTRONG banner.

Developed in conjunction with advertising agency Wieden+Kennedy, Portland, software and design studio DeepLocal and robotics developer Standard Robot, the Chalkbot is a robotic chalking mechanism that receives, processes, prints, captures and delivers data (text, GPS coordinates and photographs). Blessed with the good looks of an army vehicle and the good sense of a smart phone, the Chalkbot received messages from anyone, anywhere in the world via Twitter to @Chalkbot, via an SMS shortcode, or from an entry form on wearyyellow.com. The messages passed swiftly through an online moderating/publishing back-end interface, and approved messages were then sent to the Chalkbot to print along the roads of the Tour de France in bright, LIVESTRONG yellow using 48 nozzles and vats of emulsified chalk. All messages were also photographed by the Chalkbot, and the GPS coordinates captured. This information was then returned to the message sender via email. The messages were documented on wearyyellow.com, and on a custom built Google map. The photos of the messages could be shared by the contributor via social networks and email.

‘I think the best part about the Chalkbot’s online presence was the dialogue created with the Twitter followers,’ says Adam Heathcott, interactive art director at Wieden+Kennedy. ‘What began as a simple method to take incoming messages became a full-blown conversation. The nature of a Twitter post is that the users are doing some of the promotion work for you. Every @ and # becomes a little tiny ad. There is a certain point where it becomes self-sustaining; a couple of tweets a day get retweeted a few dozen times and then a flurry of new messages come in. Once we had printed the messages on the street and began sending photos of them back to the participants, we saw another big round of Twitter activity that kept online chatter active through the end of the Tour.’



Photo / Bob Huff /

Was there a conscious sense of taking the language and functionality of the virtual world (e.g. Tweets and social media conversations) and transplanting it into a real-world scenario?

‘I’m always fascinated when interactive means “real life,” as in, not at a computer by yourself. Having an activity start online and turn into something real and physical is special,’ continues Heathcott. ‘You are no longer sharing a picture you downloaded from a website, you are sharing a memory or encouragement that has been physically transcribed onto the roads of the world’s largest sporting event. You might even be able to glimpse a brief moment of it on TV (which is still a big deal to some people!).’

During the course of the Tour, the Chalkbot sprayed over 100,000 vibrant yellow messages of hope, and one gigantic *Contagious* logo. Hey – if you don’t ask...

From a branding perspective, Chalkbot is a bold initiative. It united not only Nike’s sporting heritage and LIVESTRONG, but also the increasingly dramatic and

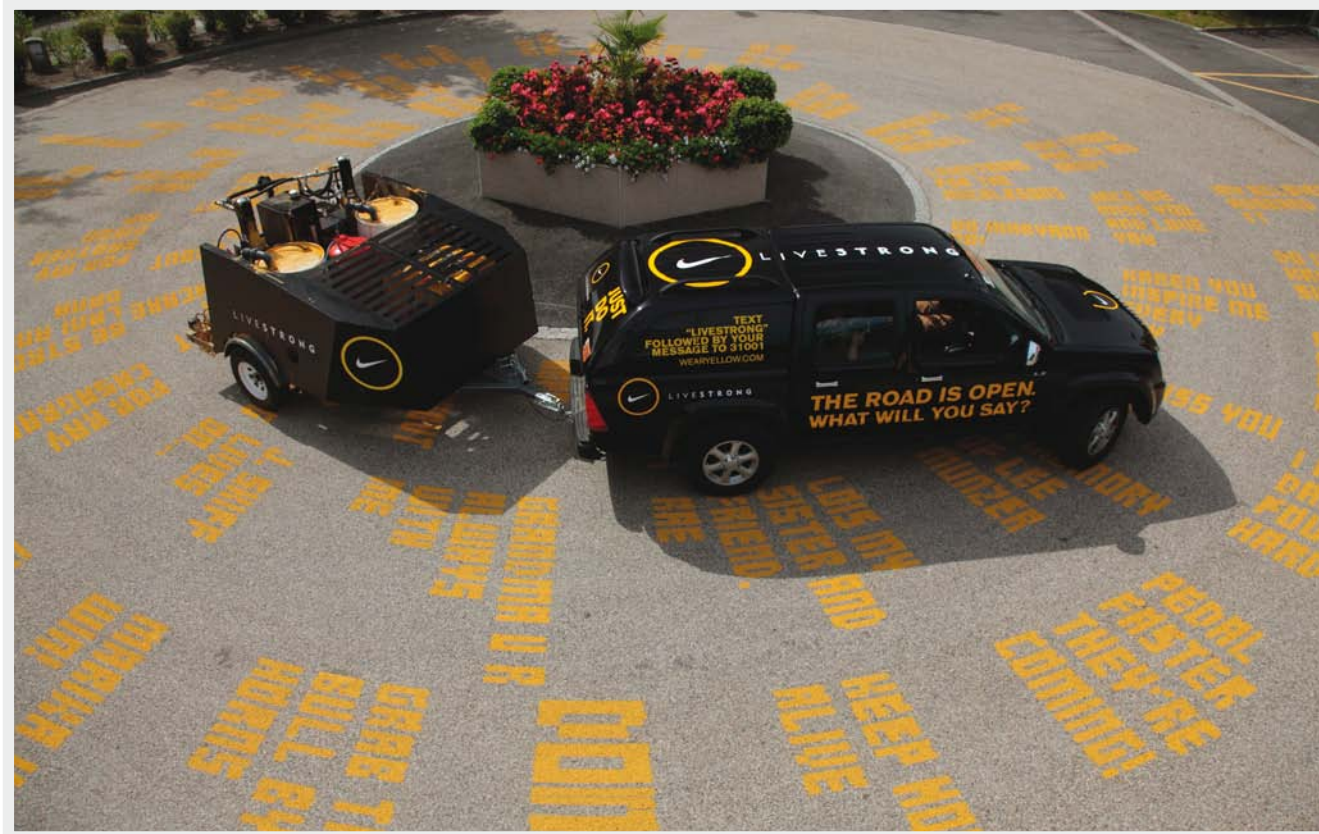


Photo / Bob Huff /

controversial Tour and Armstrong's own brand (a one-man polemic on two wheels, the American himself is no shrinking violet). That's a lot of colliding properties. How does Nike continue to innovate in the field of sports sponsorship, an increasingly cluttered space in which no one brand can claim ownership? 'Nike is better placed because we are a sports brand, rather than a non-sports brand trying to simply capitalise on the emotion of sport through sponsorship,' explains Charlie Brooks, Nike's European communications director. 'It starts with the athlete - the link with Nike and then the product we create for sport. The important thing in terms of marketing is to create a bond between the athlete and the brand in the consumer's mind. Lance is incredibly high-profile and our association with him has been long-term.'

This association has seen the creation of several memorable properties over the years. 'Nike has supported Lance throughout his career, including prior to his own diagnosis,' Brooks continues. 'We created the LIVESTRONG yellow wristbands in 2004 and helped make that a global phenomenon, with over 70 million bands being worn to date. So through that and the LIVESTRONG footwear and clothing line Nike has helped the Lance Armstrong Foundation raise tens of millions of dollars to fight cancer.'

It is this fusion of emotional, real-world and digital insight which makes the Chalkbot so special, its PR value way outstripping the benefit of a tiny, stitched logo. Heartfelt communiqués via the public forum of Twitter formed a poignant testament to the potency of Nike's idea. If you're prone to sudden bouts of

weeping, you would do well to avoid <http://tinyurl.com/kpdppy> where such messages as 'Hang in there, Dad', 'In memory of Mary - we miss you every day' and 'I am not afraid of death' were uploaded in their thousands. (If you're not, you might find amusement in the one wag whose contribution simply read: -----FINISH-----).

The Chalkbot's existence traces back to a specific insight surrounding the cycling scene. Whilst we'd love to see it in action at other sporting events, it might seem as incongruous as, say, football chants at the Augusta National Golf Club or a foam finger at Wimbledon. Not that Nike is ruling it out just yet. 'The Chalkbot is an innovative idea and may continue to be part of Nike's plans to activate and energize consumers,' concludes Brooks, before outlining the philosophy that maintains Nike's status as poster child for the new marketing revolution. 'Innovation is at the foundation of Nike, in product and marketing. Chalkbot is innovative and new, but it is important to remember that new should be better; not simply new for its own sake.' ❧

The Contagious Team would like to thank the Chalkbot team at Nike and Wieden+Kennedy, and photographer Bob Huff for their assistance in getting an 8x8ft yellow Contagious logo etched onto a mountainous French roadside. Vive le Tour, and all who ride in it.

<http://tinyurl.com/lley9bm>
www.wearyellow.com