

# Hounded by confusion

Dozens of groups with 'humane' and 'animal' in their names create confusion  
It's not the only nonprofit sector where overlapping names can flummox charitable donors.

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Welcome to the Department of Redundancy Department. ? It's a place where 43 'humane societies' stumble over each other. Where three Chambers of Commerce can serve the same business. Where 62 groups collect money for cancer. ? It's Minnesota, a place with a special tolerance for organizations that overlap - keeping consumers and donors perplexed. Do groups, multiplying like rabbits, need birth control pills? Or an abstinence program? ? 'It causes tremendous confusion in the marketplace,' said Lisa Hannum, CEO of Beehive PR Inc. in St. Paul, who consults with businesses and nonprofits about their missions and names. ? Deb Balzer struggles with the name game every day. She is the spokeswoman for the Animal Humane Society. That's not the same, she constantly explains, as the Humane Society for Companion Animals, the Minnesota Humane Society or dozens of other 'humane' groups operating in Minnesota.

"Welcome to our battle," she sighed.

Recognizing the chaos, her group kicked off a modest cleanup effort in January, merging with humane groups in St. Paul and Woodbury. They are still working on the hard part - finding a new name.

Other groups seem content with the bewildering status quo.

Police groups operating in Minnesota include the Police Protective Fund, Police Officers Safety Association, Minnesota Chiefs of Police Association and the Association for Police and Sheriffs.

Cancer groups seem to be metastasizing. A few of them are the Cancer Benefit Fund, Cancer Fund of America, Cancer Care, Cancer Research Institute and Cancer Treatment Research Foundation. There are dozens of others.

The problem lies in how groups are founded, according to Paul Verrette, who monitors program accountability for the state Charities Review Council.

Often, a person with a passion for something - homelessness, rottweilers, classical music - will start a group unaware other groups exist to serve those needs.

Or a member of a wealthy family will die, and the survivors form a foundation to address the cause of death - cancer, diabetes, lupus - although organizations for those ailments already exist.

The groups aren't formed for reasons that are logical.

"They are personal, social, emotional, usually borne out of some event," said Hannum.

"Americans are such entrepreneurial people. They choose to start a new nonprofit rather than support an existing one," said Verrette.

Other times, he said, the copycats are malicious. Parasitic groups imitate the originals, hoping to confuse donors into contributing.

**'HUMANE' HAS CACHET**

The result is donor fatigue, according to Michael Houston, marketing professor at the Carlson School of Management. Donors getting many requests will stop giving - if they perceive the groups are serving the same cause, he said.

Houston said certain words are vulnerable to abuse.

For example, take the word "humane."

"The word is powerful. It conveys a sensitivity to the world that plays well," said Houston.

That means it attracts copycats, which plagues people like Mike Fry, director of the Animal Ark No-Kill Shelter in Hastings.

He rattled off the names of six "humane" groups in the Twin Cities area.

"It is a faulty assumption that because a group has 'humane' in the name, that they are doing good work," Fry said. "You see animal hoarders or profiteers using the word 'humane' in their names."

The message to consumers is simple, he said: "If you can't easily get a clear picture of what they do, I don't think you should give them a dime."

Or take the word "trust."

"It is such a good word," said Jane Prohaska. That's one reason the group she directs, the Minnesota Land Trust, has virtually the same name as Minnesota: Trust for Public Land. Both groups find the word useful.

Or "chamber of commerce."

A single business in St. Paul might be represented by the St. Paul Area Chamber and the Midway Chamber - plus ethnic chambers for Hmong, American Indians, Hispanics, Japanese, Canadians, French, Swedish, Israelis or blacks.

"It can be confusing. Really, there are no rules" limiting overlapping chambers, said Jennifer Byers, vice president of the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce.

The groups don't even do the same thing. Several of them promote trade between nations, said Byers, as opposed to advocating for local business.

ANY BENEFIT?

Redundancy isn't always a problem, said Marcia Avner, public policy director for the Minnesota Council of NonProfits. Overlapping groups can be effective, she said, especially when they are localized neighborhood programs.

A visitor from Russia once asked one of Avner's friends why there were so many youth groups in America. "In Russia, we just have one group, with 21 million in it," the visitor said.

Better, said Avner, to have multiple and decentralized groups that give local people a sense of control. Nonprofits are like businesses, she said - redundant groups die out naturally because the public won't support them.

But Hannum used the same analogy differently.

"Businesses have a great incentive to merge, acquire, create clarity and sue each other when they infringe," said Hannum. But nonprofits are often funded by foundations or grants, so they can ignore marketplace forces, she said.

"Nonprofits have no incentive to strategically manage that so they all make sense," said Hannum.

"There is no real check and balance there."

Sometimes, groups change names to end confusion.

Last year, the United Way of St. Croix County and United Way of River Falls merged to form United Way of St. Croix Valley - creating instant confusion with the St. Croix Area United Way, based in Stillwater.

The Stillwater group changed its name in July, to United Way of Washington County-East.

But changing a name can be difficult, too. A name change can challenge a group's identity, said

Prohaska: "It's like changing your name when you get married."

Mostly, nonprofits wallow in the name confusion, leaving it up to consumers to wade through a swamp of appellations in search of something appropriate.

"People want to give to the 'humane society.' Well, there is no such thing. It's like saying, 'the newspaper,'" said Balzer, of the still-unnamed partly-probably-maybe-east-metro humane-style group.

Whatever you do, don't ask anyone from the new group why it isn't merging with the Humane Society of the United States, the Animal Humane Association or the Minnesota Federated Humane Societies.

It's a long story.

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HERE'S HELP

Confused by the glut of overlapping names of charities?

Try [www.smartgivers.org](http://www.smartgivers.org) <<http://www.smartgivers.org>>. That's the Web site for the Minnesota Charities Review Council, which rates competing or overlapping charities.

'ANIMAL' AND 'HUMANE' GROUPS?: IT'S A ZOO

Animal Humane Society

Humane Society for Companion Animals

Minnesota Humane Society

American Humane Association

Humane Society of United States

Fund for Animals

Friends of Animals

Greater West Metro Humane Society

Humane Society International

Minnesota Federated Humane Societies

United States Humane Charities

Paws and Clause Humane Society

American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

World Society for Protection of Animals