

# How Marketing Destroyed The Soul of the Online Poppy Appeal

This story revolves around three important concepts, so I 'd like to start by bluntly defining them before I show how they brought one of our most important national movements to its knees.

I think the dictionary definition of "marketing" is:

**Mar-ket-ing** [mahr-ke-ting] – verb to club enough people around the head often enough with a message until money falls out of their pockets.

I think the definition of ROI is:

**ROI** [ah-roh-eye] – noun if you club 100 people 100 times one day and get £1000 and it costs 1p per clubbing then you've spent £100 to get £1,000 so your ROI is 10x.

Finally, I think the definition of "online":

**online:** [on-lein][a.k.a. **digital** didj-ittl] – noun place to store brochures, pamphlets etc once they have been converted to .pdf format {note: dangerous place}

So here's the story. I value military service above almost everything in our society, and I support the annual Poppy Appeal. I have slowly lost religious sentiment over time, my respect for national institutions such as Government, is waning and I miss those things which can genuinely unite us as people in a common cause at least for a moment in time. The annual Remembrance is thus one of the single most important events in our nation's calendar. In my view, it is not a sideshow or a campaign but time to renew our national purpose, resolve and support for those who serve. For me, the Poppy campaign is one of only a handful of things which I can call the soul of our nation.

At the other extreme, I spend time in the trivial, superficial world of Twitter. It is a world which at one and the same time provided a real place to express and strengthen the "soul of our nation" spirit of Poppy Day. Yet at the other, it is a place which The Royal British Legion allowed to suck the soul out of the Poppy Day campaign. This is not a story about Twitter – it is a story about abject failure at The Royal British Legion. In a nutshell, it's about how they embraced marketing and ROI metrics while abjectly failing to understand the world of online and Twitter in particular. Commercialism triumphed at the expense of soul.

## On Twitter

In late October, I signed up to add a poppy to my picture on Twitter using a thing called Twibbon ([www.twibbon.com/join/Royal-British-Legion-2](http://www.twibbon.com/join/Royal-British-Legion-2)) created by a Twitter ID called JoshuaKAL to show my support to others on Twitter. It's unusual that this Twibbon was not created by The Royal British Legion, but certainly not immediately a problem.

On Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> October night, during Question Time, some tweets from Twitter ID “@PoppySupport” said that if Harriet Harmann was not wearing a Poppy, she should be “sent over here for a talking to”. @PoppySupport followed this up a few hours later in two tweets which said “Use #poppytyranny to report offenders plz” and “Big Brother is watching you”.

Now, this coercive approach to getting people to wear poppies didn’t seem quite the style of the British Legion I know and love. I think it’s called Poppy Fascism, and the pressure is something Jon Snow famously objects to. So I queried it with the British Legion the following morning and no, it wasn’t one of their Twitter IDs.

@PoppySupport had looked real enough: by the Friday morning (30<sup>th</sup> October), it had 790 followers, it asked people to text donations to the real British Legion mobile number (70222) and gave the real British Legion website <http://www.poppy.org.uk/support-us/new-ways-to-support> in its profile. It was sending out tweets to encourage people to txt donations. They were being copied and circulated on that Thursday night in their droves. It had huge momentum, everyone was “in the moment” and sharing the Twibbons and the calls for txt donations. You could say it was a Twitterstorm – one of those exciting times when everyone on Twitter appears to be involved in the same discussion at the same time. And it was genuinely warming as most people would add their personal comments and reflections as they invited others to join with them in supporting the appeal.

But it was suspicious. First there was the eerie tone of voice: the concept of #poppytyranny was completely wrong. There was the logo accompanying the Twitter ID – it was different from all the official British Legion logos. What was even more suspicious was that one person in the British Legion press office told me @PoppySupport was official but on repeated questioning, others said it was not.

It was challenging that there was a huge groundswell of support for the Poppy Appeal on Twitter yet a fragmented array of Twitter IDs, including: @PoppySupport, @HonourOurForces, @PoppyLondon, @LegionRunner, @Jump4Heroes, @HMFForces, @Veterans\_UK and numerous @RBL\_ identities run by British Legion clubs around the country.

The fact that there were so many Twitter IDs and that the support from Twitter users had been huge and rapid and widespread, meant that it was ripe for spammers to elicit money under false premises on a huge scale. With so many people willing to give money at this time – it was a huge opportunity for online thieves.

So on Friday 30<sup>th</sup> October, I am motivated primarily by two things: that the British Legion is at risk and that it’s using the “wrong” tone of voice.

The only way to get accurate is to talk to someone and so the British Legion website directs me to Robin Goodman (0203 2072233) who informs me that PoppyMan and PoppyLegion are the only official Twitter IDs, neither of which I’d come across the previous day. They recognised that @PoppySupport was not them and were trying, like me, to flush this Twitter ID out – they did not know who it was. I had been right. I was right to be concerned.

## **Poppy Man**

I couldn't find @PoppyMan anywhere. Later on, I stumble across @Poppy\_Man, a Twitter ID with just 17 tweets since June 2<sup>nd</sup> and only 73 followers – on the surface, it looks like a false site though its profile points to [www.poppy.org.uk](http://www.poppy.org.uk). The top tweet on @Poppy\_Man's profile page asks us to please "follow @PoppyLegion" – the implication being that @Poppy\_Man is not the correct site, or is an old one being wound down and would we please go to another.

According to the British Legion annual report, the Poppy Man was launched in 2007 and employed in social networks: he had "his own blog" and a Facebook entry to "attract younger people". There were 35,000 downloads of virtual poppies from Facebook and 50,000 downloads from mobile phones and the campaign that year secured 350 new Poppy appeal collectors. It seems to have been a success.

## **Poppy Legion**

The @PoppyLegion Twitter ID is a discovery! Wow. This Twitter ID belongs to a young trendy, "cool" cartoon character called "Poppy Legion", which in Friday 30<sup>th</sup> had 174 followers and 93 tweets since it was started on October 29<sup>th</sup> (Don't forget - @PoppySupport was around 790 followers). I can also follow her on Facebook and Bebo, on YouTube and Flickr.

Her tweets are a combination of news, pleas and retweets from others. The retweets included one from a PR person, @dom\_asdaPR (always suspicious). The overt pleas are slightly unusual in Twitterland – things like "would be v grateful if you could all post" "pls could you RT follow @PoppyLegion". She also creates or references a new hashtag, #PoppyPeople, and using another hashtag says she is the "voice of #PoppyAppeal".

I thought at first Poppy Legion was a joke – the name seemed trivial, the cartoon character, like #poppytyranny had earlier, seemed totally out of character with the British Legion and the naming convention of the Twitter IDs was inconsistent with @Poppy\_Man. The random use of new hashtags, the pleading with people to support - either a joke or a hoax.

So I get through to the website which most Twitter profiles show in their profiles – her's takes me to [www.legionlive.org.uk](http://www.legionlive.org.uk). Still suspicious, I check where I can on the front page of the website to find out who's running this and see reference to the legal entity "©LegionLive 2009" on the website. More suspicion – yet another entity involved. This looks like a scam. The "Terms & Conditions" link didn't work either – suspicion compounded. It did claim to be registered charity 219279, which, on checking, was the same number as The Royal British Legion.

LegionLive says it is "the Royal British Legion's new online community", it had 157 members on Friday 30<sup>th</sup>, and from here Poppy informs me that she is the "resident blogger" and "a fellow Royal British Legion supporter" and that she will share some "hot new content" with us. (That phrase still stuns me – "*hot new content*" on a British Legion website). This is a website community patently for kids.

I explore further. Clicking on a “The Royal British Legion” tab informs me what the The Royal British Legion is and notes that it is also the “national Custodian of Remembrance” and that it “safeguards the Military Covenant between the nation and its Armed Forces”. Complex language for me – even more for kids, I think. A tab called “Blogs” points me to a database of 36 separate blogs, posted by sensible people like “Bike to Berlin 2010” and “LegionLive” and many others like rblr1, aitch, dusty363, kmb216, ridermadmal and the rest (these latter all with only one post: “Hello World”. Obviously early days of a website in construction or done on the cheap by a con-artist.)

It still feels wrong. But then I find some acid.

Poppy’s leading blog post refer to “iChild’s Poppy-Inspired Activities”. I have no idea what iChild is. The post includes an “inspiring activity” paper kit for “making a bravery medal”. This seems in bad taste to me. I’m invited to click on a link to [ichild.co.uk](http://ichild.co.uk) which, it turns out, is a division of “Family & Education Marketing Ltd” with its web page sponsored by Childsure, a private health insurance product for kids, and a trading style of Sure Insurance Services Ltd, underwritten by Aviva. Of course, there’s a big banner ad for me to click on and purchase some insurance quickly and painlessly.

So right now, at this point, my suspicion is actually compounded. The more I dig, the more complex and disjointed it gets. The British Legion “voices” are hugely inconsistent. I’m more confused. But I’m now also finding Poppy Legion a thoroughly unpleasant character.

### **Why Poppy Is Unpleasant**

Poppy Legion is unpleasant first and foremost because the story of Remembrance is a cause. It is not a brand. She symbolises an inauthentic money-making brand while I support a profound human cause. The two things are very different.

With a cause built on very potent stories of real people, real families and real lives, why do we need a lying, commercial cartoon character between us and those real people?

A person motivated by a cause seeking to get others on board with that cause has no more powerful tool than social technologies such as Facebook and Twitter. Communities are forged by causes. Online conversations hold communities together with meaning and purpose. They give emotional value to their participants.

Because causes are such powerful motivators of people, and because social technologies are such powerful tools to build on causes, companies seeking to promote brands and products try hard to create causes so that they can enjoy the same community and conversation effects: loyal customers who spend money with them.

But here is a real cause acting like a brand.

The cause is emotional and social. The brand is commercial.

This cause has deeply personal stories to tell – yet here was a cartoon character instead of a person.

This cause has people with real and harrowing stories to tell. Brands are synthetic constructs with constructed stories.

Causes use the voices of real people. Brands use corporatespeak – or in this case the dumbed-down kiddie-talk corporatespeak which marketeers believe appeals to kids.

The cause's website shows a picture of a real mother and child. The brand's website shows a picture of fundraising activities.

This cause celebrates people who earned medals. The brand promotes games where you can make your own medal out of paper.

This cause is sponsored by an insurance company, it's flagrant promotion.

This cause is profound and sincere – the online manifestation comprises falsehood and sham.

The cause is authentic. The web community is inauthentic.

The cause used to comprise 610 separate local charities and many local initiatives – the brand is an effort to centralise and regulate the whole lot – someone is trying to “bring the whole lot together” and show control. Poppy Legion proclaims “we wanted to bring everyone together” and she also wanted to “provide people with the tools to connect and interact” and she offered “we have the tools right here to help you spread the word”.

Well no, Poppy Legion, actually you don't. People have those tools already and were using them far more effectively than you were. You built a place for them to come to you- they didn't. You should have been where they were. You've moved yourselves one more step away from the front line. You're becoming delocalised and centralised.

Poppy Legion also says she is “the front face of the Poppy Appeal on Twitter” – a place inhabited by mostly older people. When cutesy “Poppy Legion” sends a tweet to John Prescott saying “thanks for the Twibbon John!” and asking him to “RT: Follow @PoppyLegion, the voice of #PoppyAppeal” it feels manifestly wrong. Cutesy when it should be mature. Flippant when earnest is better.

Poppy's commercialism is both blatant and subversive, and all the more unpleasant for both these reasons. The blatantness is that when this cartoon character speaks in the first voice, she says in the same breath...“those lovely people at iChild”. I'm sure it's not only me who feel that a commercial website which promotes “Halloween bunting” and “Guy Fawkes” in the same breath has “make your own poppy” or “make your own bravery medal” is crass and wrong.

Someone, somewhere at The Royal British Legion seems to have said: “Whatever we do online, let's get tons of numbers, show tons of activity and raise tons of money and use whatever commercial tricks and techniques we can”.

## **Finding The Soul Of The Poppy Appeal Online**

So I'm confused now, having waltzed around Twitter and cartoon characters, I return now to the British Legion to retrieve the online heart and soul of the Poppy Appeal – and to be reassured I know who I am dealing with.

The Royal British Legion is a charity, number 219279, located at [www.britishlegion.org.uk](http://www.britishlegion.org.uk). Google takes us there with a search on "british legion". In the year to 30<sup>th</sup> September 2008, according to the Charity Commission website, the organisation employed 971 people, raised £104m of income, spent £25m running the Charity and raising that money and spent £76m on its good causes with a bit left over. It has over 400,000 members. Income has grown each year since at least 2004 and the organisation looks in good health. It has a clear mission statement "to safeguard welfare, interest and memory" and is crisp in saying what it does, providing financial, social and emotional support, campaigning, and acting as the "Guardians of Remembrance".

In my view, this clarity and honesty, and the heart and soul of the Poppy Appeal, completely breaks down after this point.

There's the confusion on Twitter. There's the [www.britishlegion.org.uk](http://www.britishlegion.org.uk) front page link to LegionLive, as well as a different area called Legion Interactive where I can download wallpapers and buttons (noting that the buttons link to [www.britishlegion.org](http://www.britishlegion.org) and not [www.britishlegion.org.uk](http://www.britishlegion.org.uk)).

A Google search on "poppy appeal" takes us to [www.poppy.org.uk](http://www.poppy.org.uk) though this does not link to LegionLive as far as I can see. I can also visit a site called "Poppe" at [www.poppe.poppy.org](http://www.poppe.poppy.org) to get a message added to the bottom of my emails.

The Royal British Legion ran the 2009 Online Poppy Appeal all wrong. It looks like it has been run by very crass marketeers. The British Legion website was created by a firm whose opening line on what they do is "We do whatever it takes to help shoppers buy your product" and they support this by saying that they are about "Driving Sales", "Driving Loyalty" and "Building Brands". This firm did not build the LegionLive community for The Royal British Legion, but that thinking seems to be behind Poppy Legion and the LegionLive community.

There comes a time with every organisation where it must make a decision on the role of money. All organisations are driven by two things: one is "money" and the other is "everything else". In many, the "everything else" dominates and money is a by-product or lubricant to oil the organisation's wheels. In many others, the commercial ethos dominates and money most definitely is the driver. The Royal British Legion is acting online as though this is the case for them.

Maybe they are indeed on the back foot financially - in the year ending 2008, income was £104,081 and costs of fundraising was 23% of that sum (£24m). They celebrated the successes and awards of their social media work that year. However, a year before, income was £95m costing just 18% of that sum. £1 on fundraising in 2007 raised £5.44 but only £4.34 a year later. So in the year in which The Royal British Legion sung the praises of social media, it had been less efficient in its overall fundraising. Perhaps it now really wanted to see financial returns and turned the fundraising and commercial pressure up too far?

Maybe they just found the act of communicating this cause to the younger generation too hard. The meaning of loss, of fighting for a cause, of death and of remembrance are harder for today's generation to understand. So instead of trying to reach people, let's just optimise the money extraction.

As far as I can see, there is no soul to the Poppy Appeal online. There has been a clamour for brand with all its clicks, counts, numbers, measures, purchases, posts, blogs and the rest.

The Royal British Legion has done online wrong and it has eaten the soul right out of the online Poppy Appeal.

**Postscript: @PoppySupport versus @PoppyLegion**

On remembrance Sunday, @PoppySupport had 1,739 followers and shared 617 tweets with the world. Whoever that Twitter ID really was, had whipped up significant support: timely tweets in tune with the Twitter community. Reactive, responsive, engaged. (Yes, and sometimes wrong with the #poppytyranny episode). @PoppySupport is trying also to organise a 2-minute silence on Twitter for 11<sup>th</sup> November. Judging by the number of times other people shared the appeal to send donations in, I'm sure @PoppySupport has made a bigger financial contribution to the Poppy Appeal than @PoppyLegion.

Poor, pathetic @PoppyLegion and her LegionLive community. She shared 183 tweets with us and won 329 followers. Membership of LegionLive had grown from 174 on Friday 30<sup>th</sup> October to 214 on Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> November. Just 40 members over the core of the Poppy Appeal.

The free-agent, @PoppySupport had significantly more good than @PoppyLegion. A human triumphed over marketing. And that's the lesson.

Real people beat marketing every time.

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