In his much anticipated interview with Oprah, Lance Armstrong surprised many by the extent to which he confessed to cheating, arrogant denial and bullying. But is this enough to protect the Livestrong Foundation, which is so intrinsically associated with the name and the reputation of its founder?

Positive brand image can result in higher donations for non-profit organisations. Association with high-achieving sports people can add to that positive brand image. So will its association with Lance Armstrong reduce the credibility of Livestrong now that Armstrong has confessed to being a cheat, when he had spent many years not only denying it repeatedly, and under oath, but also savagely attacking those who dared speak the truth?

Before looking into the crystal ball, let’s look to what has occurred to date. Over a period of 15 years, Livestrong raised $480 million dollars and inspired many cancer sufferers. For the past decade, the Foundation has had a full-time president and a board including members independent of the charity’s founder.

Even when it was still the Lance Armstrong Foundation, its website used the name Livestrong, which is associated with its popular yellow wristbands. According to Oprah, 80 million of these wristbands have been sold worldwide.

In October 2012, the Foundation advised ESPN that the Livestrong donor base was holding up despite the ongoing controversy surrounding its founder. In fact, for the year to 30 September 2012, revenues for the Foundation were up 2.1% (to $33.8 million). In addition, both the number of donations to the Foundation and the average size of those donations had increased by more than 5% compared to the previous year.

But these figures pre-date the 10 October 2012 release of findings by the United States Anti-Doping Agency (USADA), which show “systemic, sustained and professionalized doping conspiracy” by Lance Armstrong and the US Postal Service cycling team.

So, how has the Foundation itself sought to manage its brand in the aftermath of the USADA’s announcement? Initially, it sought to “control” the situation. On the day the USADA findings were made public, the Foundation went on the attack with a press release that began by questioning the impartiality and fairness of the USADA proceedings.

That approach, however, was short-lived and only a week later, Armstrong stepped down as the Foundation’s chairman. Armstrong stayed on the board however, until November when he severed all ties to the Foundation.

In his interview with Oprah, Armstrong revealed that his stepping down as chairman was prompted by people in the Foundation saying, “We need you to consider stepping down, for yourself.” He added that severing ties with the Foundation was the lowest point in the whole of the saga for him.

The post-Armstrong leadership team at the Foundation has started charting a new course distancing the Foundation from its erstwhile namesake. In recognition of the enormity of the media and communications challenges ahead, within a month of Armstrong standing down as chairman, the Foundation took two significant steps to position itself better for the credibility challenges ahead.

First, it formally changed its name from the Lance Armstrong Foundation to Livestrong. And it announced the appointment of a new vice president of marketing. In both, the lead-up to the interview and in the time between, the Foundation has been on the front foot with messages focusing on the good works of Livestrong in its own right.
Lance Armstrong is a genuine survivor of cancer and has inspired many who have been similarly afflicted. The Foundation he established has made a difference to the lives of many. So, will the Lance Armstrong interviews with Oprah be enough to protect Livestrong?

It's likely that people who were looking for an opportunity to find a reason to pardon Lance Armstrong or to maintain their support for Livestrong have found enough in the disclosures. Similarly, people who were already sceptical towards Lance Armstrong or condemnatory of him will have found little reason to change their opinion.

The overwhelming majority in the latter category, however, have not been and were not likely to become Livestrong supporters. So little may change.

The big challenge for Livestrong is capturing the attention of potential future donors given there are many worthy charitable organisations working to support and inspire cancer sufferers – and they are not associated with a sullied name. In a market where trustworthiness is paramount and competitors many, Livestrong will for the foreseeable future be operating at a disadvantage.

Personally, I hope Livestrong weathers this storm. I'm not sure the interviews have helped. But I can't help thinking of the adage – when it comes to trustworthiness, integrity is key. When you can fake that, you've got it made.