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OnStar puts media behind wheel

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To drive interest in its new Stolen Vehicles Slowdown (SVS) technology, OnStar ignited a cross-country PR effort that literally put journalists in the driver's seat.

The campaign was engineered to build buzz around this enhancement to the OnStar service, which allows remote access to slow down a car that has been stolen.

As OnStar is the wholly owned in-vehicle safety subsidiary of General Motors, the automaker will make the feature available this fall in nearly 1.7 million 2009 vehicles.

Strategy

Strategy focused on visually demonstrating how SVS can aid public safety officials and help prevent crashes, injuries, and fatalities.

"The partnership with third-party law enforcement... was critical," says Marguerite Pence, AE at Weber Shandwick. "They became our voice [and] stood out in the media."

The team also wanted to give the press a chance to experience it.

"A journalist, by nature, wants to be the one person that finds the flaw," says Jocelyn Allen, VP of communications at OnStar. "So we decided to offer journalists a real-life experience, put them in SVS-equipped vehicles, and told them to drive them like they stole them."

Tactics

The PR team conducted a media pre-briefing on October 5 with local Detroit media and *Good Morning America* at the GM Milford Proving Grounds. OnStar then held a launch event and press conference at the RFK Stadium in Washington, DC, on October 9.

Participation from Col. Peter Munoz of the Michigan state police, Fire Chief Jim Harnes, and the International Association of Fire Chiefs in the media backgrounder and announcement provided important third-party perspectives.

OnStar then held demonstrations of SVS across the US, coordinated in cities where there were high statistics of police pursuits and fatalities.

Results

Research since the pre-briefing indicates that 95% of OnStar subscribers are interested in installing the SVS technology, Allen says.

Additionally, OnStar predicts that SVS will perform at least 600 vehicle slowdowns in its first year after full production launch.

The conferences garnered 2,253 placements, generating 468 million media impressions, she adds.

Of all the print and online coverage, 88% was either positive or neutral in tone. Coverage spanned print, broadcast, radio, online, and major wire service (Associated Press). It also included international publications in Japan, Germany, France, and Canada.

Future

Once SVS technology rolls out with the 2009 crop of GM vehicles, the PR campaign will conclude with distribution of case studies and related media outreach.

PRWeek view

OnStar realized that the key to promoting a product not yet available (and when available, only on specific GM vehicles), lay not behind the data, but behind the wheel.

It was extremely effective to have media members drive the vehicles because they were able to take their firsthand experience and then give a detailed description of the product in their stories.

It's always beneficial to have a face with a campaign, so OnStar was smart enough to enlist law enforcement and public safety officials to each event, adding that extra layer of authenticity.

PR team: OnStar Communications (Detroit), Weber Shandwick (Birmingham, MI), and TMG Strategies (Arlington, VA)

Campaign: Stolen Vehicles Slowdown

Duration: July-October 2007

Budget: \$300,000