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You are here: US > Search > [DOT goes online to talk about drunk driving with teens](#)

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[RSS](#)

DOT goes online to talk about drunk driving with teens

Craig McGuire - 9 Jan 2006 00:00

The Connecticut Department of Transportation (DOT) launched a statewide drinking and driving awareness program in 2003 as part of a mission to reduce fatalities and injuries resulting from crashes.

Statistics revealed that year that alcohol-related fatalities in the state were 4.7% higher than the national average and 1.4% above the rest of New England.

In addition, while 54% of the drunk drivers at fault in fatal crashes were between the ages of 20 and 39, 12.5% were under 21, reports Chris Cooper, director of communications at the DOT.

When the DOT sought to extend its awareness initiative to target underage drivers, it knew it needed something beyond traditional advertising to engage a teen audience.

Strategy

The task of targeting a younger audience fell to Cronin & Company, which helped develop a program comprising advertising, a website, and PR components.

In 2004, the DOT asked Cronin to create a youth-oriented section to the website to raise awareness of the dangers of drinking and driving among teens age 14-20. With the site up and running, Cronin faced the daunting challenge of persuading teens to visit.

To do this, the firm conceived the Drink-Drive-Lose Ad Challenge, inviting teens to visit the site to learn about an advertising contest, submit entries, and vote for their favorite submissions.

"The concept of promoting an online contest to highlight the risks and dangers associated with drinking and driving was a fresh approach," Cooper says.

"It gave students the chance to speak to people in their own age bracket about an issue that kills an average of 1,400 young adults between 18 and 24 every year."

Tactics

The tactics were multi-tiered and encompassed the website, a radio partner for contest development, awareness, and execution. All contest information was on the site, and submissions were accepted online.

Cronin then reached out to administrators and teachers at 320 high schools and colleges

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statewide to raise awareness for the program.

A call from Cronin came into Cuginchaug High School relating the details of the competition, says Robin Fox, television production teacher at the Connecticut school. "As soon as the purpose was made clear to me, I jumped at the opportunity to give my television production class an authentic project that could affect other teens in such a profound manner."

In addition, Cronin targeted groups like Students Against Drunk Driving and Mothers Against Drunk Driving. The radio partner distributed contest information at radio station events and provided on-air PSAs to promote the contest.

The agency also drafted and distributed contest press materials, including an announcement press release, a deadline release, a voting announcement, and a final winner press release.

"It was important that the contest maintained the strategy of the overall Drink-Drive-Lose campaign which was all about appealing to our audience and not being preachy," Kemp says.

Results

"The value of this PR/information and education effort is significant because it was driven by youth, towards youth, through their medium of choice - the internet," Cooper says. "Young people rely on information they receive from their peers as much, if not more, as the information they get from adults."

The campaign produced more than 7,000 website hits from February through May, up more than 4,000%, while 1,271 online votes were cast evaluating 58 submissions.

The contest received 39 media placements generating 1.5 million media impressions, which Cronin estimates to be valued at \$48,000. The pro bono radio partner provided over \$2,000 in added value.

Clear Channel Communications awarded the winner in the TV ad category (Fox's TV production class) and the winner in the Flash ad category (Julianna Goodwin) with passes to Six Flags New England. The winner in the print ad category, Cliff Heizenga, received a \$100 gift certificate to Bob's Stores.

Future

The DOT is mulling sponsoring a similar contest next year.

PR team: Connecticut Dept. of Transportation (Newington, CT) and Cronin & Company, (Glastonbury, CT)

Campaign: Drink-Drive-Lose Ad Challenge

Time frame: January - May 2005

Budget: \$110,000

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