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ANALYSIS Corporate Case Study: New PR plan helps Central Park Conservancy bloom

Craig McGuire - 20 Sep 2004 00:00

The NY Central Park Conservancy places emphasis on reaching out to the media and community to draw attention to its fundraising efforts and all the happenings taking place in the park.

With mobs of angry protesters poised to invade Central Park and trample the Great Lawn into oblivion in the wake of the Republican National Convention, PR pros at the Central Park Conservancy were holding their breath. If the New York state courts granted the advocacy group United for Peace and Justice a permit to overrun the park with 250,000 protesters, the Conservancy would face the daunting challenge of raising additional money to foot the bill for the damage. After all, contrary to popular opinion, taxpayer money funds only 15% of the projected \$23 million needed annually to maintain the most famous park in the world. The Conservancy raises the rest itself. Fortunately for the Conservancy, United for Peace and Justice lost its bid in court, and with 100,000 protesters (though organizers claim that number was as high as 400,000), the group took its protest to the streets of New York City instead. While many protesters did head to Central Park, it was nowhere near the number feared. "We were just bombarded with calls," says Jennifer Pucci, the Conservancy's PR manager. "We had to coordinate with the Parks Department's media relations, which set up a command post in the arsenal in the park. We had to manage a steady stream of requests from *The New York Times*, the *[New York] Post*, the *[New York] Daily News*, and other local media. Also, because it is a national story, we had to field requests from outlets from all over." **The Conservancy's roots** The New York State Legislature created Central Park in 1853. First proposed by merchant Robert Bowne Minturn and his wife, Anna Mary Wendell, newspaper editors William Cullen Bryant and Horace Greeley, and landscape architect Andrew Jackson Downing heartily endorsed the idea. Bankers and businessmen petitioned for a park "worthy of the future greatness of the city." By the 1970s, awash in graffiti and filth, the park had fallen into a state of serious decay, marked by eroded landscaping, cracked benches, busted lampposts, and rampant crime. To arrest the decline and return the park to its former glory, the Central Park Conservancy was founded in 1980 as a public/private partnership, initially raising \$300 million for a massive restoration project. Today, Central Park is thriving once again, hosting more than 25 million visitors that spill over its 843 acres each year. Still, maintaining the park in its current state is a daunting task, especially when you need mostly private donations to do it. Despite the need to dispel the misconception that taxpayers entirely fund the park and the need to instill a sense of stewardship among New Yorkers, the Conservancy did not have an aggressive publicity program in place until just a few years ago. "When I got here [in November 2002], the strategy was more reactive than proactive," says Linda Blumberg, who heads the three-member communications department, which includes marketing and publications.

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Blumberg joined the Conservancy just as the organization was gearing up for Central Park's 150th anniversary, a program that was to both celebrate the park and heighten awareness of how the park raises money for upkeep. Not surprisingly, considering the affection Central Park elicits from most New Yorkers, the Conservancy was able to enlist the pro-bono aid of many corporate sponsors, including Weber Shandwick, which assisted with promoting the anniversary. The integrated campaign involved recruiting actress Candice Bergen for a Today segment heralding the anniversary kickoff and a series of "before-and-after" tours of the park in which Blumberg used old photographs of its formerly dilapidated condition to demonstrate the results of the restoration. "The Conservancy leveraged its key media relationships, especially those in New York, but relied on Weber Shandwick to reach out to general consumer media (such as *USA Today*) and more national outlets based here in New York to position the park as a world-class destination," says Rene Mack, president of WS' travel and lifestyle practice. Attesting to both the skills of the PR pros involved and the inherent allure of Central Park, in addition to every New York City newspaper, the conservancy's PR effort garnered coverage in *USA Today* and on WNBC. There were also articles by The Associated Press and Reuters. And, as for the 90,000 guests expected to attend the official anniversary party, 250,000 actually showed up. "The Conservancy has a highly effective and enviable relationship with the New York media at the highest levels," Mack adds. For instance, WNBC anchor and correspondent Felicia Taylor visited Central Park at least once a week throughout last year to tape segments that were part of a running series. "Did you ever have one of those bad days?" asks Taylor. "Well, for me, there was one really, really bad day. And of course, for this segment, on the gates of Central Park, we needed tons of b-roll and had to hit something like six locations. But being there, in that beautiful park, and they were just so pleasant, it lifted me out of my mood. It's a special place, unlike any other, and that really feeds the communications aspect." **Necessity of community outreach** Clearly, in terms of promoting Central Park and fundraising, the park is not necessarily a hard sell. However, that is only half the battle. There are 843 acres (6% of Manhattan's total acreage), including 150 acres in seven bodies of water, 250 acres of lawns, and 136 acres of woodlands - of which the millions of visitors who flood Central Park each year try to use every last inch. Because of that, "We need strong community outreach," Blumberg says. "We update the website constantly. We attend as many meetings as is humanly possible, are constantly distributing fliers and notices, reaching out to the media. It's all one big balancing act." New York City Council member Gale Brewer, who represents Council District 6 that runs from 55th Street to 96th Street and from Central Park to the Hudson River, knows how demanding her constituents can be. "We Westsiders go to the park by the millions every year and are a very vocal group," Brewer says. "But the Conservancy's communications people are very good at mediating disputes and keeping us informed." For instance, Brewer points to the New York City Police Department that is currently repairing its landmark station house inside the park. "Needless to say there is no parking, so the officers park in the bridal lane and elsewhere, which generates complaints," Brewer says. "Then there are the homeless in the park, the constant bickering on who gets to use certain facilities, the debate over light recreation at the reservoir, Summer Stage activities, and just so many issues." Blumberg and the conservancy staff are looking forward to the 25th anniversary of the conservancy next year, which, she says, will not be anywhere near as big as the park's 150th birthday. The campaign's primary goal, however, is not necessarily to celebrate the anniversary per se, but to instill a concept of stewardship with New Yorkers. "We need New Yorkers to be engaged in preserving the park and buy into this notion of stewardship," Blumberg says. "Because every year the park attracts more and more people, making maintaining it that much more difficult. If we are unable to raise the money we need, which has grown to \$23 million every year, the simple fact is that the park will go into decline. And we will not let that happen." **PR contacts VP of communications and marketing** Linda Blumberg **Director of communications** Suzanne Berman **PR manager** Jennifer Pucci **PR agency** Weber Shandwick

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