



CAMPAIGNS: One soldier's care package attracts national attention

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PR Team: The Mayo family and friends

Campaign: Operation AC

Time Frame: July 2003 - ongoing

Budget: Under \$1,000

Stationed in Iraq, Cpl. Christopher Tomlinson, 21, wrote to his mother in July and described how he and the members of his unit were suffering under the sweltering Middle Eastern sun, where the heat index routinely tops 140 degrees. So Frankie Mayo shipped her son an air conditioner.

This simple exchange between mother and son soon became the catalyst for a campaign in which she would be shipping hundreds of air-conditioning units to troops overseas. But in order to raise enough money to make Operation AC possible, Frankie Mayo first needed to get the word out.

Strategy

Mayo didn't have a budget to speak of, nor did she have a high-powered PR agency, or even a publicity campaign. What she did have, though, was a powerful message. Struggling to restore freedom to the people of Iraq, the soldiers carry the respect and concern of a nation, regardless of the political debate.

"To tap into that public sentiment, we knew we had to take our story directly to the media," explains Matt Mayo, Frankie's husband.

Tactics

Mayo established a base of operations at her home in Bear, DE, enlisting family and friends to help work the phones. They set up a website (www.operationac.com), and approached their local ABC affiliate to be part of the station's recurring "Website Wednesdays" feature. The station's local "action news" program later ran a separate piece on what soon became known as Operation AC. Encouraged by this initial success, the Mayos stepped up their efforts to contact other local outlets.

Results

What started with a single letter from a sweaty soldier has snowballed into a grassroots campaign attracting the attention of virtually every major news outlet in America.

Soon after the story appeared on the local news, Robin Brown, a columnist from The News Journal, visited the Mayos for an interview. "She then spoke with an editor who, through the Gannet organization, sent photographer Matt Moyer from World Pictures over to Iraq with one of our shipments," Frankie Mayo says. "When those pictures came back, that's when the story went national."

Matt Drudge covered the story as a "Red Light" feature on his eponymous site, and the Associated Press ran a story that was picked up by news organizations across the country for all the major print and broadcast outlets, including ABC, CBS, CNN, FOX, and NBC.

The coverage enabled Mayo to buy and ship more than 500 air conditioners to date, as donations continue to pour in from around the country.

"When I saw the story on CNN, it really struck a chord with me," says Greg Henson, president of The Henson Group, a Microsoft technology consultancy in New York. "We've already spent our budget for contributions this year on charities such as the AIDS Walk and The United Way, but the message was so moving, I felt we had to contribute."

Later, on August 18, when the US Postal Service announced that it would no longer accept air conditioners for shipment to Iraq because they contain hazardous chemicals, Mayo flexed her newfound PR muscles and attracted the support of cargo carrier DHL Danzas Air & Ocean and talk-show host Rush Limbaugh. DHL and Limbaugh, through his charitable foundation, are funding half the \$71,000 shipping cost. Donations from across the country are expected to cover the rest.

Future

Having assembled a network of supporters and media contacts, the Mayos plan to keep the ball rolling and support the troops in various ways. "Only half the soldiers overseas receive regular correspondence," says Matt Mayo, describing "Operation Adopt-A-Soldier," which seeks pen pals for 150 soldiers.

The Mayos plan to begin shipping heaters overseas in the winter, and are also collecting supplies, such as moist wipes, toiletries, non-melting candy, non-aerosol shaving cream, and more.

"We are going to continue working the phones, working with the media, and attracting attention so that we can do everything we possibly can to support our troops overseas," says Frankie Mayo.