



CAMPAIGNS: Community relations - Even news media like to make news

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Client: Newsweek/MSNBC (New York, NY)

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PR Team: In-house

Campaign: The Birmingham Summit

Time Frame: September 12 and 13, 2000

Budget: Less than dollars 10,000

Switching gears from news media to newsmakers, Newsweek magazine and MSNBC organized The Birmingham Summit earlier this year. Subtitled 'The New Color Lines: The Challenge for America in the 21st Century,' the two-day event centering on race relations featured a nationally broadcast town hall meeting moderated by NBC news anchor Brian Williams, an all-day conference and a panel discussion.

On September 12 and 13, nationally known community leaders, celebrities, authors, actors and athletes debated and dissected the issue as millions of Americans tuned in. And, for every news clip, broadcast segment, Web site hit and editorial blurb generated, Newsweek and MSNBC snagged top billing.

Strategy

The story of the summit began unfolding in December 1999 when the two media giants formed an alliance, pledging to partner on major editorial projects. This agreement paved the way for Newsweek correspondents to appear on MSNBC segments. The Birmingham Summit marks the first such collaboration.

Meanwhile, organizing and promoting the event dovetailed perfectly with Newsweek's four-part 'New America' project, a series of special issues devoted to specific subjects. An issue focusing on race relations was scheduled to hit newsstands just a few days before the summit, on September 18, so the magazine saw promoting the event as critical.

Timing, site selection and line up of speakers all had to be just right in order to effectively execute and promote the summit. Therefore, it was held on the 37th anniversary of the bombing of Sixteenth Street Church in Birmingham, AL, which claimed the lives of four African-American girls.

It also coincided with Birmingham Pledge Week, a nationwide effort to eliminate prejudice.

Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer, the Rev. Jesse Jackson (the summit's keynote speaker), the Rev. Al Sharpton, attorney Johnnie Cochran, MTV VJ Ananda Lewis, Phoenix Suns guard Kevin Johnson, author Dinesh D'Souza and Seattle Times columnist Mark Trahant all agreed to participate in the event.

And both media outlets contributed big guns of their own, including Williams, NBC president Andrew Lack and Newsweek editor Mark Whitaker.

DaimlerChrysler and Nationwide Insurance were brought in as corporate co-sponsors.

Tactics

As was the case with attracting panelists, Newsweek already had one foot in the door when it came to garnering media attention.

'Let's face it. We were able to attract top names because they figured if Newsweek and MSNBC are involved, it must be a first-rate event,' says Ken Weine, assistant director of communications at Newsweek. 'And, it was also fun to be a big (media) fish in a small pond.'

In the days leading up to the event, Newsweek's communications staffers blitzed the national affiliates and local media.

'We reached out to print, television and radio reporters, regional reporters - anyone within a 150-mile radius,' says Weine.

The alliance provided unique PR opportunities. 'We had Brian Williams do an affiliate tour to promote the show that day, and there were spots on the nightly news and MSNBC,' says Weine.

Before and after the event, Newsweek staff were available for interviews by affiliates from FOX, CBS and ABC.

'We also distributed a comprehensive press packet and reached out to African-American papers across the country,' says Weine. More than 80 reporters were credentialed for Tuesday's and Wednesday's events.

Results

Six network affiliates, including ABC, CBS, NBC and FOX, broadcast live coverage of the town hall meeting, and each did both live and taped broadcasts of Wednesday's all-day conference, including four interviews by Mark Whitaker.

The conference was simulcast on two local radio stations (AM and FM) and CBS Radio did a story for their national network.

Other media covering the event included Alabama Public Radio, the state's National Public Radio affiliate, as well as several African-American papers, Birmingham weeklies and student newspapers.

Future

'The Birmingham Summit is the first such event to grow out of the Newsweek/MSNBC partnership,' says Weine. 'But from here on out, there will be many more.'