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If a catastrophe struck Colorado, would its residents be prepared?

To better prepare Coloradoans for this potential reality, the state issued an RFP last March for a paid ad campaign to promote influenza prevention and emergency preparedness.

However, during the competitive agency review, GroundFloor Media - the only PR firm pitching - won the business with a proposal that featured a reality-show competition.

Strategy

"To fully engage the public and model concrete actions people could take to become better prepared for emergencies, we proposed a truly integrated campaign, embedding key messages into two popular venues: reality television and the Internet," says Laura Love, president of GroundFloor.

This strategy centered on establishing a Web site, www.whatifcolorado.com, that served as an online tool for people to calculate the quantities of food, water, and other items needed for their emergency kits, as well as for video entries for the reality competition and the voting for finalists for the reality competition. Videos entries were web-hosted through YouTube.com.

"It's no secret that public awareness campaigns initiated by government agencies have a reputation for being a bit stale and predictable," adds Dana Erpelding, training and exercise manager in the Emergency Preparedness and Response Division of the CDPHE. "We wanted to break out of this mold and take a fresh and unexpected approach to educating the public."

Tactics

"GroundFloor leapt to the top when reviewing agencies because of the exciting twist they put on the topics," Erpelding says, "as well as how they were creatively able to maximize our budget while combining PR with other traditional and emerging media."

Such integration included meshing a reality competition, online social marketing techniques, Hispanic outreach,

and more.

Footage from the three-day competition was provided daily to TV stations in Denver, Colorado Springs, and Grand Junction and aired on paid media partners' newscasts, as well as other local stations. Episodes were also posted to the Web site and YouTube.

Results

John Amos of Pueblo won from the nine chosen to live together at The Gregory Inn in Downtown Denver from September 20-23, facing a variety of challenges related to emergency preparedness and influenza issues.

The overall campaign garnered coverage from top dailies across the state, including *The Denver Post*, *Rocky Mountain News*, and the *Colorado Springs Gazette*.

To date, between the YouTube postings and the campaign's official site, the reality-competition episodes have been viewed by 14,000-plus visitors, says Love.

Contest participants even took it upon themselves to extend the reach, posting messages on blogs and Web sites, such as Cafemom, Facebook, Meetup, and Revver.

Future

Phase two of the campaign kicked off in January.

"[It] will include a partnership with Wal-Mart for Emergency Preparedness Week," says Love. "We will inform shoppers in Colorado about the importance of preparing home, auto, and office emergency preparedness kits."

The remainder of the 2008 campaign is still in development.

Colo. Department of Public Health

PR team: Emergency Preparedness and Response Division of the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE) and GroundFloor Media (both in Denver)

Campaign: What If? Colorado

Duration: June 1-Dec. 31, 2007

Budget: \$758,000

PRWeek's View

This campaign worked because GroundFloor tapped into the tidal wave of consumers flooding into media - such as the Internet, YouTube, blogs, and reality TV - for information.

By tweaking a successful reality format and using PR to drive the idea, GroundFloor beat out a slew of ad agencies for an RFP intended for a paid ad campaign.

Because the campaign's focus is on preparing for an emergency, reality programming helped the firm showcase real people exploring real actions that others can take to protect themselves. Scripted PSAs or billboards

simply can't convey such realism.