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Uncle Ben's helps to feed children

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When Mars Foods sought a charity for its Uncle Ben's brand, the "America's Second Harvest - The Nation's Food Bank Network," seemed like an ideal choice. The massive hunger-relief organization provides food to more than 25 million low-income people.

Considering that Second Harvest is already popular among food-producers, Mars needed its own recipe for a multi-year partnership, so the company enlisted the help of Current Lifestyle Marketing (CLM).

Strategy

In the next four years, Uncle Ben's will donate \$1 million to open Kids Cafe locations, which provide low-income children with meals, says Tami Cole, national communications manager at Mars.

To carry the message, Mars and CLM tapped boxer Laila Ali and kid-centric chef, Barbara Beery.

The teams opted to focus on children and selected these sponsors to frame a strategy structured around a series of openings. "This allowed for a strong and widespread communication platform, broadening the media universe from food, health, and nutrition to entertainment and sports media," says Virginia Devlin, GM at CLM.

Tactics

To kick off the push, Ali, Beery, and Uncle Ben's associates joined 100 children at the San Fernando Valley Boys & Girls Club's Kids Cafe.

Tactics included hosting volunteer events at LA and Greenville, MS, Kids Cafe locations; national print/broadcast media outreach; radio PSAs; and an online awareness campaign, including partnering with BlogHer, a community for women who blog.

The team also directed people to Uncle Ben's Web site to sign Ben's guest book, with each signature representing a \$1 donation by Mars.

Results

"The \$250,000 we donated allowed the Kids Cafe program to feed an additional 1,100 children and offer more than 150,000 servings of food in a year," Cole says.

In addition, more than 3,000 people logged on to the site to sign Ben's guest book.

The program generated 44.2 million media impressions, including both the ABC and CBS affiliates in Greenville, The Daily News in LA, The Insider, and a TV Guide Channel interview, aired as part of Dancing with the Stars: Where Are They Now.

Future

As Uncle Ben's fulfills its \$1 million pledge, the PR team will promote upcoming openings, Devlin says.

PRWeek View

Cause partnerships are now standard mode of operation for corporate brand promotion, which makes it hard to generate coverage beyond a few general pictures running on the local community pages.

Uncle Ben's created a distinctive effort because of how it distinguished itself from other Second Harvest sponsors.

Unlike the old giant-check handoff, sponsoring a string of openings featuring Ali and Beery huddled with low-income children compels more coverage because it shows, in vivid detail, where the money has gone. And, Uncle Ben's now has a recurring opportunity for event-based media coverage, adding another level of ROI to the campaign.

PR team: Mars Foods USA (McLean, VA) and Current Lifestyle Marketing (Chicago)

Campaign: Uncle Ben's and America's Second Harvest Kids Cafe Program

Duration: September 2007-ongoing

Budget: \$500,000