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Cross-country ride boosts support for wounded soldiers

Craig McGuire - 29 Nov 2004 00:00

Frustrated with the results of two unfruitful benefit concerts, Chris Carney, a bartender and personal trainer from East Hampton, NY, decided to ride his bike across the country to raise funds and awareness for wounded veterans.

However, lacking an effective publicity engine to power a national campaign, Carney clearly faced an uphill climb.

Strategy

Carney had a cause: The Wounded Warrior Project assists veterans of the conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere in their return to civilian life while they cope with the effects of injuries.

Carney also had a goal: to raise \$1 million to help fund the Project's Backpack Program, which provides basic necessities, such as clothing and toiletries, to wounded soldiers arriving at military hospitals.

And Carney had a gimmick: a coast-to-coast bike ride promoting a grassroots fundraiser.

What he didn't have was a huge ad budget or PR muscle.

But he did have Nicole Starr Castillo, a friend who is also EVP of WordHampton PR. Castillo was willing to reduce the agency's rates to the \$9,000 needed to cover costs.

Castillo's two-pronged strategy was simple: utilize local and national media as Carney passed through each town and create photo opportunities at smaller events, such as visits to VA hospitals. "Let's face it, national advertising is very expensive," Castillo says. "When you have a cause that is this compelling, and when you want to make sure as much of the money raised makes it to the actual charity, PR really pays off."

Tactics

With his route mapped out, Carney, who is not a veteran, dipped his back tire in the Atlantic Ocean at Montauk Point and set off as WordHampton began working a database of national and local media outlets in the towns he would pass through. Interviews were scheduled along the route, as were photo-ops at VA hospitals in Dayton, OH, and Phoenix.

Additional exposure arose when wounded soldiers rode portions of the route in Colorado and Pennsylvania, as well as the final 10 miles, after which an exhausted Carney dipped his front tire in the Pacific Ocean.

Results

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At press time, Soldier Ride has raised more than \$700,000.

"I was going to ride, no matter what," Carney says. "But there was no way I would have raised anywhere near the money we received without the publicity Nicole generated."

Hundreds of e-mails and letters poured in as word spread. Fox News tracked Carney's progress. Alec Baldwin and Bill O'Reilly also publicly supported Soldier Ride and made monetary donations. And WordHampton landed media hits in all of the 12 states Carney rode through.

Several corporations promised to support the Backpack Program with products, including Schick, Energizer, and AT&T.

Future

Building on this year's success, Soldier Ride will be an annual event. Next year's is scheduled to run as more of a relay between soldiers. Both Carney and Castillo have signed on to contribute, relieved that they'll have more lead time to prepare.

PR team: WordHampton Public Relations (East Hampton, NY) and the Wounded Warrior Project (Roanoke, VA)

Campaign: Soldier Ride

Time frame: June to October 2004

Budget: \$100,000 (includes costs of entire operation)

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