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Safety push touts SUV mastery

Craig McGuire - 23 Aug 2006 17:22

In late 2002, Ford Motor Co. agreed to a \$51.5 million nationwide settlement with attorneys general from 50 states and other US territories, stemming from claims that the automaker failed to disclose rollover risks involved with its Explorer SUV.

Of that, \$27 million was earmarked for a campaign to promote SUV safety. Ad agency Bartle Bogle Hegarty was brought in to execute the campaign, with Peppercom tapped to handle PR.

"Whenever you deal with 50 attorneys general, who are typically elected members of their respective state governments, nobody walks and talks alike," says Douglas Walsh, senior counsel in the Washington state attorney general's office. "For Peppercom, it was like having 50 clients all on the same campaign."

Strategy

The SUV safety effort targeted male drivers 18 to 34, who federal statistics revealed were almost two and a half times more likely to die in SUV accidents.

Terms of the settlement prohibited using scare tactics. So messaging settled on the concept of mastery, as in drivers mastering their SUVs in handling, loading, tire safety, and seat-belt use.

"Humans have mastered a number of large and formidable animals over time," says Ann Barlow, partner and senior director in Peppercom's San Francisco office. "The answer was to bring the SUV to life, or almost life."

Thus, ESUVEE was born: a 16-foot-long, 10-foot-high, 11-foot-wide, furry, animatronic beast, sporting an animal/engine roar, headlight eyes, taillights on its hind legs, and tire-tread paws.

Tactics

Peppercom began with teasers on the Web, in major cities through unique postings, and through a series of mailings to the media that included a swatch of fur, a partial photo of ESUVEE rounding a city street corner, and a picture of its tire-tread "footprint."

"We reached out to a wide range of reporters, including at long-lead men's and women's books, wire reporters, automotive beat journalists at daily newspapers, trade reporters, consumer safety producers, and automotive trade reporters," Barlow says.

To reinforce the beast theme, New York's Central Park Zoo was chosen to host the launch press conference. Spokespeople included attorneys general and other state officials, as well

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as several campaign partners, such as Consumers Union and Trafficschool.com, a Web-based driver-education program.

Public information officers at attorneys general offices in all states and districts received a media briefing-in-a-box, including the launch press release, FAQ, talking points, sample pitches, and images of ESUVEE.

Results

On the day of the launch, articles appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, and the Associated Press. The next day, ESUVEE-related segments appeared on all three major network morning shows - NBC's *Today*, ABC's *Good Morning America*, and CBS' *The Early Show* - for a total audience of almost 12 million.

Additional coverage included *The New York Times*, NPR, CNN, MSNBC, AOL, and *Automotive News*, as well as many major metro papers.

Also, more than 2 million people visited *Esuvee.com*, and some 20,000 took the ESUVEE Safe Driving Pledge posted on the site.

Future

After touring the country through a series of "SUV Safety Days" at events like state fairs, pro baseball games, and food festivals, the ESUVEE now lives on only in cyberspace and a storage facility.

"We are currently looking for a home for the beast," Barlow says. "The problem is, though, he is just so big."

PRWeek's view

This campaign was distinctive for the challenges it overcame.

This was, after all, a safety campaign where no dramatic scare-tactic-type imagery could be used. In addition, the target demographic was hard to reach, especially for safety issues. And then there were the agendas and sensitivities of 50 attorneys general to satisfy.

But by helping to conceptualize the ESUVEE beast and focusing the messaging on mastering it, Peppercom was able to overcome all of those challenges. Now, if only someone could find a home for the beast.

PR team: US attorneys general and Peppercom (New York)

Campaign: ESUVEE Safety

Duration: January to December 2005

Budget: \$750,000

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