

Freedom rides on Greyhound PR bus

Client: Greyhound Lines

(Dallas)

PR Team: Burson-Marsteller

(Washington, DC)

Campaign: "Greyhound Freedom Rides"

Time Frame: February-May 2001

Budget: About \$200,000

They were called the Freedom Riders. In 1961, 13 civil-rights activists courageously boarded buses bound for Montgomery, AL, uncertain they'd return. Along the way, they faced the naked hate of racist mob violence. They were attacked and beaten, and the Greyhound bus they rode was even fire-bombed. But they endured, persevering as their numbers swelled to over 300.

As an original Freedom Rider, John Lewis was set upon by a mob, and struck in the head with a wooden crate as he watched a white friend get knocked unconscious, his teeth fractured and three vertebrae cracked. Now a Georgia congressman, Lewis recently helped spearhead a commemoration marking the 40th anniversary of the watershed event.

Strategy

In late 2000, Lewis and Greyhound CEO Craig Lentzsch announced plans for the event. Lentzsch made commemorating the Freedom Riders a priority. After the Greyhound bus was fire-bombed during the original ride, it took a personal plea from Attorney General Robert Kennedy to persuade the company to send another bus to continue the journey.

"The PR strategy was to turn what could have been a negative connotation for Greyhound into something positive and full of pride," says Lynn Brown, VP of corporate communications at Greyhound Lines.

Early this year, Greyhound committed to becoming lead sponsor of the commemoration. However, even with Greyhound on board, a slew of other sponsors was still needed to help cover the costs of retracing part of the original route via Greyhound bus, with events in Georgia, Alabama, and Washington, DC.

Greyhound and Burson-Marsteller worked to create a comprehensive media rela-

tions plan and hammer out the logistics for the events. Eight of the original 13 Freedom Riders – including Lewis – were tracked down, and they agreed to participate. The goal was to make real news through having an interactive, educational effort.

"We had to plan and execute three days of events in five cities in a short time, including details such as security on the buses, pulling Greyhounds out of the fleet, and contacting and arranging for the Freedom Riders to attend all the events, some of whom had special needs," explains Brown.

Tactics

Kickoff for the anniversary took place on May 10 in Washington, with a news conference and dinner. US Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta offered the keynote remarks, followed by speeches from Rep. Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-DC) and William Yeomans, the acting Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights.

Burson provided a documentary on the Freedom Riders, and pitched national, regional, and local media for the events for two weeks, and also provided on-the-bus support at each locale. On May 12, Lewis, Lentzsch, and the Freedom Riders held a news conference in front of a vintage 1954 Greyhound Scenicruiser bus at Paschal's restaurant in Atlanta, a known gathering

place for Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil-rights leaders.

"Our first efforts were to begin pitching about a month out with background documents to help reporters understand exactly when the events took place, why they were important, and how they expedited desegregation in interstate transportation facilities," says Brown.

Four key media audiences were targeted: reporters who cover civil rights, political/regional reporters who cover Congress and Lewis, African-American media, and transportation reporters who cover Greyhound.

Several current Greyhound employees also were included in the celebrations.

Results

Despite seeking publicity during a news cycle anticipating the execution of Timothy McVeigh, the commemoration was covered by all the major networks (some of which rode the bus) and CNN. The event also received coverage on major wire services, radio, and in major metropolitan dailies.

Future

Other civil-rights organizations have held their own commemorations of the Freedom Riders, and future events are planned, especially for the 50th anniversary in 2011.

Craig McGuire



Lewis (r.)... original Freedom Rider played major role in PR push