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Product Launches: When you're the new kid on the block

Craig McGuire - 23 May 2005 00:00

To make sure your launch is more flash than fizzle, [Craig McGuire](#) shares some proven tips pulled from campaigns that successfully cut through the clutter

Few PR pros have the luxury of launching a unique or innovative product into a market clamoring for its release. Below are examples of agencies who found creative ways to get the job done.

Xerox

Having clawed its way back from the brink, Xerox was planning to launch two tech platforms: a new monochrome printer platform for mid- to high-end production environments and the Phaser solid ink color printer platform for the small- to midsize business market.

Text 100 pitched a customer-focused event for the launch, with the theme "From blank page to breakthrough," representing the process of innovation that often starts with a blank piece of paper.

"This was more than a product announcement," says Ed Gala, Xerox's director of worldwide strategic PR. "It was a strategic CEO-level communications event designed to position the company for growth."

The PR team invited press and analysts from around the world to the launch at New York's Hammerstein Ballroom. The site was symbolic, as the venue fell into hard times in the late 1970s, only to be revived in the 1990s.

To reinforce its customer-focused messaging, Xerox invited customers from various industries. Several were even invited to join Xerox executives on stage to tell their real-world stories using Xerox technology.

For those who couldn't attend, a live webcast was set up and live satellite downlinks were broadcast in 10 US cities where Xerox executives hosted smaller events for nearly 3,000 customers.

As a result, more than 1,375 journalists, analysts, and customers attended the New York event, more than 10,000 watched via a webcast, and more than 262 articles were generated.

More importantly for Xerox, the launch contributed a 5% increase in revenue within its targeted growth areas.

Who's Shoes ID tags

Mary Lynn Fernau was shocked when her son had an accident and waited in the emergency room for two hours before she got a call. Within six months of the incident, Fernau quit her

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job, mortgaged her home, and began making Who's Shoes ID Tags.

Fernau knew her product was compelling. The tag is a simple, bright Velcro strip that slips through a shoe's laces, around a strap, or even on a bathing suit.

"The launch faced many challenges," Fernau admits. "We had to break through other stories, get past the fear or denial factor, and we had just a \$4,000 budget."

So Fernau tied the product launch to National Missing Child Awareness Day on May 25, 2004, simultaneously aligning with the Laura Recovery Center to launch a "Child ID Challenge," a nationwide campaign to provide 500,000 children with IDs. As a result, Fernau garnered coverage in more than 60 markets.

"It was fun, frustrating, exhilarating, exhausting, and ultimately successful," Fernau says. Since then, the company has received numerous follow-up PR hits, including on *The View*."

Prevage

In January 2005, Chandler Chicco Agency mounted a campaign for the launch of Allergan's Prevage Antioxidant Cream.

"Launching a skin-care product into an already saturated market was daunting," says AE Amanda Cote. "Our research found that thousands of skin-care products already existed. Even with elaborate, expensive marketing campaigns, many new products fail to differentiate themselves quickly [and] fall by the wayside."

The launch strategy focused exclusively on PR, without traditional marketing support, such as ads or sales incentives.

Because Prevage would be sold exclusively through dermatologists' and plastic surgeons' offices, the PR team targeted this demographic. Through this strategy, they earned nearly 300 million media impressions, including all three national morning shows and top outlets, such as *Prevention*, *Parade*, *Allure* (four times), *InStyle*, *Us Weekly*, *Harper's Bazaar*, the *LA Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, *W*, *Vogue*, and *Time*.

"To establish credibility and introduce the product within the dermatology community, we sent experience kits with Prevage samples to key opinion-leading physicians," Cote says. "These kits included scientific research and data, which showcased the product's effectiveness and safety in comparison to other well-known antioxidants."

Doctors were able to offer the product to select patients, thus cultivating patient success stories ahead of the launch and potentially influencing medical peers at meetings and conferences.

Mr. & Mrs. T's Bloody Mary Mix

There's nothing wrong with borrowing buzz for product-launch PR, says Tom Coyne, founder and president of Coyne PR.

"Not every launch is a Mini Oreo, a project we did that became Nabisco's most successful product launch," Coyne says. "[Most] are low-profile line extensions or low-interest categories. If you do not have a Mini Oreo to launch, we advise using what we call the 'Trojan Horse of Borrowed Interest' philosophy." Basically, the lower the interest in the brand, the greater the need to borrow interest from another source to make media, he says.

"With the launch of Mr. and Mrs. T's Bloody Mary Mix, instead of a straight pitch, we created the world's largest Bloody Mary at Mardi Gras," Coyne says. "With a 700-gallon Bloody Mary on Bourbon Street, the media couldn't cut the visual, or the brand message."

Morpheus

When Morpheus launched, McClenahan Bruer Communications pitched a grassroots effort for the wildly popular file-sharing service now embroiled in the entertainment industry-file-sharing services Supreme Court case.

"Using a grassroots strategy of working with potential users online - rather than barraging the media with press releases - we helped sign up 1 million users in 30 days," says Jeff Hardison, senior PR counsel at McClenahan.

"PR pros should stick this note to their monitor: 'PR does not stand for Press Release,'" says Hardison. "Communications to support a product launch should fit the audience one [targets]."

So if research shows that your target audience only watches nightly news, don't focus on the trades. If your users don't even trust traditional media, but spend a lot of time online, find out what sites they visit, consider direct e-mail, or create a product blog.

"When we proposed a grassroots strategy, we were met with initial opposition from investors

and company leaders who liked the thought of stacks of media coverage," Hardison says. "We had to convince them that generating grassroots buzz and driving actual usage could yield stacks of coverage, as well."

Technique tips

Do try to align your launch with relevant and larger industry events

Do your legwork and understand the market and its audiences

Do consider novel approaches, especially if you are launching into a crowded market

Don't have tunnel vision and just focus on the product. Always keep the consumer in mind

Don't just focus on media stacks. Generate buzz among consumers

Don't undervalue the importance of credibility. Recruit key market providers to spread the word

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