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NASA touts science to students

Craig McGuire - 6 Mar 2006 00:00

Did you know that in some middle school in America today sits a child that will one day walk on Mars, according to NASA?

Unfortunately, while employment opportunities in science and technology should increase three times faster than all other occupations, enrollment in related courses in US colleges is declining.

To promote interest in these subjects when it counts, NASA partnered with Honeywell Hometown Solutions (the corporate citizenship arm of the \$32 billion contractor) to launch "FMA Live! Where Science Rocks."

Named after Sir Isaac Newton's second law of motion (force = mass x acceleration), "FMA Live!" is a biannual rock tour/educational program geared to students in grades six through eight.

STRATEGY

Honeywell and NASA have a vested interest in inspiring the next generation of science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) professionals.

"STEM programs in our schools play a vital role in preparing young minds to one day replace an aging work force," says Jim Stofan, NASA's director of informal education. "Part of our education strategy is to look at ways of promoting educational programs that will stimulate interest."

Honeywell and NASA designed a program to inspire young people and also attract attention from media and public officials and, by extension, from Honeywell and NASA stakeholders.

TACTICS

With actors, music, videos, and demonstrations promoting interest in science on stage, the combined PR muscle of NASA and Honeywell was flexed to spread the word behind the scenes.

To support each live event and generate mainstream awareness, Honeywell coordinated with NASA to develop a PR plan targeting local and select national media. The plan was to saturate each local market with pre- and post-event media coverage using Honeywell and NASA executives, the "FMA Live!" street team, students, school administrators, teachers, and public officials as spokespeople.

"We found the local media particularly receptive to this story," says Jim O'Leary, spokesman for Honeywell. "It connects to well-known technology leaders with a vital social issue that people are paying attention to right now."

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In addition, the team developed a Web site to offer students and teachers the opportunity to experience the "FMA Live!" show and some of its activities online.

RESULTS

"FMA Live!" has traveled more than 50,000 miles with performances in front of 73,000 students at 153 schools in 67 communities.

Since March 2004, the PR engine has generated more than 250 stories, producing more than 25 million media hits, including *USA Today*, *New York Daily News*, *Houston Chronicle*, *The Washington Times*, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, and more than 60 stories on local market broadcast outlets.

Perhaps the best measure of success is the impact on the students, which currently can only be gauged by their feedback. "We were amazed by how you could make learning about Sir Isaac Newton so interesting," Kaylee Smith of Torrance, CA, wrote to the organizers. "This was the best show I've ever seen about something so educational. [It] kept me interested the whole time."

FUTURE

NASA and Honeywell will continue the "FMA Live!" tour at least through 2006, with two tours already planned for this year.

Craig McGuire

PRWeek's View

This campaign worked for a number of reasons, but mostly because of its core messaging of preparing the nation's children for challenging careers in fields vital to the future success of the nation as a whole.

The messaging carried a wide appeal to kids, parents, educators, and technology and political leaders alike, and afforded a timely, issues-related hook to both local and national media outlets.

The brand strength of the powerful NASA and Honeywell partnership was also key, as were the PR resources both brought to bear, including leveraging a small army of PR pros who had existing relationships with journalists and broadcasters.

PR TEAM: NASA (Washington) and Honeywell International (Morristown, NJ)

CAMPAIGN: FMA Live! Where Science Rocks

DURATION: Twice per year, since 2004

BUDGET: \$35,000 per tour for PR

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