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YMCA spreads word about its community outreach

Craig McGuire - 10 Jan 2005 00:00

Though most Americans have heard of the YMCA, few know that the organization provides a number of health and social services. Craig McGuire finds that raising awareness is its PR team's main objective

Sure, everyone knows that the local YMCA offers aquatics, arts and crafts, whiffle ball, and spare cots for travelers. But did you know that the YMCA also provides childcare services, drug-abuse counseling, and job training? If Joanna Taylor has her way, you will know it soon. As CMO of the YMCA of the USA, the umbrella organization supporting the country's many YMCAs, Taylor is on a mission to spread the word regarding the club's health and social services, which it provides to 18.9 million men, women, and children in 10,000 communities nationwide. "Stop anyone on the street and they have heard of the YMCA," Taylor says. "But ask them what we do, [and] more likely than not, things get a little fuzzy." The YMCA of the USA is the national resource office for the country's 2,575 independent YMCAs. Collectively, these community-based outfits make up the nation's largest charitable community service organization, serving millions of people of all ages, incomes, ethnicities, and religions, half of whom are under the age of 18. "The depth of services the YMCAs provide to local communities is simply not understood to the extent it should be," Taylor says, adding that the YMCA is the nation's largest childcare provider, serving 500,000 children. "It's our mission to change that." The nonprofit was founded as the Young Men's Christian Association in London on June 6, 1844. George Williams, a sales assistant in a draper's shop, launched the movement with a group of fellow drapers in response to unhealthy social conditions arising in big cities at the end of the Industrial Revolution. By 1851, there were 24 YMCAs in Great Britain, with a combined membership of 2,700. That same year, the YMCA arrived in North America, establishing beachheads in Montreal and Boston. To commemorate the 150th anniversary of the YMCA movement in North America, it kicked off a massive nationwide campaign in 2001. The backbone of the media relations campaign was an SMT with actor Danny Glover and a comprehensive media kit containing customizable media materials for local YMCAs, including press releases, media alerts, PSAs, and a promotions calendar. The campaign generated 535 media placements, which included broadcast and print outlets, reaching an audience of 30,551,763, says Julie Mulzoff, national media relations manager. The campaign also reached 4,000 ABC radio stations, and the YMCA secured a live, in-studio CNN interview. More recently, the YMCA of the USA was named the nation's number one nonprofit organization for the second consecutive year, in the November "NPT 100" issue of **The NonProfit Times**. **Getting the message out** Though the YMCA movement began more than 150 years ago, the organization's communications operations were not formally established until 1997. Today the department's efforts are mainly focused on managing a national branding effort. The communications team also oversees the publication of *Discovery YMCA*, a quarterly national magazine used for recruiting

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volunteers and fundraising. Recruitment is a major consideration for the communications office, as the generally understaffed YMCAs depend on 600,000 volunteers to identify and serve community needs. "Today the organization is also more intentional about communicating the charitable nature of YMCAs, [which] serve their communities through volunteerism, youth leadership, civic engagement," Taylor says. "And all programs are infused with character development components." The primary PR and media relations responsibilities are handled by two full-time staffers - an associate media relations director and a national media relations manager, both of whom report directly to Taylor. The department's budget is under \$1 million, which includes national promotions and events, and web and print communications. In addition to managing proactive and reactive media relations, the team assists communications staff at local YMCAs by creating customizable media materials that they can personalize with information about their local programs that tie into national initiatives. For such a small team, effectively communicating with such a vast network of grassroots community-based organizations is extremely challenging. In an effort to significantly improve the team's bandwidth, the YMCA rebuilt an antiquated intranet that spans virtually all YMCAs. Launched in May and slated to be fully functional this month, YMCA Exchange is the missing link Taylor and her colleagues have sought. "Your local YMCA probably does not have a fully staffed communications department with professionals recruited from top PR firms," Taylor says. "This intranet technology enables us to simultaneously provide thousands of YMCAs with dynamic content they can easily use to promote their programs and reach out to communities." The role of the PR and media relations arm inside the communications department is to secure national visibility of YMCA programs and expertise in areas including childcare, youth sports, aquatics, and after-school programs. "This includes reinvigorating the brand and educating the public about the charitable nature of the YMCA's work," Taylor says. "This also involves identifying common themes and messages that YMCAs can support and reiterate in their own media markets." At the same time, the department is charged with positioning the YMCA movement as a leading advocate for children and families and as a social force committed to developing and supporting research. For instance, the central communications organization recently completed the second phase of a research project called Building Strong Families. This effort was led by Search Institute, a think tank in Minneapolis that surveyed 685 African-American parents, 639 Hispanic parents, and, for some questions, 261 Caucasian parents. "The purpose was to learn what challenges they face and what would help them become more effective, successful parents," Mulzoff says. "The findings are also useful in demonstrating the tangible benefits of such YMCA family strengthening programs as 'Adventure Guides,' 'Family Nights' parent-child sports and fitness programs, and 'Family Camp,' which can help support their efforts to become better parents and stronger families." To assist in developing materials and pitching the study nationally, the YMCA hired Chicago-based PR firm Public Communications. "Because they provide so many services and programs, I can see how it is challenging to remain focused," says Ruth Mugalian, agency principal. "But they pull it off because they are so committed. Inevitably, this is the kind of communications you really have to throw yourself into. But for all their dedication, they are still open to trying new ideas, as long as it works and gets their message across." **Other comms efforts** Beyond the marketing arm, the YMCA of the USA also has a national events director, a communications director in its government relations and policy office in Washington, DC, and a director of PR and communications for its resource development office. A third layer of communications involves developing relevant publications for widespread distribution. "We have a team of seven communications managers and a design manager, responsible for writing, editing, and design of three internal communications vehicles, training manuals, white papers, and conference materials, which are available to all YMCA staff nationwide on the intranet site they also manage," Taylor says. The YMCA of the USA and its community counterparts are well-positioned to lead the discussion on a number of issues affecting the country's children and families. One such issue is the nation's health crisis related to poor nutrition and lack of physical activity, the subject of its "Activate America" initiative, Taylor explains. In this multi-year research and development effort, a select group of YMCAs, known as Pioneer YMCAs, are serving as living laboratories for testing new approaches to wellness that will activate hard-to-motivate youth and adults alike. And the YMCA's communications team will keep promoting innovative programs, as well as the nonprofit's well-earned reputation for responding to such social needs. ----- PR CONTACTS **Chief marketing officer** Joanna Taylor **Associate director of media relations** Arnie Collins **Manager of media relations** Julie Mulzoff

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