



CAMPAIGNS: Promotional PR - Virgin epitomizes Spirit of New York

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Client: Virgin Atlantic Airways (New York/London)

PR Team: In-house

Campaign: The Spirit of New York

Time Frame: October - November 2001

Budget: \$25,000, plus cost of flight

When New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani issued his plea to draw tourists back to New York City following the September 11 terrorist attacks, Sir Richard Branson, founder and chairman of Virgin Atlantic Airways, was listening. Prompted by Branson, British tabloid The Sun ran a contest offering to fly a planeload of lucky passengers to New York from London on October 31 on Virgin Atlantic.

Strategy

The free flight, renamed "The Spirit of New York," marked the launch of a television and newspaper campaign in the UK, promoting travel to the US.

From a PR perspective, the goodwill gesture availed Virgin the opportunity to garner substantial media coverage. From a business standpoint, Virgin had the chance to showcase its new ground and on-board security measures.

Tactics

Certainly no stranger to the spotlight, Branson was out on point, spearheading the campaign.

To maximize media exposure, he took 200 of the passengers on double-decker buses from, where else, the Virgin Megastore in Times Square. Heading downtown, the exuberant passengers could be seen hanging out the windows and over the sides of the bus wearing Virgin Atlantic "I Love New York" t-shirts, and waving US and UK flags.

"(Branson) flew on the plane, he rode the bus, he waved the flags, and he facilitated bringing the charitable donations over," says Wendy Buck, PR manager at Virgin. "We knew we needed great visuals," she adds. However, wide-eyed, flag-waving tourists can only get you so far.

"I got the call two weeks before the flight to try and get Mayor Giuliani to attend," recalls Lori Levin, VP of corporate affairs for the Virgin Group. "I got to the right person, and they were gung-ho."

At a media op held at city hall, Giuliani posed with the passengers, holding aloft a t-shirt that read "Yo! Knighted We Stand," in reference to the honor to be bestowed upon the mayor some time next year.

Afterward, the group was escorted to Ground Zero by Giuliani's head of operations so British firefighters could deliver donations that they had collected for the families of their fallen US comrades.

Results

For the price of the round-trip flight, plus less than \$25,000 in marketing materials, Virgin attracted coverage on no less than 70 TV stations, including CBS, CNN, and FOX, not to mention scores of print and radio hits, according to Buck. And though the trip was the focus of the coverage, details of Virgin's security measures did trickle down into a number of publications, she added.

Over in London, 40,000 people entered the competition - enough to fill 120 jumbo jets. Branson anticipated that the promotion alone would yield \$1 million of tourist expenditure in New York.

Future

Soon after, Branson headed to Washington, DC to testify at the congressional hearings on airline security. That's not to say the campaign has lost its legs.

"What we're doing is sending (Giuliani) an invitation, hopefully to host him when he gets knighted," says Levin. "We'd also like to find a partner publication (in New York) to perhaps bring 100 New Yorkers over with him."

Meanwhile, Virgin continues its support for the city by collecting in-flight donations for the American Red Cross, UNHCR, and the UN Refugee Agency.