

Sleepless in San Diego: A Media Relations Campaign Awakens Plight of the Homeless

Company: San Diego Rescue Mission
Agency: Cook & Schmid
Timeframe: 2005 - 2006

For over 50 years, the **San Diego Rescue Mission**, which started off as a soup kitchen, has been serving 10,000 homeless men, women and children without government funding. However, in recent years, the Mission saw that its donor base was shrinking as its operating budget increased. To remedy the situation, the Mission hired local PR, advertising and marketing firm **Cook & Schmid** in 2005 to launch a program that would not only enlarge its donor base, but also engage new stakeholders to change commonly held perceptions about homelessness.

READJUSTING THE MISSION

Cook & Schmid began working with the Mission to publicize its events; however, their project goal changed after closer scrutiny.

"I knew the previous director of the Mission; we had been working with them for several years," says Jon Schmid, co-partner of Cook & Schmid, who acted as lead manager for this campaign. "We were brought in to initially promote some of the events that they had every year – for example, a Thanksgiving banquet for the homeless where they serve 1,000 meals. But as we began working with them, I realized that they could be more strategic about the things they were doing. I proposed to them a plan for the year, and that's what we did. The goal was to boost their donorship."

Complete with a \$5,000 monthly retainer, the firm

got cracking by conducting research to analyze why the Mission was not attracting corporate or high net-worth individual donors, in addition to why it had limited press appeal.

"One of the things the Mission realized was that they relied heavily on direct mail," Schmid says. "They had a great response rate, but their donors were typically elderly San Diego residents who had been donating for years, and they were literally dying away. They needed to build relationships with other types of donors, as well as the business communities that could be giving them large sums of money rather than twenty dollars."

Schmid and his team, which consisted of Rick Cook, his business partner, and outside consultant/event manager Connie Reeves, did a demographic analysis of North San Diego, pegging the area as an untapped donor base. They also conducted a literature review that revealed healthcare-triggered bankruptcies as a growing cause of homelessness for families with children.

Cook & Schmid's findings led them to strategize the following tactics for the Mission:

- Increase media coverage by four times than before to keep the Mission foremost in the mind of the press;
- Develop consistent messages and hands-on media training so the Mission staff could use them effectively;
- Plan a series of high-profile events to engage both the media and the most influential San Diego residents and businesses; and,
- Challenge stereotypes of



A bird's eye view of a recent Sleepless in San Diego event.

homelessness to broaden the donor base and translate empathy into action.

PRIORITIES, PARTNERS & PHILANTHROPY

As Cook & Schmid planned its program for the Mission, there were several issues that popped up as being of prime importance. The team focused on repeating key messages while enhancing the Mission's existing events. They also sought to build strategic partnerships for new events and leverage the interest in philanthropy around the holidays to enable the Mission to solicit new donors.

There were other elements the firm noticed that had been absent at previous events – glaring omissions that could better fulfill their goal of attracting more, well-heeled donors.

"One of the things we realized when we started working with them was that they would get the media there, and they loved the events, but they never asked viewers for donations," Schmid says. "We worked with them on media events. We also

realized they didn't have a signature event that was geared for fundraising. Other events they did, like the Thanksgiving banquet, is something they do for the San Diego homeless so they weren't bringing in prospective donors."

SLEEPLESS IN SAN DIEGO

Thus, the agency created the "Sleepless in San Diego" event, which became the linchpin of the fundraising program. Here, volunteers collect pledges, then sleep on cots in a public plaza overnight to dramatize the plight of homelessness. (The inaugural "Sleepless in San Diego," which bowed on April 28, 2007, is expected to be an annual staple for the Mission.)

Ultimately, pursuing an aggressive media campaign to promote the plan's tactics was paramount. Starting with the holiday season in 2005, Cook & Schmid enhanced the Mission's existing Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners by incorporating key messages and launching a guest chef program supported by several local fine eateries. The agency also

increased the media allure of the dinners by securing celebrity servers. This had a positive impact with stakeholders.

The agency also launched several special events that would generate a lot of attention for the Mission. They created a “Handprints” children art event, which was taken from the Mission’s art therapy program; the art was then sold at a silent auction with the aim of using the funds to pay for a new playground. The agency also sought to use this event to attract prospective new donors. Also, an article about the need for a children’s playground appeared in multiple media.

Cook & Schmid execs arranged another high-profile event to capture media attention: A visit by well-known painter Thomas Kinkaide, where he and his Thomas Kinkaide Galleries would act as the exclusive San Diego partner in a national coat drive.

For broadcast media unable to attend these events, the agency shot B-roll and hand-delivered it with news releases to these specific outlets. According to research conducted by Cook & Schmid, a majority of San Diego residents cite television as their preferred news source so appealing to broadcast media was crucial on the part of the agency’s strategizing.

FINDING THE REAL ESTATE

For Cook & Schmid, a key challenge in working on this program was location, location, location—literally. During the period the agency was invested in the campaign, the Mission relocated to a more gentrified area, which presented even more difficulties than before.

“The Mission was previously part of downtown San Diego that was so rundown nobody minded the fact that they were there,” says Schmid. However, as is the case of many metropolitan areas formerly blighted by urban decay, San Diego

downtown soon underwent a Renaissance. When the Mission moved its quarters to the revitalized area, they were met with loud protests from residents. “People don’t want homeless people in their neighborhood. Homeless people cannot hang out in front of the building.”

With the media writing stories on the Mission’s controversial move, the agency sought to shift their focus onto something more positive and productive.

“We wanted to be more proactive with the coverage,” Schmid says. “We worked to find stories that we could get into the media that were good holiday stories that would prompt people to give.”

Another prime challenge was getting the Mission to re-strategize their goals using a different part of their brain. “Working with a nonprofit can be challenging because they have limited resources and staff,” says Schmid. “They’re focused on providing meals and a bed to the homeless so to get them to step back for a minute and think about long-term strategy—that was one of the challenges.”

At Christmas 2005, Cook & Schmid secured a feature story that appeared in *San Diego Union Tribune*, which profiled Jo Del Rio, a prominent research scientist who plunged into homelessness following a serious illness and bankruptcy. The story on Del Rio not only helped dispel stereotypes about the illness but it was emblematic of a current troubling pattern.

“Homeless people are gener-

ally regarded as young or older males who are alcoholics,” says Schmid. “That’s true; there are a lot of homeless who fit into that stereotype. However, one of the things we’re seeing that is a disturbing trend is there are more women and children who are fitting into this category. They are the fastest-growing segment of homeless.”

This group often find themselves homeless due to a number of variables that are beyond their control. “People are made homeless for a number of reasons,” notes Schmid. “For instance, housing is extremely expensive. They lose their job. A variety of circumstances can come together to create working homeless.”

The return on investment was the following:

- Cook & Schmid recruited more than 25 business sponsors in the first three months of the program;
- For the same period ending in December 2005, the media coverage increased fivefold compared to the previous year. Forty-nine stories were generated, yielding an audience impression of 4,999,404;
- Donations for December 2005 increased by 118 percent to \$1.3 million, surpassing the Mission’s nine-year average for the month of December, making it the best for that month ever;
- The article on the need for the playground generated \$40,000 in donations from three private donors;

- The Handprints event secured a \$50,000 corporate pledge from Bank of America. CalPacific sponsored a second Handprints event in March 2007;

- Seventeen A-list San Diego residents, including the city’s mayor Jerry Sanders, a local TV anchorwoman and Olympic Gold Medalist for sailing Malin Burnham, joined the Sleepless host committee. The Sleepless event elicited \$100,000 from corporate sponsors; and

- As of the end of the first quarter in 2007, donations increased by 65 percent; in 2006, total donations increased by 38 percent to \$3.6 million

LESSONS LEARNED

For Schmid, the lessons learned were pretty self-explanatory, especially to seasoned PR practitioners. “The importance that’s attributed to bringing influential community leaders to the table [cannot be underestimated],” he says. “When we got Malin Burnham on board as the honorary chair—he’s an extremely prominent member in the San Diego business community—that opened doors. That sets the standard because when they’re on board, then other community leaders and businesses want to be involved as well.” PRN

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MEDIA RELATIONS, NONPROFIT-STYLE

For nonprofits that wish to both build their brand and increase their donor base, Jon Schmid of **Cook & Schmid** offers advice that’s both practical and straightforward.

“Understand whom your donors really are and whom your donors are going to be moving forward,” he says. “Develop the communications channel that can effectively engage these people—media relations is very powerful, but at the same time [with the San Diego Rescue Mission] we developed some programs that engaged these leaders. These people are now involved; some are serving on the board now.”