



Silver Anvil Winner

Nine-Year Community Outreach Program Supports Trolley Construction from Old Town to La Mesa

Starting in 1995, agency teams led by Tom Gable successfully implemented award-winning community outreach programs for the Metropolitan Transit Development Board in support of the largest infrastructure program in San Diego history: the expansion of the San Diego Trolley from Old Town to La Mesa over almost ten years and at a cost of some \$1 billion.

First Phase Analysis, Mission Valley West

In early 1995, MTDB was ready to begin construction on its Mission Valley West Extension, a \$300 million project that would add 6.1 miles of track from Old Town to just east of Qualcomm Stadium. The project's cost and its perceived impacts on Mission Valley by some residents and businesses created anxiety and even animosity toward the project before construction began. Construction needed to proceed smoothly in order for the Trolley extension to be completed before Super Bowl XXXII in January 1998.

The Plan

Agency team members implemented a continuous, multifaceted public and community relations plan that reached residents, businesses, employers, shoppers, media and others throughout the construction process. The team elevated the public image of the Trolley extension by adopting a customer service approach to community relations, reducing adverse impacts on the community, and building excitement for the completion of the Trolley extension and the beginning of Trolley service. During the two-year construction period, team members attended hundreds of MTDB planning and community meetings to stay abreast of developments and, in turn, update the public. Media specialists also arranged dozens of print, radio and TV interviews. Through agency efforts, thousands of Mission Valley residents were contacted through free construction tours, mall appearances, speaking engagements, telephone information lines and the production of a special video about the project. The team also distributed regular newsletters about the new Trolley extension and created a community advisory board to help with proactive communications into communities along the route. The campaign culminated with a series of grand opening activities that raised awareness and excitement about the Mission Valley West Extension. Through months of planning, the team expanded MTDB's promotional budget for the opening activities by bringing in dozens of media and corporate sponsors. This extra support made possible more than a dozen special events

and promotions - ranging from a free ride day in conjunction with a street festival to an "opening day" Trolley commute by Mayor Susan Golding.

The Results

The Mission Valley West Extension Community Relations Campaign built support for the project and helped eliminate public protests that might have delayed the on-time and on-budget completion of the Trolley Extension. Other achievements included: a 90 percent public approval rating (measured by survey forms filled out during free Trolley construction tours); two editorials supporting the Trolley extension in the San Diego Union-Tribune; an editorial hailing the extension's opening on NBC 7/39; extensive media coverage, including three major print news stories and more than 75 news reports (total impressions: approximately 20 million); more than \$300,000 in cash, in-kind services and media time contributed to Trolley grand opening events from more than 40 sponsors; attendance of more than 25,000 people during the Trolley extension's grand opening activities between Nov. 20 and Nov. 30, 1997. The program earned a Silver Anvil from PRSA, the profession's highest honor.

Second Phase, Mission Valley East

Tom Gable led a team that implemented a countywide community outreach plan for MTDB and the Mission Valley East extension of the San Diego Trolley, which would connect two separate lines and close the final loop in a system surrounding the heart of San Diego. The agency team worked from the grassroots level up to build support for three separate segments of the MVE extension: Grantville, San Diego State University and 70th Street/La Mesa. The program began in 2000 and continued through completion of construction and the official grand opening of the new line in 2005. The target audiences included community leaders, businesses, government officials, the SDSU community, current system riders, local residents along the construction route and the general public.

Implementation

The program was implemented on many levels simultaneously, using lessons learned from the agency's award-winning work on the Mission Valley West (MVW) extension, plus new management and planning techniques from Tom Gable's best-selling book, *The PR Client Service Manual*. The activities included: press conferences at key milestones in the project; news releases to update the public on progress; regular updates to the Web site; managing and responding to an 800-number and email hotline; presenting at community street fairs and other activities; organizing and managing a Project Advisory Committee of community leaders and members of local planning groups along the route; implementing a crisis plan as needed (such as a death on the construction project); responding in hours to changes in construction schedules and community concerns; producing a newsletter for distribution to more than 50,000 residents and interested parties; conducting ongoing research through direct mail; pitching positive news stories to the media; providing creative ideas for brochures, advertising, direct mail; writing



copy for speaking engagements; conducting a door-to-door business outreach program along the route; developing a customized database for email and direct mail communications; meeting regularly with the MTDB/MVE team to update on plans and construction activities; attending construction management meetings with the subcontractors on each of the segments; monitoring the news to look for issues effecting the project or MTDB in general; holding regular personal briefing meetings with the news media; working with elected officials to plan future public events; and continually updating the media kit, brochures, Web site and other copy as public perceptions evolve.

Results

As with the Mission Valley West program, the integrated approach helped generate positive public awareness of MTDB and MVE, enlisted advocates along the route, improved relationships with the media, pre-empted possible negative media coverage by fast responses to public concerns, demonstrated the quality of the MTDB planning and engineering staff and results, built relationships within neighborhoods and communities and encouraged interactive relationships at all levels.

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