



Fact-Based, Direct Media Relations Program Challenges And Reverses Negative Coverage of Proposed Highway in Southern California

Situation

Gable PR was retained by the Transportation Corridor Agencies (TCA) of Orange County, California, to counter a misinformation campaign being run by opponents of a proposed toll road extension that had generated significant negative and inaccurate coverage. Opponents claimed the road would ruin the surf at a popular beach and threaten several endangered species. Research showed the media coverage was running 90 percent against the toll road extension and made it appear residents throughout Southern California were opposed to the 16-mile State Highway 241. The road was needed for long-term traffic relief and would be the final link in a regional transportation system that had been planned since 1981.

The Plan

Gable PR used a direct and fact-based approach to educate the media and combat inaccurate coverage, which was being driven by a multi-million dollar campaign financed by no-growth interests. The agency created a slate of media materials using outside experts as sources to counter the anti-road propaganda. The core piece: a comprehensive “myths and facts” piece that debunked opponents’ claims with data from government agencies and others. The agency monitored all media coverage of the issue and followed up immediately with writers and editors when the 241 issue wasn’t covered in a balanced fashion. The agency secured meetings with editorial staff, generated letters to the editor in support of completing the toll road, and placed supporting op-ed pieces in major local newspapers.

The Results

- Within three months, Gable PR generated letters of support, testimonials and opinion pieces from more than 25 community leaders and elected officials.
- The agency secured op-ed pieces in the four major print media in the region: Union-Tribune, North County Times, San Diego Business Journal, and San Diego



Daily Transcript. In addition, the Union-Tribune supported the toll road editorially.

- The agency pitched the editorial cartoonist from the Union-Tribune on caricaturizing the situation. His two-panel piece showed a side view of two surfers in a surf wagon on Interstate 5 in panel one, talking about going to a party at the beach. One asks the other what they are celebrating. The second panel shows an aerial view of a freeway in gridlock, with the answer “The defeat of the toll road.”
- Media coverage improved significantly (from 10 to 40 percent favorable), and along with it, the public’s perception of the road’s impact.
- Survey results showed a majority of San Diego and Orange County registered voters in favor of the toll road in unaided responses. Support grew to 2:1 in favor when respondents were given additional information about how the environment and beaches would be protected.

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