

PRWEEK

CAMPAIGNS

CORPORATE REPUTATION

Outreach to press, community pays off for casino firm

PR team: Vandiver Group, Inc. (St. Louis) and Pinnacle Entertainment (Las Vegas)

Campaign: Pinnacle Entertainment St. Louis casino license applications

Time frame: November 2003 to September 2004

Budget: less than \$200,000

When Missouri decided it would allow two new casinos to be built in the St. Louis area, it set off a scramble by applicants wanting to secure the licenses. One license would be granted for a casino in the city itself and another one for the surrounding country.

Las Vegas-based Pinnacle Entertainment sought out the two licenses, hiring the Vandiver Group to handle PR during the application review process. "We wanted to associate ourselves with people who had a good knowledge of the area," explains Kim Townsend, VP of marketing with Pinnacle.

Strategy

While Pinnacle operates casinos in other locations, such as Mississippi, Louisiana, and Colorado, it did not operate any of the five casinos already in the St. Louis market when the application process began.

As a result, it was an unknown business entity in the area. PR was seen as the best way to establish the company's reputation and credibility as a casino operator with all the interested parties.

"The most important thing from our standpoint was to put a face on this company and get people to know both them and

their proposal in a short amount of time," says Mack Bradley, the Vandiver SVP who oversaw the effort.

Tactics

The agency conducted a local media poll in November to find out what reporters knew about the license-selection process and what they knew about Pinnacle. The poll, conducted by phone, found a high degree of media interest in the licensing process.

Vandiver advised Pinnacle that "senior management needs to make themselves known to the press," Bradley recalls. Pinnacle's CEO made himself available, either in person or via phone. He became the human face of the company.

Vandiver also recommended that the company make details of its proposals public, inviting reporters to scrutinize and compare its bids to that of other applicants.

"I think that level of commitment on the client's part to be open made a critical difference in this," says Bradley.

The county selection process would involve seven public hearings, so Vandiver's four-person account team also worked to establish ties with community groups that likely would appear at those sessions. It reached out to a county chamber of commerce, a local school district, and other local organizations, explaining that Pinnacle planned to invest \$600 million in the two projects if they were approved.

While the city casino would be near downtown St. Louis on a 7.5-acre site, the county plan would cover 87 acres. Neighbors there wanted to know what would be done with the land and wanted such amenities as a community center.

Pinnacle promised a center, along with baseball fields, a park, a movie theater, bowling alley,



Laclede's Landing Casino... an artist's rendering of the casino slated to be built in St. Louis

and retail mall. "We asked the community what it wanted," says Bradley. "We did our best to build relationships early."

Says Townsend of Vandiver's efforts, "They were able to get the word out in a very positive, succinct way."

Results

Public hearings on the Pinnacle application for the county site saw more people in favor of it than against it as a result of the community outreach that had been done, says Bradley.

Pinnacle also received more than 600 media hits during the campaign.

Both St. Louis and the county

recommended to the state gaming commission that Pinnacle receive the licenses. The gaming commission traditionally goes along with local suggestions in such matters, so Pinnacle won both licenses.

Future

Pinnacle was so pleased with Vandiver's work that it has retained the agency to handle PR as it constructs both casinos, says Townsend. That process will extend into 2006 for the city site and 2007 for the county site.

John N. Frank