

PR WEEK

March 14, 2005

CAMPAIGNS

NONPROFIT PR

Dollar-Help efforts receive invaluable aid from local kids

PR team: Dollar-Help and The Vandiver Group (both St. Louis)
Campaign: Warming Hearts and Homes
Time frame: November 2004
Budget: \$5,000

Dollar-Help is a nonprofit corporation that provides financial assistance to help low-income families in Eastern Missouri pay their heating bills during the cold winter months.

Each year, the organization raises money to give to seven social-service partners, which in turn distribute the funds to needy families. Last year, Dollar-Help teamed with The Vandiver Group because the organization wanted to draw attention to its efforts to raise \$1 million with a well-thought-out and inexpensive PR effort.

Strategy

The Vandiver Group helped create a concept that would highlight that these were families in need by turning the spotlight onto the kids of parents who were receiving aid. To do this, the agency decided to give those children a gift: a donated, hand-made teddy bear from the Build-A-Bear Workshop company, which has 170 stores [in 40 markets] where kids can go to make their own teddy bears.

"The goal for the project was to create awareness of the program so we can raise funds," explains Vandiver's Terry Ross. "I really think that teddy bears and children fit. It's an emotional connection for giving."

Dennis Kelly, president of Dollar-Help, adds that the concept was a hit because "it was a combination of the parents warming their home and the children warming their hearts."

Tactics

First, the Vandiver team contacted Build-A-Bear to pitch its idea. Although the company receives more than 1,000 such requests each month, it decided to aid Dollar-Help.

"It's very important to us to be good community partners," explains Shawn Bertani, bear relations coordinator for the St. Louis-based company. "It was



Build-A-Bear... Dollar-Help president Dennis Kelly and local Cub Scouts created teddy bears for needy kids

something that made it very easy for us to say yes."

With the donation of 30 bears secured, Vandiver decided to add a deeper component to the program – and a great media hook – by having a troop of local Boy Scouts assemble the bears at the Build-A-Bear Workshop in the St. Louis Galleria, one of the largest and best-known shopping malls in the area.

"The Cub Scouts are always looking to be involved in philanthropic things," explains Ross. "They are into social responsibility and teaching that to children." Boy Scouts were also chosen because "it's not as typical as maybe Girl Scouts would be," she adds.

They were also careful to choose a troop in the 8 to 12 age range, in part because "they're at a great age where they are excited to help and maybe not too old where they don't want to be seen making bears," she says.

With the event scheduled, the team sent out a media advisory, along with press kits featuring teddy bears wearing miniature Dollar-Help T-shirts. The event was scheduled for a Sunday, when the Scouts would be out of

school and available to do the work in the afternoon, making it possible for broadcast media to make their nightly news shows.

Results

"We got some good stuff," says Kelly of the resulting media coverage.

Three out of four local broadcast news stations showed up to cover the event, as well as numerous print outlets. In addition, there was a 10% spike in donations in November, and an 8.5% increase in December. While Kelly says that it's really the December and January donation figures that will show the effectiveness of the program for fundraising, he adds that the press coverage went a long way toward fulfilling the goal of raising awareness.

Future

The Vandiver Group is still working with Dollar-Help to raise awareness and money. Part of that plan included another event with Build-A-Bear set to revolve around more custom-made teddy bears pegged to Valentine's Day.

Anita Chabria