

MARKETING

How to market a meeting—fast!

By Scott D. Oser

The task: Attract 1,000 attendees to the first joint conference of the Association of Fundraising Professionals' Washington, DC, metro chapter (AFP/DC) and the Direct Marketing Association of Washington (DMAW).

The timetable: Less than four months from the marketing team's first meeting in late March 2006 until the conference opened in mid-July.

The marketing team: Four volunteers working with two staff members.

The techniques: We took the following high-speed steps.

1. Save time later by developing a thorough marketing plan first. We determined upfront who would do what when. The plan included a comprehensive calendar for using multiple marketing methods, target lists, roll-out schedules and assignments, and subgoals and messaging. With so much to do, we had to divide and conquer. Each volunteer took charge of one or two parts of the plan.

2. Build a brand that adapts to multiple media. Although the cosponsoring organizations were already well established, a clear, strong conference brand was vital to the look and feel of marketing materials that would work in different media. For consistency's sake, we created a brand brief (describing what the brand stood for) as well as a style guide to spell out proper use of the logo: a stylized rendering of Washington, DC's Memo-

rial Bridge with the words "Merge for Strength" and "Bridge to Integrated Marketing and Fundraising."

3. Develop a multitasking website. We honed in on four specific goals for our site: Make it educational and informative, use it as a registration tool, provide sponsorship recognition, and ensure brand consistency. The result: Nearly 49 percent of registrations came in through the site (www.bridgeconf.org).

4. Market smart. We drove prospects to our website with

- Print and online advertising that sent a consistent message—visit the conference site—without seeming repetitive;
- Public relations that sent key messages to a target list on a specific schedule;
- Emails (complete with our branding and logo) that went to prospects at least once a week for more than three months;
- Direct mail consisting of a save-the-date postcard, an early-bird registration mailing, a reminder mailing with special teaser copy, and a last-chance mailing.

We closely monitored our postage and production costs, stuck to our timeline, and tracked results carefully.

The turnout: More than 1,200 people. Our planning and hard work paid off—and taught us these takeaway lessons:

1. Save time by doing your planning upfront and getting volunteers and staff to buy in early.

2. Market both online and off to make sure you hit all possible audience segments.

3. Develop your brand and stick with a strong, consistent style in your materials. Your message will travel more efficiently and be less confusing.

4. Adapt these same techniques for membership solicitation, publications marketing, fundraising, and other communications—even when you aren't in such a hurry.

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