

PR WEEK

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CAMPAIGNS

NON-PROFIT PR

Kids take Santas to school for VOA

Client: *Volunteers of America—Greater New York*

PR Team: *Amster-Young Public Relations (New York)*

Campaign: *Sidewalk Santa Program*

Time Frame: *October to December 1999*

Budget: *\$55,000*

Putting a new spin on a 97-year-old tradition isn't easy.

That was the challenge for Volunteers of America (VOA) and its Sidewalk Santa program. The group wanted to freshen the program and "brand" it as its own. VOA wanted to drive home the point that the Santas ringing the bells with their trademarked red brick chimneys and white belts are with VOA, which provides a range of human services.

Strategy

The group had to deliver message points that would help it throughout the year. "We wanted every photo caption, every story, even when any of the Santas were interviewed, to deliver messages about the organization's goals," says Karen Amster-Young, president of Amster-Young PR, the agency VOA brought on board this season for the first time.

To achieve success, VOA needed new sponsors that would offer tie-ins to add spark to traditional festivities, including the Fifth Avenue Parade Kick-off event the day after Thanksgiving.

Tactics

For the first time in years, VOA had a celebrity for the parade — Barry Bostwick, the mayor on ABC's *Spin City*. The Plaza Hotel helped the Santas get ready for the season by hosting Santa School and Kids on Broadway, during which professional child actors roleplayed with Santa trainees.

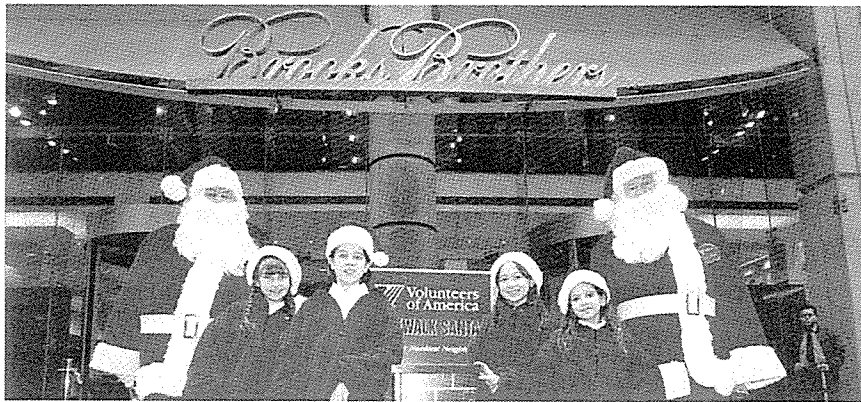
To drum up sponsorship, as early as April of last year dozens of letters were mailed and listings announcing sponsorship opportunities ran in trade publications.

Brooks Brothers, the American Dairy Association and Dairy Council, Procter & Gamble and Reebok came on board as sponsors. Brooks Brothers hosted the kick-off event at its flagship Fifth Avenue store. The Santas participated in promotions for the other sponsors — for example, they cheered the holiday season with a "milk toast."

The agency launched an assault on the media with hundreds of pitch letters to local, national and international media throughout the holidays.

Results

The aggressive early outreach paid off for VOA. The number of sponsors doubled from two to four — all of whom were new. The increase translated into a 100% jump in funds raised from sponsors — \$36,000.



Volunteers of America... wanted every photo caption to communicate the organization's objectives

As for the press, the events generated more than 50 television and radio placements in New York and some 36 television segments in markets like Atlanta, Los Angeles and Philadelphia. On kick-off day, there were live remotes from several shows.

Print coverage included stories on the front page of the Metro section of *The New*

York Times and the front page of the Queens edition of *Newsday*, as well as international coverage.

"I believe we did boost awareness that the Sidewalk Santa is VOA," says Linda McNeil, director of development and communications at VOA. "We haven't done any marketing surveys, but we heard a lot anecdotally, from

our board members in particular. The quality of press was better. This time we got our message points out."

Future

This year, look for a celebrity dishing out advice about the dos and don'ts of being a Santa at the Santa School, and expect an increase in sponsors.

Sheryl Nance-Nash