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CASE HISTORY

HOUSTON-GALVESTON AREA COUNCIL: THE OPENING OF THE KATY FREEWAY MANAGED LANES

SITUATION

In 2008 as the opening drew near for the first Managed Lane system in Houston, the partner agencies involved began to realize that synergistic collaboration on public communications would be instrumental in effectively and efficiently detailing the project. The agencies involved included the Houston-Galveston Area Council (H-GAC), the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT), Harris County Toll Road Authority (HCTRA) and the Metropolitan Transit Authority of Houston (METRO).

Through my work at Vollmer Public Relations on behalf the H-GAC, I was tapped to craft an overall public relations strategy for all the partner agencies to accomplish the goal of collectively “speaking with one voice” in order to better inform and educate constituents on what Managed Lanes were, how and when they can be used, how more Managed Lanes would be implemented throughout the region and their benefits to our region’s mobility.

STRATEGY

Because this project was so complex and its success so important to future transportation initiatives, the goal was to clearly, consistently and proactively communicate messages in meaningful ways to those who were most impacted, the drivers of the Katy Freeway.

Work began with bi-weekly meetings among the communications professionals within the partnering agencies and with the development of agreed-upon wording, messaging and positioning. All partners understood that in order to reach our communications goals, a full arsenal of tools would be needed and, as a result, were developed, including:

- Key messages
- Media relations
- Video and internet initiatives
- Advertising
- Public meetings
- Grassroots activities and events
- Influencer and elected official outreach

Each partner agency was responsible for communicating messages relevant to their areas of responsibility. However, when possible, all agencies incorporated the positioning and advertising initiatives agreed to by this group in their efforts. In addition, all agencies linked information from their websites to other partner sites, as appropriate.

RESULTS

The PR campaign that I developed and, along with my account team at Vollmer, implemented generated a variety of successes including:

- An editorial board meeting with the *Houston Chronicle* resulting in an OpEd as well as ongoing, fair and accurate media coverage for the Managed Lanes.
- An effective, proactive approach with the media that served to position H-GAC as the expert source on transportation planning and Managed Lanes throughout the region. Media relations activities included: conducting background sessions with key media contacts and monitoring opposition groups to assure balanced coverage.
- Aggressive media and grassroots outreach to the public and local governments for five successful public meetings that generated an average of 100 residents in attendance at each.
- Collaboration with regional transportation agency partners that led to the development of valuable briefing tools to be distributed to elected officials in advance of one-on-one briefings and public meetings.

My collaborative approach to public outreach resulted in an open dialogue among the region’s transportation agencies and a transparent strategy for communicating to the public and other stakeholders. The end result was that the public and stakeholders were armed with information prior to the Managed Lanes opening and there was little to no negative outcry from those opposed to the project. In addition, through the strategy outlined above, I was able to position my client, the H-GAC, as an expert in regional transportation solutions.

