

Oregon Arts District media relations

Downtown Dayton Partnership: Kristen Wicker

Research

In February 2008, an effort was launched to establish the new Oregon Arts District, an innovative approach to transforming this downtown area into a unique urban entertainment destination for the Dayton region. Throughout 2008, an enclave of new creative spaces, such as art galleries, and new programming, such as monthly art hops dubbed First Friday, enhanced the District's existing business mix as part of a strategy to increase visitation to the District. Another key component of that strategy was the development and implementation of an aggressive media relations campaign.

When the Oregon Arts District was established, no one person was responsible for media relations for the District. Those efforts depended on the District's independent business owners submitting their event information and news to Dayton-area media. Yet few of the business owners had experience working with the media, leading to sporadic media relations efforts.

The leaders of the Oregon Arts District project looked to other successful arts districts, such as the Short North in Columbus, Ohio, to gather ideas for tackling this problem. They found that a concerted, organized media relations campaign had been very successful in building audience and positive public perception elsewhere — and the common thread was a staff member responsible for leading such a campaign.

The need for an effective media relations strategy was underscored by the lack of an advertising budget to promote the new Oregon Arts District. District leaders hoped to implement a cooperative advertising campaign in which various business owners would contribute toward some joint advertising. However, while business owners reported an increase in business, the economic downturn meant they couldn't afford to participate.

Improving public perception and sprucing up the District's image also were identified as priorities in the Oregon District Strategic Plan, completed in 2007 after extensive study of the District and surrounding areas. The study, which was at the core of the development of the Oregon Arts District project, identified the development of an "image campaign" as a high priority for successfully marketing the District. The study found that the District, while enjoying name recognition throughout greater Dayton, was challenged by a "party image" from past years when most businesses were bars and taverns. Greater Dayton residents, the study noted, were generally unaware of the diverse offerings in the District, including fine dining restaurants, art galleries, health facilities, retail shops, a movie theater, comedy club and more.

Planning

An integral part of the media relations campaign was hiring the Oregon Arts District coordinator, who came on board at the end of February 2008. The coordinator immediately began organizing a media relations campaign focused on the priorities established in the research phase. The campaign aimed to better inform District visitors and potential visitors about events throughout the District and at individual establishments — all while communicating the diverse, urban and fun nature of the Oregon Arts District.

At its core, the development of the Oregon Arts District media relations campaign had three objectives:

- Increase visitation to the District;
- Improve the public's perception of the Oregon Arts District; and
- Make the public aware of the diverse offerings at Oregon Arts District establishments.

The target audience for this project included residents in the City of Dayton, particularly such inner-ring neighborhoods as South Park, St. Anne's Hill, McPherson Town and Dayton View; residents from the close-in suburbs; patrons already coming downtown to attend theater, sporting, and other entertainment and

recreational events; and downtown residents, employees and investors. The campaign also aimed to reach out to those visiting Dayton for conventions and other events, as well as residents of nearby metropolitan areas, such as Cincinnati and Columbus, who may consider a visit to Dayton and the Oregon Arts District.

The budget for this project was \$10,000 to fund the Oregon Arts District coordinator's wages for a six-month, part-time contract. This budget also included support resources, such as phone and Internet service, photocopies, and other miscellaneous office expenses.

Execution

The Oregon Arts District coordinator worked closely with Oregon Arts District businesses to train them on effectively working with the media, including workshops on how to write press releases. The coordinator also worked with business owners to ensure they were regularly sending news and events items to the coordinator, who sent them on to media outlets.

For larger events, such as the monthly First Friday events, the coordinator collected information from participants and compiled a press release that was sent to Dayton-area media. The coordinator also wrote and sent out press releases on significant District events, such as the opening of several new businesses and the 25th anniversary of another. In addition, news tips were sent to media via e-mail and by simply picking up the phone.

The media relations campaign also focused on developing personal relationships with members of the media. The coordinator regularly contacted targeted reporters with news tips and story ideas, as well as met with reporters and editors to pitch story ideas. In addition, a Web site was created where reporters and editors easily could find events listings and news releases for story ideas.

Results

The media relations campaign was extremely successful and resulted in numerous impressions in a variety of Dayton-area media. The Oregon Arts District, First Friday, and District businesses and events were the subject of 38 feature-length stories in Dayton print and electronic media as a direct result of the media relations efforts. Those publications include the *Dayton Daily News*, *activedayton.com*, *Dayton City Paper*, *Dayton Business Journal*, *Single Source News*, *At Home* magazine, *Tour Great Miami* magazine and *The Oakwood Register*.

Additional media coverage included more than 30 shorter features in print and electronic media, such as news columns, calendar features and inclusion in longer articles. Publications include the *Tastings* e-newsletter, *Art Around Town* e-newsletter, the Downtown Dayton Partnership's weekly *e-Vents* e-newsletter, *Dayton B2B* magazine, Dayton/Montgomery County Convention and Visitors Bureau events calendar, and *Living Arts* magazine. The District's annual Halloween party was even featured on CNN.com. The media relations campaign also netted feature broadcast coverage on the Dayton CBS and ABC affiliates, as well as two feature broadcast stories and interviews on Dayton's public radio station. (A sample of media coverage is included in this entry.)

This media relations campaign met and even exceeded all of its goals. District business owners reported that — even in light of tough economic conditions — their business increased. Business owners also reported customers regularly commented they'd heard about the business or event in the media. Attendance at First Friday continually grew, as did the number of venues and organizations participating and public awareness of the event. Traffic to the new Oregon Arts District Web site grew dramatically, especially for a new, unknown site, further indicating an increase in public awareness of the District and its offerings. In October 2008, when data collection began, there were 141 unique visitors to the site. By the end of the year, that number had grown to 1,119. Overall traffic also is on the rise, growing from 7,932 hits in October to 91,730 in January.

In addition, the media relations campaign came in under budget, with the coordinator's wages and ancillary costs totaling approximately \$9,120. It also was organized and implemented within the six-month timeframe.