



Inventory No: 6BW-9606E

Format: Campaign Profile-A two-page summary of a Silver-Anvil Award winner, addressing research, planning, execution and evaluation.

Title: Saving Helen Ellis

Tarpon Springs Hospital Foundation, Ketchum Public Relations, 1996

Summary: When city officials threatened to sell the Helen Ellis Hospital through a referendum and promised to use the estimated \$20 million in proceeds to defer future tax increases, the Foundation Board did the unexpected: they refused to back down. Instead a public relations campaign was launched at ending the dispute over control of Helen Ellis forever.

Full Text: OVERVIEW

Following an attempt by the management of Helen Ellis Memorial Hospital to form a partnership with Columbia/HCA, city officials in Tarpon Springs, Florida, launched an aggressive campaign to seize control of the Hospital. The city, which had owned the hospital's land and buildings since 1927, did everything in its power to oust the Tarpon Springs Hospital Foundation, which had leased the facility from the city since 1947. City officials planted stories in the media of possible criminal wrongdoing and an F.B.I. investigation, threatened to overthrow the Hospital's Board of Directors, attempted to have the volunteer Board President fired from his job as the local bank President and sought to renegotiate the 30-year lease that had been approved in 1993.

The power struggle threatened the future of the Foundation, raised the likelihood of a lengthy and expensive legal battle and ultimately jeopardize the Foundation's ability to keep the Hospital open. The Foundation retained Ketchum Public Relations/Pittsburgh to secure the Foundation's position as the area's healthcare provider of the future.

When city officials threatened to sell the Hospital through a referendum and promised to use the estimated \$20 million in proceeds to defray future tax increases, the Foundation Board did the unexpected: they refused to back down. Instead, we launched a public relations campaign aimed at ending the dispute over control of Helen Ellis forever.

RESEARCH

Primary research determined the level of awareness of the referendum among registered voters and voter opinions. Research consisted of random telephone survey of 303 registered voters. A phone survey, rather than mall intercepts or mail, was chosen because of the need target registered voters and the importance of probing. Research conclusions: Early momentum was on the city's side. Fifty seven percent of respondents said they either supported the sale or did not know how they would vote. This told us we needed a message that would not only be compelling enough to convince people to vote 'NO.' but also needed to change the minds of voters who had already decided to vote "YES." The wording of the referendum question confused voters. When read the exact referendum question, the number of voters who said they supported the Hospital sale nearly tripled. We knew our communications needed to be clear and direct. The city's key message, that the Hospital is a burden to taxpayers, had sunk in. It was cited more often than any other factor as the reason voters supported the proposed sale. Our message -- A "NO" vote preserves local access to healthcare -- was a positive way to counter this problem.

A second wave of research one month later was used to guide the campaign and check message acceptance. It determined that our campaign had changed voter attitudes about the proposed hospital sale. Research consisted of a random telephone survey of 351 registered voters in Tarpon Springs. Research conclusions: We had taken momentum from the city. Fifty percent of respondents said they opposed selling the Hospital and another 40 percent were undecided. The city's key message, that the Hospital is a burden to taxpayers, had fallen out of favor. Only 11 percent of those in favor of selling the Hospital cited the tax issue as the main reason, down from 21 percent in the initial survey.

PLANNING

Placing the issue on the November 14 ballot was a calculated decision on the part of City Commissioners. They expected the Foundation to acquiesce and negotiate a settlement. The odds were clearly in the city's favor. With no other candidates or referendum issues on the ballot, voter turnout would be low and help the city win approval of the Hospital sale. A comprehensive public relations plan was designed to reduce the issue to its most simple elements. Based on our research, the plan framed the referendum as a vote over access to healthcare and took the focus off the "tax-burden" perception.

Objective To conclusively demonstrate that the Foundation should continue to control healthcare in Tarpon

Springs.

Strategies To refuse to back down in the face of a threatened referendum and allow voters to decide who controls local healthcare; Simplify the issue as a vote over closing the Hospital and, therefore, access to healthcare; Make an emotional connection between the Hospital and the community.

Target Audiences Registered voters in Tarpon Springs, Florida; Members of the organizations that make up the Tarpon Springs Hospital Foundation; Hospital volunteers, employees and medical staff; Hospital patients and their family members; Media in the Tampa Bay/St. Petersburg metropolitan area.

Budget -\$45,000.00

Public Relations Services Including frequent trips to Tarpon Springs to operate campaign; design, execution and analysis of telephone surveys; strategy development; planning; participation at organizational meetings for Save Helen Ellis Committee; attendance at media briefings; public appearances and rallies; development of direct mailers; contact with media; development of news releases, fact sheets; media advisories, speeches; backgrounders and a chronology; and media coaching of spokesperson.

Out-of-Pocket - \$55,000

Including purchase of stock photography; design, production and distribution of direct mailers; production and distribution of collateral material, including t-shirts, yard signs, buttons and banners; purchase of random-digit dialing lists; purchase of mailing and phone lists of registered voters; telephone researchers; frequent travel to Tarpon Springs, telephone. and duplicating.

Key Messages Helen Ellis Memorial Hospital provides and is committed to preserving local access to high-quality, cost-effective healthcare; A vote to reject the referendum is a vote to save Helen Ellis Memorial Hospital; Helen Ellis Memorial Hospital is an important community asset; and closing her would jeopardize lives and jobs.

EXECUTION

To achieve the Foundation's objective, the "Save Helen Ellis" program, launched in September 1995, built grass-roots support; forged strategic partnerships; organized public appearances; staged special events; conducted aggressive media relations. and developed collateral material and direct mail.

A key to communications was the decision to bring the campaign to life through development of a grass-roots network. This eliminated the complexities of the power struggle and made it a personal struggle with life-and-death implications. Based on our research, we knew voters would respond to a simple message. The grass-roots network gave the campaign a voice with which to communicate this message.

Grass-Roots Support

We initiated meetings with a small group we identified as being key to success. The outcome of the meeting was the creation of the "Save Helen Ellis Committee," comprised of hospital employees, volunteers, medical staffers and community activists. These well-known faces helped us personify the campaign to save the Hospital.

Strategic Partnerships

Through public forums, personal meetings and mailings, we reached out to the dozens of influential religious and community organizations that make up the Foundation, asking members to actively campaign on the Hospital's behalf. Through letters to editor and personal contacts, these partnerships helped to illustrate the historical significance of the Hospital and gave names and faces to our campaign.

Public Appearances

To illustrate our resolve to save the Hospital, Administrator Joe Kiefer and Foundation President Lester Garner stood toe to toe with the city's political heavyweights at community forums and debates.

Special Events

We organized meetings with volunteers, employees and medical staff, explained our position and sought their active support. They responded by writing letters to the editor, talking with patients, participating in marches and rallies, soliciting votes in person and over telephone, and driving elderly voters to the Polls.

Media Relations

A steady flow of news releases kept reporters interested and informed, and personal contact in the week prior to the election resulted in stories that focused on the possible loss of a local care giver in newspapers and on television. All reports included key messages, a limited number of media contacts in the area, personal and constant contact was maintained to build relationships and place stories. In anticipation of media inquiries, we media-trained Joseph Kiefer, Hospital administrator, to help him convey the Hospital's key messages in upcoming interviews. Periodic rehearsal sessions kept Mr. Kiefer's messages clear and fresh.

Collateral Material

Hundreds of tee-shirts were distributed to Hospital employees and volunteers, who wore them around town. Yard signs lined city streets --including the homes on both sides of the Mayor's house. Thousands of buttons were distributed to patients, their family members and friends, and banners greeted everyone driving past the Hospital.

Direct Mail

Four direct mailers were delivered to the homes of every registered voter in Tarpon Springs. Because our research revealed a large number of elderly, each direct mailer featured large, easy-to-read type and compelling headlines, such as "She's Been Here for You" and "What Would You Do Without Her?" They were intended to make a personal connection between the daily frustrations and struggles of elderly voters and the plight of their local Hospital.

EVALUATION

Objective: Conclusively demonstrate that the Foundation should continue to control healthcare in Tarpon Springs.

The referendum was rejected by a margin of nearly 3 to 1 -- 3,712 to 1,383; Forty one percent of the registered voters in Tarpon Springs cast ballots -a record for a referendum-only election. Standard & Poor's Healthcare upgraded Helen Ellis' bond rating from "negative" to "stable," saying -The Hospital's direction was clouded temporarily by a proposal to sell the Hospital, which was defeated recently at the polls.