NEW ORLEANS PUBLIC LIBRARY

MILLAGE CAMPAIGN
A LIBRARY AT A CROSSROADS

JOHN COTTON DANA AWARD APPLICATION
CATEGORY - PUBLIC LIBRARY
The New Orleans Public Library faced a financial crisis and was at a crossroads. A millage proposition (tax increase) was scheduled to appear on the May 2, 2015, ballot and the outcome would either allow for stabilized future funding and increased library services or create an overwhelming budget deficit resulting in a drastic cut in library services.

The Library could not actively encourage people to vote for the proposition, only inform the public of the election and its outcomes.

Concise messaging, consistent branding, and clearly defined target audiences were developed to create a cohesive and effective informational campaign that resulted in the proposition passing by a 75% margin.

“Whatever the cost of our libraries, the price is cheap compared to that of an ignorant nation.”

— Walter Cronkite
NEEDS ASSESSMENT:

THE NEW ORLEANS PUBLIC LIBRARY consists of 14 library locations and serves a population of 378,715 New Orleanians. With a city poverty rate of 29%, our libraries are more than a place for personal enrichment, they are a vital community resource, but our library system has been chronically underfunded for over 100 years. After Hurricane Katrina completely destroyed 6 libraries in 2005, and 90% of library staff were laid off, approximately $12M in unspent millage revenue accrued in budget reserves through 2011. In 2012, five large replacement libraries were opened creating a significant increase in operational expenses and $2.9M in reserve funds were used to meet the increased costs. Since 2012 we had to use approximately $3M from our reserves annually to compensate for our insufficient tax funded budget. Reserve funds were projected to be depleted in 2016 and without additional funding we would have had to make very grim and drastic decisions regarding how we served the community. The New Orleans Public Library was at a crossroads that would affect not only the future of the Library itself, but the future of many New Orleanians for years to come.

After years of stating to the New Orleans City Council that the Library was chronically underfunded and headed for a disaster, the council responded and placed a Library millage proposition on the May 2, 2015, ballot asking voters if they would support an increase of 2.5 mills for Library services. The results of the election would either allow us to stabilize our funding and increase our services or require us to devastate the Library. With such a clear distinction between the two outcomes, we crafted a “If Yes – If No” core message which we further developed into a graphic element that visually compounded the message.

_TARGET AUDIENCES_

By qualifying target audience members as those who were already either pro-library, or civically-minded and engaged within their community, we felt we could achieve maximum efficiency and effectiveness in both the delivery and impact of our message. Additionally, we felt that once our target audiences were informed about the election and its critical outcome they would then amplify our message to their circles of influence and provide the additional reach and frequency we couldn’t afford through traditional paid media.

Target Audiences:
- Library Staff
- Active Library Users
- Media
- Community Partners & Involved Neighbors

CRAFTING A CORE MESSAGE

We knew that we needed to quickly convey the serious consequences of the election results. Due to our financial situation there was no “status quo” post-election scenario. The election results would allow us to either improve the Library or require us to devastate it. With such a clear distinction between the two outcomes, we crafted a “If Yes – If No” core message which we further developed into a graphic element that visually compounded the message.

ADDITIONAL MESSAGING

With our core “If Yes – If No” message, we answered the questions of what would happen to the Library but we knew that we needed to proactively answer questions that our target audiences would likely ask.
- How much is this going to cost me?
- What is the Library’s current financial situation?
• Does anyone still use the library?
• Why do we need libraries?
• How much funding do other libraries receive?
• When and where is early voting and when is Election Day?

By answering these questions in a clear and concise manner, our target audiences would see the importance of voting in the millage proposition election. Answers to these questions were incorporated into all of our marketing materials.

IMPLEMENTATION:

With our goal of winning the election set, a commitment to a “keep it simple” target audiences and messaging strategy determined, we began developing the tactics to put our plan into motion.

MILLAGE BRANDING

Developing a millage proposition brand was extremely important to define and differentiate campaign elements from all other Library related marketing materials. A defined color palate and font were selected for all millage related materials.

COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

Our strategy was to not just inform our target audiences about the election, but to also increase library offering awareness and usage. We felt that anyone who knows all the library offered would be more inclined to support the proposition. We used a combination of the following communication channels:

• Internal Staff Learning Sessions
• Print Collateral
• Signage
• Digital Marketing – webpages, e-mail marketing
• Social Media
• Presentations
• Media Relations – editorial board meetings, interviews
• Outreach Opportunities – community meetings, farmers markets, festivals
• Promotional Products

CREATING AN INFORMED AND ENGAGED LIBRARY STAFF

The most valuable asset our Library has is our staff and we wanted to harness their enthusiasm for passing the millage proposition while encouraging them to continue to provide the outstanding service they always have. We wanted to ensure that every staff member was fully informed about the millage proposition so that they could confidently interact with people both within and outside of the library. We did this by utilizing the following communication channels:

• January 28, 2015 - All Staff Election Kickoff Meeting
• February 11, 18, 25, - Plan, Mobilize, Win Staff Meeting Series
• 45, 30, 15, & 3 Days Until Election Day Emails
• Election Day Countdown Flip Charts

REACHING LIBRARY USERS

Library users already knew the importance of the services that we provided. They had a positive perception of what a library does and they knew the value of the library not only to themselves, but the greater good the library provides the community. We didn’t need to convince this target audience of the libraries value, but we did need to ensure that they were registered to vote, were aware of early voting locations and dates and Election Day information. We provided election information to voters through the following ways:

• Print/Display Materials in all Library locations
• Voter Registration Events with the League of Women Voters
• Email Marketing
• Social Media

If Yes - If No Core Message

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| **What if the Proposition does not pass:**
| ↓35% Decrease in hours of operation
| – Close 7 of 14 libraries
| ↓Significant decrease in collection, programs, and technology funding

| Current Operation Level (will not continue after 2016) |
| --- | --- |
| **What if the Proposition passes:**
| ↑30% Increase in hours of operation
| +7 days a week service at 6 Libraries M-Th 10a-8p, F-Sa 10a-5p, and Su 1p-5p
| +6 days a week service at 9 Libraries M-Th 10a-8p, F-Sa 10a-5p
| +Increased investment in collection, programs, and technology
| +Re-open the Nora Navra Library in the 7th Ward (Renovation funds are already secured by FEMA)

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SERUING MEDIA COVERAGE

Without the benefit of a paid media budget we knew that gaining earned media coverage was critical to reaching our target audiences and beyond. Members of our Administrative Team met with editorial boards of every major print outlet in New Orleans, which resulted in unanimous media endorsements in favor of the proposition. The positive media coverage led to interviews of Library Staff by every local print publication, network television stations, and several local radio stations.

REACHING OUR COMMUNITY PARTNERS & INVOLVED NEIGHBORS

We knew that reaching Library Users who were already aware of our value was critical, but they were only a small percentage of registered voters. Gaining media coverage would help inform a large percentage of the population, but would they care enough to vote? We needed to reach more people, people who were invested in their relationships with us and in their communities. We felt that these people would be more inclined to vote in a way that was favorable to passing the proposition. Below are just a few of the examples of how we worked with community partners and neighborhood groups.

THE LISTENING POST - Library Edition

The Listening Post is a community conversation media project of the local NPR station, WWNO. During the week of April 20, 2015, the Listening Post asked and provided the answers they received to questions about the library. The topic received the largest response the Listening Post had ever received.

WWOZ BROADCAST - New Orleans Public Library Collection Broadcast

On Wednesday, April 1, 2015, WWOZ DJ George Ingmire dedicated his popular weekly “New Orleans Music Show” to the Library by only playing music that he checked out from his favorite library. He discussed the importance of libraries, talked about the proposition election, and asked listeners to call in and share their favorite library memory.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & OUTREACH

Working with the Mayor’s Office of Community Engagement, as well as through relationships and contacts from Library Staff, we attended and spoke at 278 neighborhood and community group meetings to inform attendees of the proposition election and answer any questions about it. In addition to attending formal meetings, over the course of the campaign, we made 1,299 contacts with individuals and local businesses, we set up library information booths at farmers markets, the New Orleans Po-Boy Festival, and the French Quarter Festival.

EVALUATION:

With the proposition passing by such a large margin, we are confident that our clear and concise message reached our target audiences:

Library Staff:
• Through in-person information sessions and regular campaign e-mail updates, library staff were informed and engaged in the election process.

Active Library Users:
• Active Library Users received informational brochures, saw signage at all library locations, and received millage related messages via e-mail and social media.

Media:
• The media heard our message and responded.
We received millage endorsements from all 7 local print publications and garnered 29 separate print, television, and radio stories.

Community Partners and Neighborhood Outreach
• Our staff members reached out to the community by attending 278 community meetings and making 1,299 individual contacts outside of the Library.

While we achieved our goal of winning the election, we also increased library awareness and usage during the election period:
• Circulation +7%
• Library computer sessions +3.7%
• Library visits +2%
• 1,695 new Facebook Likes