

Excellence Winners

The Eco Experience

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NEED/OPPORTUNITY / The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) is a state governmental agency that works with Minnesotans to protect, conserve and improve the environment, and enhance the quality of life. The MPCA uses regulation, assistance and education to protect the environment and people.

In addition to regulations, today's environmental problems demand a new approach that includes assistance and education to help individuals and businesses solve environmental issues before they become problems. Environmental education research shows that an environmentally literate population makes informed choices that positively impact the environment. Many remaining environmental problems are ones that are most influenced by individual behavior, such as air pollution from vehicles and water pollution from lawn fertilizers. People should learn how their actions influence the environment, and then take responsibility to make choices that reduce those impacts.

Toward the end of 2005, MPCA educator, Jeff Ledermann, approached the Minnesota State Fair with several ideas featuring sustainable activities that would demonstrate a new approach to protecting the environment. Fair managers were interested in plans for a comprehensive exhibit that would offer resources and ideas on a range of environmental topics—renewable energy, organic agriculture, transportation, green home building, gardening and recycling. State Fair staff liked the idea so much they became full partners in the exhibit. In February 2006, the Minnesota State Fair presented the MPCA with the opportunity to take over the Progress Center, which housed the Minnesota technology exhibits for the past several years, to showcase sustainable, “living green” activities.

The exhibit was named Eco Experience and was co-presented by the Minnesota State Fair and the MPCA. MPCA leaders fully supported the effort by providing staff support and funding. They saw it as an opportunity to solidify community partnerships while presenting environmental messages to a broad cross-section of the state's population. It was also a chance to further develop the new brand of the MPCA that emphasizes the role of education, outreach and prevention. Finally, the Eco Experience offered MPCA employees active roles in a positive, high-profile project, promoting staff engagement.

Intended Audiences/ The intended audience for the Eco Experience consisted of visitors at the Minnesota State Fair, which draws 1.7 million people each year. Minnesota State Fair guests come for entertainment, food and learning. The Minnesota State Fair dictated that exhibitors within the Progress Center could not sell anything; the sole purpose of the Eco Experience was to educate and inspire action.

Goals and Objectives/ The goals of the Eco Experience communication plan were to:

1. Work with partners to communicate key environmental messages and opportunities that will help tens of thousands of Minnesota citizens take responsibility for protecting their environment.
2. Work toward changing the environmental behaviors of as many fairgoers as possible by encouraging them to make commitments to take environmentally beneficial actions.
3. Present an image of the MPCA that is high-tech, effective, efficient and responsive to stakeholders, and disseminate important agency information.
4. Generate staff interest about, and involvement in, a shared outreach project.

Solution Overview/ Time was an important factor as the team worked to develop the Eco Experience. They were given the final OK from the State Fair in February 2006. They had six months to develop and implement a plan. As project manager, Jeff Ledermann received approval from MPCA leaders to assemble a team and a budget. The team met weekly to coordinate and communicate progress. The weekly meetings also included problem solving and turned out to be very productive in keeping work moving along.

The team included:

- Jeff Ledermann, project lead.
- Scott Andre, graphic artist and exhibit style design.
- Laurie Gustafson, media relations and web site content.
- Colleen Coyne, internal communications, senior leader liaison and media.
- Jennifer Groebner, coordinated the sustainability stage and staffing.
- Joan Heldt, budgeting, purchasing; recruiting and managing 200 external volunteers.
- Jeff Stuhr, on-site logistics.
- Jerome Davis, managed publications within the building.
- Matt Comstock, coordinated camera, computer, Internet and Web needs.

In addition, three supervisors were directly involved with the project: Rick Patraw, Liz Gelbmann and Sue Wiley.

The first order of business was to determine who to recruit to be part of the building. The Minnesota State Fair offered the space for no charge, but it was up to the team to determine who would participate and what the content of the messages within the building would be. They specifically targeted organizations that represented associations or larger groups of organizations that had the connections and resources to manage a specific topical area. With support and guidance from the MPCA, those partners were then empowered to design, develop and coordinate their topical area.

Communication with exhibitors and partners

After the layout of the building was determined and the exhibitors were chosen, the whole group met with State Fair officials three times during the summer to make sure each exhibitor was on track and understood their obligations and deadlines. In addition, the Minnesota State Fair helped by providing printing support and T-shirts to those staffing the building. Besides the full group meetings, members of the MPCA State Fair team were in regular contact with individual organizations as they developed their components. In addition, several e-mails were sent when deadlines approached, to serve as reminders of special dates. The team hosted a kickoff reception for exhibitors and partners the day before the State Fair opened as a preview to the exhibit.

Internal Communication

Several MPCA staff were recruited to help develop displays within the Eco Experience that were critical to the MPCA's goals, including water, air, and waste reduction and recycling. One track of communication involved coordinating efforts in developing the specific MPCA exhibits and messages. Another internal communication track involved recruiting volunteers to staff the Eco Experience. The team needed 300 MPCA staff to make sure there were enough people around the Eco Experience to create a good experience for visitors.

External Communication

External communications began in July. The team did not use advertising to promote the Eco Experience. They felt that it probably wasn't necessary because of the popularity of the State Fair. The State Fair promoted the Eco Experience heavily through their media efforts. The team retained Evans Larson to help support media efforts. They issued their first press release in July and their media kit in August. In addition, the MPCA distributed several press releases statewide to inform those outside the metro area about the Eco Experience. Evans Larson and many MPCA staff also maximized established relationships with media and made direct contacts with others to solicit story placement.

The team also recruited people outside of the MPCA as volunteers to staff the Eco Experience. They posted a request on www.ecoexperience.org, sent a notice through the MPCA's Minnesota Sustainable Communities Network and sent e-mails to those who had previously volunteered for another event they plan called the Living Green Expo. In all, 200 external volunteers were recruited.

Implementation and Challenges/ The largest exhibit component at the Eco Experience involved the installation of a 123-foot, 13,500-pound wind turbine blade outside the Progress Center, the building that houses the Eco Experience. This marks the first time that this type of blade was installed vertically in the U.S. and required significant communication, leadership, negotiation, engineering and partnerships to make it happen.

The effort was led by Windustry, a nonprofit association that focuses on education about wind development, and the installation was managed by M.A. Mortenson Company, the country's premier wind project management firm. Many other organizations contributed thousands of dollars and hours of staff time, almost all of it in-kind, to complete the project before the fair started in late August. As with the rest of the Eco Experience, the turbine blade project didn't really get started until March of 2006.

The biggest challenge most of these organizations had was staffing their areas for 12 days, 12 hours each day. Many of them tapped their networks of volunteers, but the MPCA stepped in to help some of the smaller, nonprofit organizations that were particularly struggling with this issue to work out a system to provide external volunteers to staff those exhibits. Tapping into and increasing an existing network of agency volunteers, the MPCA was able to coordinate and provide an additional 200 volunteers to the effort.

Eco Experience exhibit partners had virtually no money set aside when the project was given the green light in February 2006. Through extensive communication, negotiation and solicitation, the 140 Eco Experience partners, including the Minnesota State Fair, contributed over US\$1 million, most of it in-kind services, toward the development of the Eco Experience.

Budget

The MPCA spent almost US\$179,000 on the Eco Experience. Expenses included supplies, contractors, posters, graphics and specific exhibits. With this year's 350,000 estimated attendance, the MPCA spent about 31 cents, or 20 percent less than the cost of a postage stamp, on each individual who visited the Eco Experience.

Measurement/Evaluation/ By all measures, the Eco Experience was a success. The building drew 350,000 attendees during its 12-day run, and took advantage of mutually beneficial partnerships with more than 140 businesses and organizations. State Fair officials said that the building was the second biggest draw on the grounds, and perhaps responsible in part for a 50,000-person uptick in attendance that included two new daily attendance records. The team garnered over 23 million media impressions with an advertising value of US\$2.5 million. Almost everyday of the Fair, the Eco Experience received some kind of media attention from newspapers, radio and TV.

Goal 1: Partnerships with exhibitors. Twenty-eight exhibitors and dozens of other partners, including such organizations as the Science Museum of Minnesota and Organic Valley, worked cooperatively to make the Eco Experience happen. Almost all of the exhibit partners rated their Fair experience as "excellent," and all of them have asked to return next year. Even businesses only tangentially related to the Eco

Experience found the project compelling (go to <http://www.bannercreations.com/>). The eight building topic hubs (water, wind, solar, transportation, hydrogen, green buildings, waste reduction—reduce, reuse and recycle—and healthy local food) represented a range of key environmental messages that resonated with fairgoers and encouraged many of them to cite actions they could take to become more responsible stewards of the environment.

Goal 2: Promote behavior change. While behavior change is difficult, studies show that making a verbal or written commitment to take action greatly increases the chances of follow-through. Exit surveys show that 98 percent of attendees sampled found the building “very” or “somewhat” interesting. Of those surveyed—most of whom “just wandered in” to the building—89 percent took away one environmental action that they said they would apply to their daily lives. A number of staff shared that their involvement with the Eco Experience made them feel proud to work at the agency. Also, via the “Make a Difference” environmental commitment cards, the team has built a database of about 4,000 attendees for potential future outreach. Most of these fairgoers checked off four environmental actions, ranging from increasing their recycling and composting rates to driving and idling less, that they agreed to try at home.

Goal 3: Positive feedback from participants. Feedback from surveys of volunteers, staff, exhibitors and Fair officials show that the MPCA was represented in a professional, effective and efficient manner at the Eco Experience. Anecdotal evidence from fairgoers showed that many visitors were “wowed” by the building, particularly the wind turbine blade/wind exhibits, the eco-home, the high-tech vehicles, the hydrogen exhibit and “trash mountain.” The MPCA’s 300 staff and 200 external volunteers talked with thousands of fairgoers, and distributed about 100,000 copies of agency publications during the 12 days of the fair. Many of these publications addressed the MPCA’s important water and air quality priorities.

Goal 4: Staff interest and involvement. The team held two pre-fair, all-staff events and one follow-up, all-staff party, and sent several e-mails, e-news notes and “hot news” pieces informing staff about the Eco Experience. An all-staff survey has helped them learn more about not only the experiences that staff had at the Fair, but whether or not staff felt sufficiently “in the know” about Fair outreach. This survey is helping the team plan their internal communication for the coming years.

The Eco Experience project team successfully met all of its goals for 2006. The MPCA has a three-year commitment to organize the Eco Experience. The “lessons learned” debriefs have helped pinpoint areas of improvement for next year. Most of the changes are operational in nature, such as who will be invited back to next year’s exhibit and reorganizing the building to help the flow.

Since the Minnesota State Fair ended in September, the Eco Experience has been honored by two organizations. The International Association of Fairs and Expositions honored the Minnesota State Fair for the Eco Experience with two Awards of Excellence at its 116th Annual Convention held in Las Vegas in December 2006. The Western Fairs Association honored the Minnesota State Fair for The Eco Experience with two industry awards at its annual convention held January in Reno, Nevada.

