

Antarctica Marathon Media Relations

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Need/Opportunity / Capella University seized the opportunity to be the first and sole sponsor of the Antarctica Marathon and successfully communicated the experience via a comprehensive media relations campaign to media outlets around the globe. As a fully online university, Capella has students of all ages and backgrounds from all 50 U.S. states and more than 50 countries around the world. Capella's market research has shown that its students are early adopters of new technologies and are ambitious achievers who typically pursue a healthy lifestyle, including running. Based on that research, a strategy was developed to sponsor marathons as a way to expose likely students to Capella and to associate the university with active, healthy lifestyles. When the opportunity to sponsor the 2007 Antarctica Marathon presented itself (the event, which has been held eight times, has never had a sponsor before), Capella made the bold decision to be the sole sponsor. With this sponsorship came the opportunity to choose three of Capella's students to run the marathon, thereby reinforcing Capella's key messages that a person can attend Capella from literally anywhere in the world, and that Capella's students are active and ambitious achievers. The sponsorship also provided an opportunity to reinforce the key message that Capella is a technologically advanced organization with the ability to use technology to communicate—and more importantly educate—from anywhere in the world.

Intended Audiences / Capella University's decision to sponsor the 2007 Antarctica Marathon was based on extensive market research the university conducted that showed Capella students were typically ambitious, high-achieving professionals who had healthy, active lifestyles and were particularly involved in running. Demographically, Capella students are typically working adults in their 30s and 40s, of which approximately 66 percent are women. Those demographics align well with the demographics of marathon runners.

Based on this research, the communication team decided that the primary audience for the media relations activities related to Capella's sponsorship of the Antarctica Marathon would be professional adults who were considering continuing their education and who had healthy, active lifestyles. That primary audience was subsequently broken down into more specific sub-audiences based on several factors:

- **Health and human services professionals:** This is a key market for Capella's School of Human Services. In addition, two of the three Capella students selected to run the Antarctica Marathon work and are pursuing degrees in this field. Therefore, Capella decided to use the inspiring stories of those student runners to target professionals in the health and human services field.
- **Higher education and K–12 teachers and administrators:** This is another key market for Capella, and as Capella is an educational institution, it made sense to share the Antarctica Marathon experience with other educators.
- **IT professionals and early adopters of technology:** Because of the significant technological challenges that had to be overcome to transmit videos, audio and photos of the marathon to media outlets around the world, as well as the need to use cutting edge and never-before-tried satellite technologies, IT professionals and those interested in technology were selected as target audiences. Those audiences also align with Capella's significant offering of technology-related degrees.
- **Running enthusiasts/marathoners.**

- **Military personnel:** This is another key market for Capella, as nearly 15 percent of its students are members of the military. Also, one of the three Capella students selected to run the Antarctica Marathon is a Marine who served three tours of duty in Iraq. Therefore, Capella decided to use his story to target members of the military who may be interested in continuing their education while serving their country.
- **Women ages 30–50:** a key demographic for Capella.

Goals and Objectives / Capella identified the following key objective for its sponsorship of the Antarctica Marathon: Drive increased awareness of, and affinity for, Capella and online learning among working adult professionals who have active, healthy lifestyles. This objective is aligned with the overall future business objective of increasing enrollments among professional, working adults seeking a graduate level education by increasing their awareness of, and affinity for, Capella. Specifically, Capella set a target of 1.5 million impressions, and US\$200,000 worth of media mentions of Capella related to the Antarctica Marathon, with each mention including at least two of the designated key messages (see below). The time frame for meeting these specific goals was August 2006 through the end of March 2007.

Specific financial outcomes for Capella were not identified as part of the goal and objectives development since the objective identified focused on building awareness (building the foundation for future enrollments). However, the team did set an objective of raising aided brand awareness of Capella by 5 percent among the target audiences.

Solution Overview / A key component of Capella's sponsorship of the 2007 Antarctica Marathon involved holding a contest to select three of Capella's students to travel to Antarctica and participate in the race. These students were selected through an essay contest that asked them to explain what challenges they overcame in their lives. The students eventually selected had incredibly inspiring and media-friendly stories: One received a Purple Heart after being wounded by a roadside bomb in Iraq, one lost 150 pounds through a commitment to running and healthy eating, and one is a recent cancer survivor who had to learn to walk again after breaking her neck in a car accident. Needless to say, all of their stories had significant potential to interest the media. And most important, they would all be continuing their studies at Capella both on the Russian ice-breaker ship to Antarctica, and even while in Antarctica.

During the months prior to the marathon, Capella pitched the story of its unique sponsorship and the stories of its three student runners to dozens of feature/lifestyle and health and fitness writers and editors at a variety of national consumer print publications, broadcast outlets, and web sites (including *Outside*, *Men's Health*, *Men's Journal*, *Shape*, *Self*, *Fitness*, *Runner's World*, *USA Today*, the Associated Press, *Parade*, *Reader's Digest*, *People* and many more). Those pitches also directed reporters and editors to the training blogs that Capella set up for each of the student runners, as well as to an overall Antarctic Marathon web site that Capella developed. In addition to arranging media interviews with the student runners and university representatives prior to the marathon, Capella also organized satellite phone interviews between members of the media and the Capella runners from Antarctica on the day of the race for live radio and broadcast coverage.

On the day of the marathon itself, the video crew Capella brought along to Antarctica produced and distributed a video package of highlights of the race (including shots and interviews of Capella's runners under Capella race signage) for a domestic feed that day to broadcast outlets nationwide (that feed also included b-roll of Capella students studying on board, footage of the marathon course, including glaciers and penguins, and the winner crossing the finish line). Never

in the history of the Antarctica Marathon had same-day video of the race been available to the media. New satellite technology allowed this to be possible for the first time in 2007.

An audio bite line for use in radio broadcasts nationwide was also developed; the bite line included sound bites from a Capella spokesperson, Capella student runners, and the marathon organizer—all of which were infused with the following key messages:

- Capella students can pursue an advanced degree literally any time, from anywhere in the world—even Antarctica.
- Capella students are motivated, ambitious achievers who will go to the ends of the earth to fulfill their educational dreams.
- Capella is a technologically forward thinking and ambitious organization.
- Capella is a university that accommodates the needs of working adults who live active, healthy lifestyles.

In addition to the training blogs authored by the student runners, Capella leveraged another type of social media by launching two podcasts related to the marathon: one featuring an interview with the marathon founder describing the experience of running 26 miles in Antarctica and the other with a satellite expert discussing the significant technical challenges of broadcasting from Antarctica and how Capella was overcoming them.

Throughout the process, Capella's key stakeholders were involved with the campaign development and were kept abreast of how the initiative proceeded. Those stakeholders included the founder and CEO of Capella, Capella University's president, the deans of Capella's five schools, and dozens of Capella's marketing and IT staff. All of Capella's 16,000-plus students were invited to enter the contest for a chance to run the marathon, and approximately 50 students submitted an essay. All of the students were then kept informed about the adventure via videos and text updates on Capella's external web site, intranet sites, and the student runner's blogs. The end result was a shared experience that proved to be something the whole university could rally behind—incredibly positive, morale boosting and exciting for Capella students in Antarctica and at home alike.

Implementation and Challenges / Capella's project budget for the sponsorship of the marathon and all media relations activities was US\$125,000. This included the cost of the actual sponsorship; travel expenses for Capella staff, students and a video crew to travel to Antarctica for the marathon; and the purchase and rental of satellite equipment to send video, photos and reports of the marathon back to media outlets. Capella chose to use a group of former video journalists (who were much more experienced with this type of shoot and far less expensive than corporate video producers) to accompany them on the trip. They also selected a satellite expert/technician who was willing to provide all technical support needed on the trip free of charge in exchange for the chance to visit Antarctica.

As the marathon took place on 26 February 2007, on King George Island, just off the Antarctic Peninsula, Capella began developing its media relations campaign in earnest in mid-2006 and continued through March 2007.

The most significant challenge associated with this event was conquering the technological limitations that came with sending videos/photos and other data back from Antarctica; prior to 2007, the marathon organizer's had never been able to send same-day photos or videos of the race to news outlets. However, just months prior to the 2007 marathon, a new satellite was launched that—in theory—would allow for video, photos and audio to be sent back the same day. After

extensive research and interviews with various satellite experts, Capella felt confident that they could make this new satellite technology work and be the first to provide same day footage of the race to news outlets worldwide. Through much experimentation, consultation and use of never-before tried technologies and equipment, Capella's efforts paid off, and the team was indeed able to share the experience of the Antarctica Marathon—and Capella's involvement—with news outlets across the globe. This technological achievement itself proved to be a story with several IT-focused media.

Measurement/Evaluation / In connection with the objective to drive awareness of Capella among working adults who live an active lifestyle, the team tracked and evaluated the media coverage Capella received before, during and after the event. The team set a goal of 1.5 million impressions, and US\$200,000 worth of media mentions. Capella exceeded that goal with more than 2 million impressions and US\$215,000 worth of media mentions. Some of the more notable media to cover the race and Capella's involvement include *Time*, the *Houston Chronicle*, the *Star Tribune*, ESPN, and Reuters.

The Antarctica Marathon web site created by Capella (www.capella.edu/antarcticamarathon) and the blogs authored by Capella's student runners received more than 10,000 visits, more than doubling the goal of 4,000 visits.

Most important, Capella's sponsorship of the Antarctica Marathon met the objective of boosting awareness of Capella among the intended audience.

In summary, Capella's sponsorship of the Antarctica Marathon and the media relations proved to be a success and was valued by Capella leadership, staff and students alike.