Minnesota’s Greatest Generation
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NEED/OPPORTUNITY / The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs estimates that more than 1,100 veterans of World War II pass away daily. Included in this astounding figure are individuals from Minnesota’s own “Greatest Generation”—those born between 1910 and 1929, who grew up during the Great Depression, came of age during the Second World War and participated in the boom that followed the war.

With so many members of this generation passing—only 75,000 of the 300,000 Minnesotans who served in World War II are alive today—quick action was required to preserve their invaluable stories. The Minnesota Historical Society and Fedoruk & Associates Inc. recognized the important role they could play in collecting, preserving, and sharing the stories of this generation to educate, inform, and inspire current and future generations.

In August 2005, the Minnesota Historical Society marked the 60th anniversary of the end of the second World War by launching the MGG project—a comprehensive, four-year campaign to explore the life and legacy of Minnesota’s “Greatest Generation.”

The MGG project is the largest and most comprehensive project in the society’s history. It included an oral history project, preservation workshops, an interactive web site, a three-year documentary film competition, publications, educational outreach efforts, public programs and a collecting initiative. The exhibit, “Minnesota’s Greatest Generation: The Depression, The War, The Boom,” which opened at the Minnesota History Center on 23 May 2009, was the culmination and capstone of this project.

RESEARCH
The Society researched other organizations and projects around the U.S. that related to the “Greatest Generation.” The Society suspected that public history institutions had exhausted the subject because of the nearly universal public recognition of the phrase “Greatest Generation.” However, the Society discovered that while several history museums had mounted exhibits on the subject, the central theme of many was the Second World War.

In the summer of 2006, the Society conducted a survey designed to test their visitors’ associations with and interest in the subject of the “Greatest Generation.” The survey confirmed widespread familiarity with the term and strong associations with the Depression and World War II. The survey also showed a high level of interest in the subject of “generations” in general.
Additional research, coupled with the Society’s experience, revealed that personal narratives provide a more powerful window for museum visitors to look through when examining broader themes and events in local, national and world history.

Based on these findings, the society determined that “Minnesota’s Greatest Generation: The Depression, The War, The Boom” would differ from other similar exhibits in three significant ways. First, while the war would remain a major focus of the exhibit, the overall subject would be the entire life arc of a generation—from birth to death. Second, Minnesota’s “Greatest Generation” would not be defined exclusively by their military experience. Instead, their lives would be explored on a wider spectrum. Last, the generation’s stories would be told by members of the generation themselves through the use of recorded interviews, archival footage, film and audio collected by the society during hours of oral history interviews.

This approach resulted in an exhibit unlike any other in the country. It offered an extraordinary opportunity to experience Minnesota and U.S. history in the 1930s, ’40s and ’50s, and that era’s legacy in the present day, with a focus that remains not on events but on the people themselves. “Minnesota’s Greatest Generation: The Depression, The War, The Boom” was developed with the vision to:

- Document and share the defining events of the 20th century as the members of Minnesota’s “Greatest Generation” experienced them, focusing on the key decades of the 1930s, ’40s and ’50s.
- Explore the life arc of a single generation via a story-driven exhibit through first-person narratives drawn from oral history interviews, published memoirs, reminiscences and letters.
- Create an intergenerational experience that encourages families to document and preserve their family histories.

INTENDED AUDIENCES / Minnesotans living in the seven-county Twin Cities metropolitan area were the primary audience, including the society’s 19,000 members. While the Twin Cities metro accounts for 60 percent of the state’s population, 81 percent of visitors to the Minnesota History Center are traditionally from this area.

Minnesota residents outside the Twin Cities metropolitan area, including members of county historical societies, were identified as a second, significant audience. A third audience encompassed residents in neighboring states, including North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa and Wisconsin.

These three audiences were further broken down into members of Minnesota’s “Greatest Generation”: their families and friends, families with children, veterans, history enthusiasts, and educational groups.

Additional audiences included Minnesota’s broadcast, print and online media, with a specific focus on features, arts, entertainment and history beat reporters. This audience was identified for its ability to reach the other audiences to promote the exhibit opening, convey key messages and tell the stories of the exhibit subjects.
**GOALS AND OBJECTIVES** / Goals for the MGG exhibit opening campaign were to:

- Raise awareness of the important work of the Society, including the exhibit opening and all components of the MGG project.
- Raise awareness of the innovative elements and state-of-the-art techniques used throughout the exhibit and during the MGG project.
- Share the history of Minnesota’s “Greatest Generation” with citizens statewide.

The objectives included the following:

- Generate promotional print, online and broadcast publicity for the society and all components of the “Minnesota’s Greatest Generation: The Depression, The War The Boom” opening, including exhibit subjects, opening weekend festivities and the Memorial Day celebration.
- Increase attendance to the exhibit opening and weekend festivities over similar exhibits recently opened at the Minnesota History Center.
- Enhance and expand the society’s collections, including items for research and exhibition, and oral histories.

**SOLUTION OVERVIEW** / The members of Minnesota’s “Greatest Generation” featured in the exhibit were identified as the society’s strongest resource, as many of them were still living and members of other generations could easily connect their stories and experiences to people in their own lives.

Fedoruk & Associates Inc. and the society recognized the strong parallels between the experiences of MGG and current times. Citizens were coping with one of the greatest recessions since the Great Depression; the nation was fighting the “War on Terrorism” on two fronts and non-stop waves of technological advances, such as social media and devices like PDAs, were changing the landscape at an increasingly rapid pace. These similarities would be used to emphasize the importance of listening to and learning from the lives and legacies of Minnesota’s “Greatest Generation” as resources and guides to navigating current challenges.

The timing of the exhibit opening was seen as an advantage. With the recession forcing many families to reevaluate their summer vacation plans and look for options closer to home, the family-friendly focus of the exhibit and the opening weekend events presented an excellent opportunity to position the Minnesota History Center as a destination for families planning summer outings. The military connection to both the Memorial Day Weekend opening and the focus of the exhibit also served as an excellent way to connect past and current events.

The team focused on the media relations campaign, placing a high priority on securing stories in print, broadcast and online media to build anticipation about the exhibit’s opening. They highlighted the personalities featured in the exhibit and positioned it as a destination for families. Media kits as well as “sneak peek” events kept members of the
media engaged and updated on the progress and content of the exhibit. Outreach to hometown media outlets of the exhibit personalities spread the message to communities around the state.

The society also conducted outreach to its members and donors to thank them for supporting the MGG project, to build anticipation about the exhibit opening, and to encourage members to attend opening weekend events.

**KEY MESSAGES**

- The Minnesota Historical Society is leading the nation with an innovative initiative that brings together multiple generations to capture and share history for future generations.
- As our nation continues to sift through current hardships, it’s comforting to know others that have endured similar trials. Now is the time to listen to the stories and learn from the experiences of Minnesota’s “Greatest Generation.”
- “Minnesota’s Greatest Generation: The Depression, The War, The Boom” is a highly moving, interactive exhibit that weaves together the personal and shared history of an era.
- The exhibit features the insights and experiences of this remarkable generation, as told by the members of the “Greatest Generation” themselves.
- It traces the entire life arc of this pivotal generation—from birth to legacy—in a comprehensive and educational manner unlike anything else at other history centers or educational institutions across the nation.
- Visitors have the extraordinary opportunity to experience a vast sweep of U.S. history from the 1920s to the present day.

**TACTICS**

The media relations campaign led by Fedoruk & Associates Inc. included the following elements:

- **Long-lead media kit:** highlighting all elements of the MGG project to local, regional and national media contacts with an emphasis on the exhibit opening.
- **Short-lead media kit:** focusing on the exhibit opening, including the surrounding events targeted to local, regional and national short lead media contacts. The kit included an exhibit floor plan to build anticipation.
- **Sneak-preview media events:** offering the media behind-the-scenes looks at the construction and completion of the exhibit, including:
  - A load-in event featuring several of the large-scale objects being placed in the exhibit gallery.
  - Behind-the-scenes tours of the exhibit under construction a month before the opening.
  - A media preview of the completed exhibit held before the opening with a separate preview time for local bloggers.
Media outreach: focusing on major Twin Cities news outlets, such as the *Star Tribune, Pioneer Press* and *Minneapolis St. Paul Magazine* to secure interviews with exhibit personalities and Society spokespeople. Fedoruk & Associates Inc. also targeted other specialty publications relevant to the target audiences, such as *Minnesota Legionnaire, Minnesota Good Age* and *Minnesota Parent*. Fedoruk & Associates Inc. prepared interview subjects with key messages and provided media coaching when needed.

Hometown media outreach: focusing on outlets in the exhibit personalities’ hometowns to promote the local connections and secure features about their compelling human-interest stories.

National outreach: focusing on spreading the visibility of the society and the exhibit through stories with national print, broadcast and online outlets.

IMPLEMENTATION AND CHALLENGES / BUDGET
The total communication budget for the opening of “Minnesota’s Greatest Generation: The Depression, The War, The Boom” was US$210,000. The budget included US$15,000 for public relations, US$155,000 for advertising and US$20,000 for collateral materials. The remaining US$20,000 was allocated to administrative needs and costs associated with the exhibit’s opening, including community outreach and group tours. This budget was the largest spent for the opening of an exhibit produced by the Society, but was less than half of the US$560,000 budget allocated to promote the most recent and highly lauded Smithsonian traveling exhibit, “Vatican Splendors,” in 2008.

TIME LINE
Fedoruk & Associates Inc. conducted media outreach to local, regional and national media outlets from January through June 2009. In March, outreach to hometown media outlets of exhibit personalities began and continued through the exhibit opening. To increase the visibility and raise the profile of the exhibit opening, the Society secured broadcast partnerships with the Twin Cities’ NBC affiliate, KARE 11, and the CBS radio affiliate, WCCO Radio.

- 29 January 2009: The first sneak preview event, featuring the load-in of large artifacts to the exhibit gallery, was held at the History Center.
- February 2009: The long-lead media kit was mailed to outlets to account for most magazines’ three-month lead time.
- April 2009: The short-lead media kit was mailed to provide six weeks of lead time.
- 23 April 2009: Behind-the-scenes media sneak-preview tours were held exactly one month before the exhibit opened.
- May/June 2009: The Society ran ads in several Twin Cities publications, including the *Star Tribune, Pioneer Press, Minnesota Monthly, Minneapolis./St. Paul* and *WHERE Twin Cities* magazines in the weeks leading up to and following the opening to promote the exhibit and surrounding events. Broadcast ads also ran on KARE 11 television station, and the Society underwrote messages on WCCO Radio and Minnesota Public Radio.
• 20–21 May 2009: The Society hosted donor events to preview the exhibit.
• 21 May 2009: The final “sneak peek” event invited members of the media to preview the completed exhibit before it opened to the public. A separate event was held later in the day for local bloggers with members of the Society’s social media staff.
• 21 May 2009: The Society tied the exhibit opening into their popular Retrorama event, which was created as part of the MGG project and focused on pop culture in the 1930s, ’40s and ’50s. Retrorama attendees were the first members of the public to preview the exhibit.
• 23–25 May 2009: “Minnesota’s Greatest Generation: The Depression, The War, The Boom” opened at the History Center on Memorial Day weekend, and the Society hosted three days of special events.
  o Family days (Saturday and Sunday): The events featured workshops; performances; cooking demonstrations; history players and historic re-enactors; games and craft stations; presentations by Society staff members; and “Greatest Generation” experts, short plays, and documentary screenings.
  o Memorial Day: The day led off with an honor and remembrance ceremony with a World War II aircraft flyover, performances of World War II-era songs and a color guard ceremony. Following the ceremony, the society hosted a panel discussion with World War II veterans, as well as musical performances, cooking demonstrations, and the opportunity join “Operation Minnesota Nice” in assembling care packages for active servicemen and women overseas.

CHALLENGES
One of the biggest challenges the Minnesota Historical Society faced with the “Greatest Generation” was time. A large portion of the generation had already passed away, and many remaining members struggle with declining health. Documenting stories through oral history interviews often required members of the Society to go to the members of the generation.
To account for some of the health challenges faced by members of the generation attending the exhibit, the society included captions and audio descriptions for all the multimedia components. Rest stations were included throughout the exhibit gallery to provide visitors with places for both physical and emotional rest and reflection.

Another challenge was the fact that many members of the generation never discussed their wartime experiences with anyone following the war. Through research and experience, the Society discovered that members of the generation often found it easier to discuss difficult memories with their grandchildren instead of their children. To take advantage of this opportunity, the Society created school programs that taught students how to record oral history interviews and paired them up with members of the generation to document their experiences.
MEASUREMENT/EVALUATION OF OUTCOMES / The opening of “Minnesota’s Greatest Generation: The Depression, The War, The Boom” exhibit successfully met and exceeded established program objectives.

- The exhibit opening received a level of media coverage unmatched since the opening of the Minnesota History Center in October 1992.
  - Media outreach resulted in more than 290 print, online and broadcast stories across the U.S. with total media impressions conservatively estimated at more than 42 million.
  - More than 40 television clips provided more than US$83,000 in publicity value.
  - Nearly half of the 70 broadcast clips featured interviews with exhibit personalities or Society staff members.
  - The Star Tribune ran two feature articles featuring exhibit personalities and included the exhibit opening in a feature article about Memorial Day. The Pioneer Press and Minneapolis/St. Paul Magazine each ran feature articles with quotes from exhibit personalities and Society staff.
  - The large artifact load-in “sneak peek” event was covered by three of the four television network affiliates: KARE 11, WCCO and KSTP. It resulted in features in the Star Tribune, Pioneer Press, Minnesota Legionnaire and an article from The Associated Press that ran in 19 local outlets around the region, including outlets in North Dakota and Wisconsin. The event produced more than 6.9 million media impressions.
- In terms of attendance, this is the most successful homegrown exhibit ever opened at the Minnesota History Center. It beat overall attendance numbers for all traveling exhibits, with the exception of “Vatican Splendors”—which had more than double the marketing budget.
  - The Minnesota History Center averaged 1,201 visitors per day during the exhibit’s opening weekend, an increase over the two major exhibits that opened at the History Center in 2008. Visitors per day increased 26 percent compared to the opening of Vatican Splendors (955) and 53 percent from MN150 (787).
  - The exhibit opening week attendance of 7,170 visitors to the Minnesota History Center on Memorial Day weekend was up 92 percent from 3,738 in 2008.
  - The attendance of 55,827 visitors to the Minnesota History Center during the summer months of June, July and August was also up 92 percent from 29,101 in 2008.
- The society’s collections were expanded with:
  - One hundred four objects collected before the exhibit opening and 14 collected since, for a total of 118 objects.
Prior to the exhibit opening, 1,192 stories from members of the generation were collected via the “Share Your Stories” database on the Society’s web site. Since the opening, 140 stories have been collected for a total of 1,332. Stories from “Share Your Stories” have been viewed more than 210,000 times.