**BP Oil Spill Response**

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**NEED/OPPORTUNITY**

On 20 April 2010, an explosion led to a gushing oil leak that devastated tourism in the coastal region of Louisiana. By 15 July, the leak was capped, but the perceptions of pollution continued to threaten Louisiana’s US$9.4 billion tourism industry. A study by Oxford Economics projected the spill could cost the Gulf Coast US$22.7 billion in tourism revenue over the next three years. The study suggested an aggressive and comprehensive response effort could reduce the economic impact by US$7.5 billion.

A study by Greater New Orleans Inc. revealed gross losses to the economy of Louisiana could be between US$285 million and US$428 million from 2011–2013. These losses would contribute to the loss of between 2,700 and 4,000 full time-equivalent jobs and lost employee earnings of between US$68 million and US$103 million.

LOT commissioned DC to forge its response campaign. DC was charged with responding to the media whirlwind, the dissemination of facts—despite powerful imagery propagating misperceptions—and the proactive preservation of the Pelican State’s tourism industry, which generates US$850 million annually in tax revenue. Since the oil spill started in April and LOT did not solicit DC until July, the limited time frame posed many challenges. Within just 24 hours of LOT’s request for a response strategy, DC developed an outline. This outline served as a foundation for the strategic plan that was fleshed out the following week.

**RESEARCH**

To craft a strategic response, DC conducted media audits of oil spill coverage and a comprehensive best practices assessment of the Exxon Valdez spill, the 9/11 attacks, Tennessee flooding and Hurricane Katrina response. These analyses informed the development of the response. The team audited the tone, spokespeople and geography of prominent media coverage to guide the language and approach of the media relations outreach. The best practices document revealed a host of tactics for engaging the media and target audiences.

DC’s research was complimented with several reports, including the New Orleans Convention and Visitors Bureau’s media coverage report and LOT’s perception surveys and tourism forecasts. These data indicated a grim future for Louisiana tourism. Public perception of the state’s tourism assets were plummeting. Fifty-seven percent of respondents believed shrimp cost more because oil had to be cleaned from them before they were sold—a complete falsehood. These alarming statistics shaped messaging and allowed the team to identify specific misperceptions interfering with tourism in Louisiana.

Once the misperceptions were identified, an important priority of the campaign was to overwhelm the misperceptions with the truth. The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries and the Louisiana Seafood and Marketing Promotion Board continuously posted valuable reports of the oil conditions, oyster closures, fishing restrictions, seafood safety and the
impact on the seafood industry. DC shared this content with the media to counter the powerful images suggesting Louisiana was completely covered in crude oil.

Additionally, the team collected anecdotal reports on the conditions of the affected parish from Convention and Visitors Bureau directors and the Louisiana Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority. They secured an accurate status of tourism assets and realized nearly all tourism experiences were available across the state regardless of the spill.

During the implementation of the campaign, DC produced more than 160 daily media audits, key messages and weekly stakeholder reports for distribution to its network of more than 1,100 partners. These daily media audits and weekly reports not only provided daily updates to a vast network of key influencers but also operated as a vehicle for feedback from individuals directly engaged in the situation. A presentation was developed and delivered to a variety of different audiences across the region, including the Louisiana Travel Promotion Association, the Public Relations Association of Louisiana and the Florida Public Relations Association. The presentation was another tool designed to facilitate the distribution of messaging and garner direct feedback. DC relied on this feedback to shape the direction of its campaign and distribute the most up-to-date content available. By the end of December, the team updated their messaging document 29 times to reflect the changes in the situation.

INTENDED AUDIENCE(S)
The primary audience for the campaign was travel consumers 35–54 years of age, with annual household incomes of more than US$50,000 who travel domestically more than four times a year. This audience tends to skew female—since most women make household decisions. The team targeted meeting planners, golfers, outdoor enthusiasts, historians, casino gamers and culinary travelers. While the campaign focused on national media, the team reinforced their coverage with concentrated media outreach in drive-in and direct-flight markets as well as occasional international outreach.

Online travel consumers were an audience of particular interest. Research indicates Louisiana visitors book a majority of their trips online. Forty-eight percent of trips to Louisiana are booked online compared to 36 percent of trips booked off-line through travel agents. Engaging customers as close to the purchasing point as possible would increase the influence of messaging.

As the oil spill story evolved and changed in the media, DC made it a priority to inform Louisiana tourism industry stakeholders and leaders about the changes that could affect the industry. The team facilitated the distribution of important information, supplied talking points and developed procedures for potential threats. As an example of a potential threat, they drafted LOT’s protocol for responding to a hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico while oil was still leaking.

The media was another high-priority audience. To engage them, DC’s media relations efforts adhered to a specific set of criteria. The criteria incorporated elements of topicality, timeliness, localization, humanization and visuality into outreach. Prioritized media included international and national markets; local/regional markets, specifically in drive-in markets; direct-flight
markets; trade publications; special interest publications such as culinary, restaurant and travel/tourism; and social and digital media.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES
The response orchestrated and implemented by DC strove to preserve Louisiana tourism despite the devastating oil spill coverage and to boost tourism once the leak was sealed. Objectives were to:

- Meet or exceed the most successful previous LOT project return on investment of 35.1 to 1.
- Garner accurate media coverage that conveys the tourism assets readily available in Louisiana to at least 65 million impressions and to generate more than US$24 million in total coverage.
- Diminish the economic impact on the tourism industry by correcting false perceptions that became prevalent in the media between July and December.

SOLUTION OVERVIEW
The core of DC’s approach was an immersive, 360-degree messaging strategy. The strategy was a multifaceted and comprehensive approach to connecting the interests of Louisiana tourism to the demands of the media and the concerns of the most important publics. Key messages were created for both short-term and long-term consideration of the situation. The messages emphasized that the majority of tourist areas were open for business and minimally affected by the spill.

The messaging strategy provided a 10-day forecast of what messages, updates and focus areas would be the focus of messaging and promotional activities. There was also a rapid response strategy to respond to breaking news issues and media inquiries about the state and its situation. The proactive 10-day plan was adjusted in response to changes.

The messaging strategy operated from a proactive position that managed the media’s discussion with a unifying voice. As a proactive plan, the strategy worked to not only conceive, construct and share stories but also rapidly respond and frame stories as they developed. Within the proactive control position, impacted and non-impacted locations were delineated, and specific messages were tailored for each area and situation. DC research supported this effort, which avoided inconsistent messages that can result from discontent of constituencies who had conflicting interests and priorities (another one of the team’s challenges).

In impacted areas, realistic and candid messaging was used with an emphasis on putting the situation and response into context. This context was created with the proper application of perspective, details and expert resources.

In non-impacted areas, demonstrative messaging was used to show the positive qualities and available attributes of the area.

The campaign implemented the following:
• **Strategic campaign development:** preliminary needs assessment and strategic counsel, development of a strategic response outline, environmental analysis, and campaign strategic direction setting

• **Planning, monitoring, research, reporting:** ongoing media monitoring system, ongoing initial media audit, messaging strategy and evolution, and message refinement

• **Partnerships and alliances:** rapid response system management; strategic partner network development and coordination; issue updates and coverage reports; updates for LouisianaTravel.com and Reel Louisiana, an online initiative supported by user-generated content

• **Media relations:** proactive and reactive media relations, triage and response, satellite media tours, letters to the editor, media orientation tours (host and visit), and proactive account support and management

With each tactic, DC accentuated the positive, such as the state’s visitor-ready aspects, and mitigated, but did not deny, the negative. The communication provided an accurate reporting of the negatively impacted areas, while providing information on the majority of the state’s areas and attractions that were unscathed. DC also made certain all messaging was accurate and credible. To visitors, perception was reality, and the perception was that the state was polluted. The team focused on that perception as they moved forward and made sure that all of their key partners were in sync with one overall message to avoid consumer confusion.

Based on LOT and DC’s experience with Hurricane Katrina, the one-voice strategy was crucial to productive communication. This strategy directed all organizations and parties interacting with the media with consistent messaging and facilitated the exchange of timely information. A one-voice strategy was achieved by positioning LOT as the go-to resource for media content. By establishing messages and designating media contacts, LOT advanced consistent and productive messaging.

The coordination of strategic partnerships and alliances assisted with the vast and highly varied coverage the oil spill received. Since any positive coverage of Louisiana contributed to a positive perception of Louisiana tourism, the access to experts and representatives from state, regional and national organizations was an important instrument in distributing messages. Arranging an interview with a representative from the EPA could lead to an article that only discussed the quality of air in Louisiana, but that story would still improve the perception of tourism in the state.

In order to maximize and manage this media coverage, 77 spokespeople were selected, segmented and supported based on industry, government and geographic affiliation. The selection was also proactive and pragmatic. The strategy anticipated which individuals and perspectives the media would want and included them as a partner, sharing and promoting strategic messaging. DC leveraged the most credible and most likely media interview subjects to advance its messages. Ultimately, the team developed an “experts bureau” of more than 77 distinguished leaders who would be valuable resources for connecting with people immersed in multiple aspects of the situation. The experts bureau members were coached on DC messaging points and connected with journalists who covered any story regarding Louisiana. The team strategically reached out to journalists covering more than tourism to convey consistent
messaging points in all pieces tied to Louisiana. They coordinated the experts bureau, which also included a network of more than 1,100 industry partners, to receive daily updates from 8 July to 31 December, with refined key messaging and daily media clips.

The ability of the experts bureau to assimilate messaging was applied to earned media. This was one of the most credible and fastest methods to build awareness of the Louisiana tourism industry (earned media has consistently been found to be more effective and less expensive in shaping or creating perception than paid placement).

The rapidly changing dynamic of crisis situations makes swift and decisive action vital to success. The quick pace translated to an accelerated approval process and efficient use of technology. The importance of timeliness required DC’s team to resist authoring all content and instead work more as aggregators of content. Time constraints also demanded prioritizing media opportunities based on importance and performance.

To engage the online community and social media networks, DC developed four online initiatives. On the 100th day after the oil spill, the team solicited Twitter and Facebook communities to contribute the top 100 reasons to visit Louisiana. DC also directed changes to the LOT website with particular attention to the media section of the site; DC also implemented the media relations, including the social media relations, for the national Dine America event. DC’s efforts made Dine America the number one Tweet in the New Orleans market on the day of the event. These initiatives were all reinforced with media releases distributed to local and regional media outlets.

Furthermore, DC built a website titled “Reel Louisiana” to aggregate videos and pictures of reasons to visit Louisiana and illustrate conditions across the state. Reel Louisiana was announced with media releases to local, regional and national media as well as trade publications.

IMPLEMENTATION AND CHALLENGES

The budget was US$144,868.43. Through an established network of opinion leaders, DC assimilated valuable details, factual information and proactive messages into local, regional, national and international media coverage—and finished under budget.

There was considerable competition for messaging, even within just the Louisiana state borders, let alone regionally. Knowing the media tends to default conversations about Louisiana to New Orleans, DC strategically worked to expand the scope and the discussion to the entire state. The campaign was also forced to overcome the powerful but misleading images bombarding the public. Images of sea turtles and pelicans soaked in oil, a beach of tar balls and shots of the sheen across the gulf interfered with the progress of DC’s messaging. The emphasis on delineating nonimpacted and impacted areas was implemented to account for these images, and placed the strong visual in an accurate context.

The one-voice approach was a particularly important strategy to overcome the media’s lack of interest in tourism-specific stories. In the aftermath of the spill, the media’s focus was
concentrated on the environment as well as BP and the federal government’s response to the clean-up. DC relied on the depth of its experts bureau to convey messaging through officials concerned with the environment and clean-up. However, after months of oil spill coverage, the media lost interest in the situation, forcing the campaign to execute creative ways to continue engaging the media and the public, such as the Dine America event.

MEASUREMENT/EVALUATION OF OUTCOMES

Objective: Meet or exceed the most successful previous return on investment for the LOT of 35.1 to 1.

Result: Achieved 584 percent of goal.

Through its previous projects for the LOT, DC was able to gain significant results with an average 35.1 to 1 return on investment. By 31 December, the team aimed to surpass that goal. They assessed the amount of media placements and the positive tonality of these earned hits, and determined that the return on investment was 204.9 to 1, greater than 584 percent over the original goal for oil spill media and community relations.

The oil spill response campaign was originally commissioned to end after four months, but due to DC’s success, the campaign was extended to eight months.

Objective: Garner positive media coverage that conveys tourism assets readily available in Louisiana to at least 65 million impressions and to generate more than US$24 million.

Result: achieved 123 percent of the publicity value goal and 124 percent of the media impression goal.

Through extensive media work, DC garnered more than US$29.7 million in publicity value and reached more than 80.9 million visitors. Essentially, the team exceeded its goal by US$5.7 million in publicity value and 15.9 million media impressions. DC secured coverage in all nine of its targeted markets, including The New York Times, NPR, AOL News, ABC News, CBS Sports and CNN.

- International: fr.canoe.ca, BBC Arabic
- Local/regional: KTRK(ABC)—Houston, Texas; WPMI (NBC)—Mobile, Alabama
- Trade: PR Newsweek
- Special interest
  - Culinary: CNN’s Eatocracy
  - Restaurant: OnTheMenu.com
  - Travel/tourism: Destinations Magazine
- Social and digital: Dine America top tweeting trend, Open Road blog

Objective: Diminish the economic impact on the tourism industry by correcting false perceptions that became prevalent in the media between July and December.

Result: achieved a 7 percent reduction of the perception that restaurants serving seafood put customers at risk.
DC strategically placed letters to the editor in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *USA Today*. The team also organized media tours with journalists from a variety of publications, including the *Chicago Sun-Times*, *Martha Stewart Living Magazine* and *Travel + Leisure*. These media tours provided journalists with firsthand experiences in Louisiana.

The perception changes mitigated the economic impact on the tourism industry. The Ritz Carlton New Orleans sold out rooms for Mardi Gras earlier than in years past. Furthermore, in eight parishes surrounding the hardest hit area, hotels boasted nearly a 13 percent increase in occupancy in 2010 compared with 2009, according to Smith Travel Research. This New Orleans area is defined by Jefferson, Orleans, Plaquemines, St. Bernard, St. Charles, St. James, St. John and St. Tammany parishes. This equated to 64.7 percent occupancy, ranking it as the eleventh highest occupancy among the top 25 markets in 2010. Also in that year, New Orleans beat the national average of 57.6 percent and ranked number one in US RevPar growth (revenue per available room), achieving a 33 percent hotel tax collection increase.