

Case Study: Public Relations Campaign for Santa Catalina Island

If TMZ were around in Hollywood's golden era it might have had a bureau on Catalina Island. As the playground for A-listers of the day, stars like Marilyn Monroe, Clark Gable and Charlie Chaplin frequented Catalina. But in the decades that followed, the island faded from the collective conscious, settling in as sleepy getaway who's charms were known only to handful of visitors, residents and boaters who relished the Island's natural beauty.



In 2010, the Santa Catalina Island Company sought to bring Catalina back to the fore and kicked off a campaign that would update aging facilities, create new and exciting adventure activities and reinvigorate the island's tourism industry. Infrastructure was an important part of the revitalization effort, but the marketing and communications campaign that followed set the stage for unprecedented growth. By reintroducing California to Catalina, Santa Catalina Island Company's marketing efforts, in conjunction with Lyman PR, help usher in the Island's next golden age. Relying heavily on public relations outreach, the campaign successfully influenced its target consumer audience in the key Southern California segment plus secondary markets nationwide.

But that was only the beginning. The resulting coverage also caught the attention of production teams working on some of television's highest-rated TV shows. Eager to take advantage of Catalina's updated facilities and aesthetic appeal, programs like the Bachelorette and the Ellen DeGeneres Show exposed the entire country to the new Catalina.

Research

The reintroduction campaign relied heavily on market research that would inform much of the strategic planning process and its subsequent execution. Information gleaned from current and past visitors provided valuable insight into the makeup of the existing typical Catalina visitor. It also shed light on the type of customer Catalina was seeking but not attracting. Armed with this intelligence, the campaign was accurately targeted at those most likely to visit in the future.



The story the Island had to tell would appeal to a mass audience, but the number crunching identified specific geographic and demographic priority audiences that proved to be vital in the effort to create awareness of the island's renaissance. Located 30 miles off the coast of Los Angeles, Southern California was a natural first step, but further market analysis showed that Catalina's offerings were most appealing to specific communities within the region and efforts were made to target specific communities in Los Angeles, Orange and San Diego counties.

Research also showed that Catalina's new offerings made it appealing to specific demographic audiences including families, empty nesters, and a younger & hipper demographic not likely aware of Catalina. Finally, the breakdown of previous visitors indicated that vertical audiences including boaters, mountain and road bikers, hikers, campers and divers were particularly receptive to the message that would be broadcast. Meeting and wedding planners also accounted for an important portion of the Island's revenue and were subsequently targeted.

Objectives

The campaign's objectives, in keeping with the research, were straightforward: Increase the island's visibility in Southern California, paying particular attention to geographic, demographic and vertical audiences identified as priority using the following themes:

- Island Renaissance (new Catalina)

- High Quality – visitor is taken care of
- Lifestyle adventure
- Increase the island's national visibility – Southern California was important, but to capitalize on the Island's new offerings, reaching a national audience was necessary to sustain year-over-year growth.
- Build relationships in important vertical categories – Reaching influencers in communities like boating and camping, that were identified as particularly receptive to Catalina's message would build business during shoulder seasons and mid week, when visitation typically flagged.

Target Audiences

As mentioned, the Target audiences were identified and segmented by geography, demographics and by interests:

- Geographically: Southern California, with particular focus on communities in Los Angeles, Orange and San Diego counties as well as outlying areas
- Demographically: Families, young couples, active empty nesters, lifestyle explorers
- Vertical interests: Boating, adventure travel, eco-travel, road and mountain biking, hiking and camping, fishing and foodies.



Execution / Implementation

To reach the target audiences, a media relations strategy was executed that spread out coverage. By focusing on individual improvements and scaling outreach to generate coverage throughout the year, repeated media placements were achieved in outlets that most directly reached the target audience. Outreach centered on the renovations to the Pavilion Hotel, SCICO's new luxury hotel property, a zip-line eco tour through the canyons on the island's interior, the Sea Trek underwater adventure and several new and/or improved restaurant options.

The strategy also focused heavily on media visits, with the realization that the island's renaissance and the new adventures, lodging and dining options were best experienced in person.

Media materials infused with the theme of revitalization and luxury were also important tools in a campaign that would build unprecedented media interest in Catalina Island.

Finally, SCICO and Lyman PR staff bent over backwards to accommodate complex requests, from the large production studios that resulted from the media coverage earned in Southern California (often at significant cost). By building a reputation as an accommodating and hospitable host, Catalina became a favorite location for production teams, which resulted in repeated national exposure for the island.

Results

The campaign resulted in over 225 confirmed media placements; representing the most media interest the Island had ever received. Feature stories on Catalina appeared in the Los Angeles Times or latimes.com seven times. Local affiliate KTLA ran three stories on Catalina, with KNBC, KTTV and several other local television news stations producing stories on the new Catalina. The island was featured on the Bachelor, Bachelorette and Bachelor Pad, the Ellen DeGeneres Show and Millionaire Matchmaker, among other national TV shows. Coverage also appeared on ABCNews.com, Gadling.com, New York Times, Travel + Leisure, Sherman's Travel, and NationalGeographic.com.

Measurement / Evaluation

There would only be one measure of success – increased interest in the hotels and activities owned and operated by the Santa Catalina Island company as measured by inbound phone and online inquiries, web traffic and bookings.

Website traffic:

Jan-Dec Visits
2009 1,418,979
2010 1,687,762

Jan-July Visits:

2010 1,056,641
2011 1,211,881

Inbound Call Volume

A key objective of the PR program was to maintain a steady drumbeat for a long term. Notable to this, a 57% increase in call volume was observed from 2010 to 2011 during January through April.

In short, the renaissance that began for Catalina in 2010 is continuing well into 2011.