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Title: Protecting Keiko and Oregon Coast Aquarium

Oregon Coast Aquarium, Conkling, Fiskum and McCormick, Inc., 1999, 2pgs

Summary: With signs that Keiko's health may be suffering under the care of the Foundation, the Oregon Coast Aquarium began a campaign to retain control of the care of the whale.

Full Text: OVERVIEW

Until July 1, 1997, Aquarium staff was responsible for Keiko's rehabilitation, which began 18 months before when the star of the movie "Free Willy" was transported from a small, shabby pool in Mexico. That ended when the Foundation took sweeping measures to ban Aquarium staff access to Keiko. Soon concern and anger festered among staff. They reported seeing signs that Keiko was ill and confronted the Aquarium's board for not taking back control of the whale. When journalists found out about it, the Aquarium hired Conkling Fiskum & McCormick (CFM) to manage the crisis. CFM's transition strategy focused on the Aquarium's core mission and guided the organization toward a future without Keiko.

RESEARCH

- Quantitative – We reviewed the results of an annual statistically valid poll of visitors to the Aquarium. In 1997, a total of 1,510 visitors were surveyed. The poll found: 97 percent of respondents rated the Aquarium excellent or good; 77 percent said the Keiko exhibit was the reason they visited; and when asked to identify the exhibit they enjoyed the most, 55 percent said it was the Keiko exhibit, nearly five times the next most-enjoyed exhibit.
- Qualitative – We reviewed the findings of The Oregon Coast Aquarium Capital Campaign Market Research Report, developed by Thomas D. Wilson & Associates, Inc. The report was compiled as a result of 60 personal interviews and two focus groups. The report states, "The only substantive issue was the relationship between the Aquarium and the Keiko Foundation. This issue confused the marketplace."
- Conclusions – Keiko's popularity drove the Aquarium's positive perceptions. If the Aquarium was seen as jeopardizing Keiko's well-being, support could dry up, so we positioned the Aquarium as Keiko's defender. Since Keiko arrived, the Aquarium's brand identity had eroded. We had to establish what the Aquarium stands for. The Aquarium had benefited financially from the Keiko exhibit. The research told us that involving third parties to speak on the Aquarium's behalf would enhance the organization's reputation.

PLANNING

CFM's team worked closely with the Aquarium's president, board of directors, and the organization's marketing and public relations staff to define objectives and develop workable strategies. The plan was to call for an independent evaluation of Keiko's health, rally third parties to endorse our stand and simultaneously communicate the vision for a future without the whale.

- Objectives: (1) Protect and enhance the Aquarium's high level of public approval through Keiko's eventual departure; (2) Protect Keiko's health and well-being; and (3) Establish an environment in which the Aquarium can secure finances for an expansion.
- Strategies: (1) Set the agenda by publicly calling for an independent evaluation of Keiko's health, thereby clearly establishing that the Aquarium does not own Keiko and cementing the Aquarium's position as the organization with the whale's best interests at heart; (2) Seek and mobilize allies to speak on behalf of the Aquarium; (3) Make the Aquarium's vision for the (Keiko-less) future the centerpiece of all communications, including discussions concerning the whale.
- Audiences – We focused on internal audiences in order to ensure that our external communication had impact and credibility ... Aquarium employees; Aquarium volunteers; Aquarium members (donors); community leaders; animal care professionals; media; Keiko fans worldwide; and Aquarium lenders.
- Messages – (1) We will not be satisfied until an independent team of experts completes a comprehensive evaluation of Keiko's health; (2) Through long-term, thorough planning, the Aquarium's board of directors and staff have made sure this organization never becomes dependent upon Keiko; and (3) We're focused on the future, which includes improvements and an expansion that will make a visit to the Aquarium a more enjoyable and enriching experience.

Budget:

- Public relations services – Including: strategic planning and ongoing strategic \$34,000 counsel; development of materials; media contacts; coordination of speaker's tour; design of presentation materials; and outreach to strategic partners.
- Out-of-pocket expenses – Including: travel; research; telephone; fax; \$11,500 duplication; and postage. Costs for direct mail are not included because they were absorbed into the budget for already-planned mailings.

EXECUTION

Internal communication – We focused on the core of the organization with frequent meetings and memos that improved staff morale and fostered two-way communication.

Direct mail – We reached out to members and donors by planting our messages in periodic newsletters and fundraising letters and encouraged their feedback.

Strategic partnerships – We contacted regional and national marine animal-affiliated organizations and animal experts, explained our position and encouraged them to get involved in the discussion. These partners were our conduits to the media, particularly while securing Keiko's health evaluation.

On-line communications – The Aquarium's web site, a worldwide attraction because of the popular "Keiko Cam," proved to be an important vehicle for relating our messages – particularly to die-hard fans of the killer whale. In August 1998 alone, as the Aquarium prepared for Keiko's departure, the web site carried our message to nearly 750,000 visitors.

Speaking Engagements – To illustrate our openness and willingness to listen, Aquarium President Phyllis Bell hit the rubber chicken circuit with a colorful, exciting presentation.

Media relations – Our stunning October 1, 1997 announcement that we were concerned about Keiko's health was covered around the world. We maintained an open-door and open-book policy for journalists.

- Proactive media contacts – A talk show tour achieved blanket positive coverage.
- Editorial board visits – Outreach to editors secured support from every daily in the region.
- Letters to the editor – We placed letters from Aquarium officials and encouraged partners to write.

EVALUATION

We succeeded in protecting and enhancing the Aquarium's high level of public approval through Keiko's departure. Public opinion polling showed the Aquarium had maintained a high level of satisfaction and the public recognized that the Aquarium is not dependent upon Keiko. The poll of 384 residents of Northwestern Oregon (+/-5%), found that 74 percent of respondents rated the Aquarium as excellent or very good. Only 6 percent rated it fair or poor (20 percent were undecided). Meanwhile, only 17 percent of respondents said the most important reason to visit the Aquarium is to see Keiko.

We succeeded in protecting Keiko. Two and a half months after our initial call for an independent evaluation, the Foundation allowed federal regulators to conduct an evaluation of Keiko's health. The evaluation confirmed Keiko had been seriously ill during the summer and early fall. A subsequent judge's ruling ordered the Foundation to return day-to-day control of Keiko to the Aquarium.

We succeeded in establishing an environment in which the Aquarium secured finances for an expansion. The Aquarium secured one of the highest bond ratings ever awarded to a non-municipal aquarium to finance a \$14 million expansion.