

Research/Situation Analysis

Florida's land conservation efforts face a defining moment in history, as conservation funding becomes ever more scarce. There is increasing agreement among state leaders that the future of Florida's natural lands lies in the successful collaboration between agricultural landowners, government agencies, environmental organizations and citizens. Landowners are working on public/private partnerships to use new tools and planning initiatives to continue their legacy of environmental stewardship while remaining economically viable. Comprising nearly one-fifth of Florida's acreage, ranchlands are vital not only to the state's economic sustainability but to its culture and history, and hold the key to future land conservation efforts. The Florida agriculture industry's overall economic impact is estimated at nearly 100 billion dollars annually. In addition, many ranches protect irreplaceable water resources and critical wildlife habitats. As part of the effort to promote greater understanding of Florida's ranchlands and their relationships to conservation efforts, the annual Florida Ranches Calendar serves as an unconventional educational tool - combining informative articles about cutting-edge planning efforts with breathtaking photography. Since 2005, the Firefly Group - a public relations, marketing and community outreach firm with a sustainable focus - has spearheaded the calendar's production in order to pay tribute to ranches with innovative, sustainable best management practices and generate greater public awareness about the unique history and culture of ranching. One of the calendar's most meaningful accomplishments is the diverse collaboration of partners and sponsors that support its production. The target audience is citizens throughout the state of Florida.

Objectives

The objectives for the 2012 Florida Ranches Calendar were to 1) create a visually appealing and content rich publication with key message points about the importance of Florida's ranchlands in terms of environmental, cultural and historical perspectives; 2) maintain net sales profit of \$1,208; 3) coordinate the calendar's large-scale release at a statewide ranching conference, requiring a November 25, 2011 production deadline; 4) cover the approximate \$14,000 cost of publishing the calendar through sponsorships and in-kind donation of services, and increase sponsorships by 10%; 5) increase sponsorships by 10% and secure sponsorships from at least 6 of the featured ranches, a sponsorship goal not attempted in past years; 6) increase sales from wholesale and consignment orders by 10%.

Implementation

A timeline and plan of action was prepared identifying key tasks: 1) securing sponsorships; 2) securing photography; 3) creating informative articles from three authors: renowned photographer Carlton Ward, Jr., land conservation expert Ernie Cox of Family Lands Remembered, and Jim Handley, President of the Florida Cattlemen's Association; 4) completing the design, layout and printing phases of the calendar; 5) distribution of the calendars to sponsors; 7) promotion of the calendar. Solicitation letters were distributed to past and prospective sponsors with personal follow up to secure underwriting commitments. Fifteen ranches and one historic livestock market spanning 10 counties in Florida were included, with each month portraying the unique types of ranch conservation projects in Florida—from a partnership with Costa Rica's EARTH University for ground-breaking sustainable agriculture research, to preservation of 22,000 acres for Florida panther habitat, to a phosphate pit transformed into restored wetlands. Each month also included informative captions, relevant agricultural industry dates, and smaller photos with a "faces of ranching" theme that was very well received. Press releases were distributed to regional/statewide media outlets. For the first year, a sales promotion e-communication campaign was conducted and distributed to 2,600 people. Calendars were prominently featured through University Press of Florida, Family Lands Remembered and Firefly Group websites, as well as social media including Facebook and Twitter. Over 4,600 calendars were distributed, and significant positive feedback has been received about its content.

Evaluation

All objectives were met or exceeded. 1) a visually appealing and content rich publication was produced containing key messages about the importance of Florida's ranchlands; 2) net profits from sales increased by 39%; 3) the calendar was produced by October 21, 2011 – one month earlier than the production deadline, in time to be sold at the Florida Cattlemen's Association Winter Conference; 4) costs were 100% offset through sponsorships and in-kind donations of services from 30 organizations, with support increasing from \$19,500 to \$23,250 (an increase of 16% from the previous year); 5) we achieved 100% sponsorships participation from the 15 ranches and livestock market featured in the calendar – more than 140% higher than the goal; 6) sales from wholesale and consignment orders increased by 102%.

Budget

Expenses: photography - \$1,000; graphic design - \$1,500; copywriting, production, shipping and postage - \$15,994 printing - \$6,291; online promotion and PayPal – \$150.