

DRIVERS START YOUR (FIRE) ENGINES

MOTORSPORTS PR TAKES A HOT NEW TURN

by Lori Campbell Baker, APR

What do you do when your career leads you into the fastest growing sport in America? You gather your PR skills and get ready for an exciting ride!

Public relations opportunities in motorsports have never been more exciting – or more diverse. Whether it's working for a sanctioning body, an internationally known sports facility like Daytona International Speedway or a race team, there's plenty to do, and the pace is – well – fast!

But suppose you're not up on the current NASCAR Winston Cup Series point standings? Or you don't know the difference between a stock car and a sports car? Or between a restrictor plate and a roof flap? Well, fear not!

“Actually, the majority of public relations jobs in motorsports have little to do with the technical aspects of racing,” says Daytona International Speedway Manager of Community Relations Lori Campbell Baker, APR. “While auto manufacturers’ PR reps are charged

and bolts’ of their products, most other PR activities involve getting fans familiar (and enamored) with their sport, their drivers and the many sponsors involved.”

On the national level, dozens of PR staffs come

in to play. Sanctioning bodies such as the National Association of Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) send out daily media announcements on subjects including drivers, sponsors, point standings, rule changes and licensing agreements. National sponsors’ PR departments announce new paint schemes, new consumer promotions and new ways to entice race fans to use their products and services. Individual tracks promote upcoming race events and community activities. And hundreds of drivers rely on PR support – from the grass roots

efforts of a local dirt track competitor to the full scale image campaigns of an internationally recognized superstar – to keep their careers on the fast track.

As in any PR assignment, along with the glitz

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and glamour of media promotion and special events come the critical, nitty gritty details of a solid PR plan. What's the best way to find a target audience for a new racing event? Or to decide whether to include a local TV buy in an advertising plan? It's all about front-end research, and it's all followed up with some basic "how'd it go?" evaluation.

As in any field, not all situations in motorsports PR can be predicted. Take, for instance, the 1998 race season, in which millions of race fans around the world looked forward to seeing the inaugural nighttime running

of the July 4 Pepsi 400 NASCAR Winston Cup Series race at Daytona International Speedway.

The race was scheduled to air live in prime time, and all systems were go. A Community Open House, scheduled by the Speedway Community Relations department for earlier that week, went off smoothly, with just a slight haze on the horizon from distant wildfires.

"The community was ready, our sponsors were excited, and our fans were preparing to make their way to sunny Daytona Beach for a great race and a relaxing vacation," explains Campbell Baker.

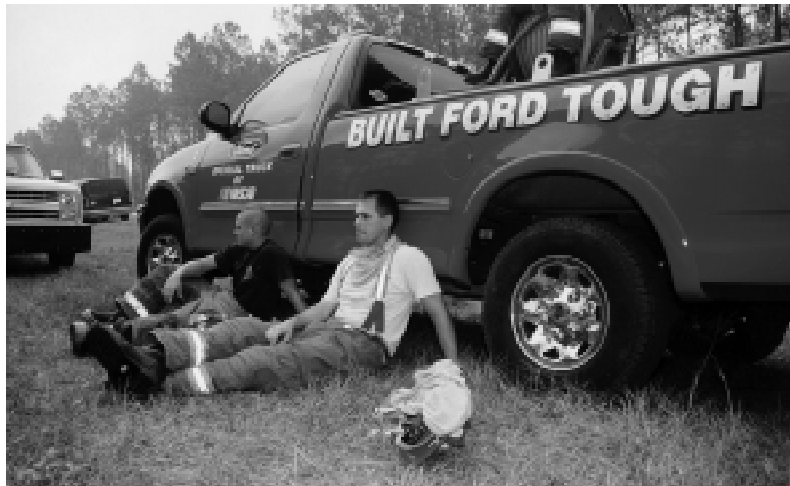
And then, the unthinkable happened. The wild fires rolled in. To stay.

For the first time in the Speedway's 40-year history, NASCAR and Speedway officials agreed to postpone the Pepsi 400. The first viable scheduling option was just a few weeks away, so with no guarantees that the fire situation would improve any time soon, they opted for an October resched-

uling. The PR and management resources of the Speedway, catering company Americrown Service Corporation, parent company International Speedway Corporation and NASCAR were pulled together for some strategic planning.

Media coverage on the postponement was both

immediate and intense. Hosting a NASCAR Winston Cup race in a community is the equivalent, in both attendance and economic impact, to holding a Super Bowl. So while some people felt that it would be irresponsible to bring hundreds of thousands of visi-



Speedway fire trucks and personnel took action against the raging wildfires.

tors to the area via smoke-impaired roads, others felt just as strongly that the Speedway owed it to the fans – and even more, to the local tourism-driven economy – to hold the race as scheduled. To postpone the race, felt the latter group, was to ensure the financial failure of a number of local "mom & pop" motels and small businesses who would be unable to survive a delay in income.

What to do?

"The moment the announcement was made, we went into crisis mode," says Campbell Baker, "and what came next was one of the most amazing teamwork efforts I've ever witnessed. Top management from all four companies made the situation top priority and stayed involved in every new development."

The first task at hand was to make sure the word got out to the media and the fans, many of whom were already en route, of the postponement. Strong relationships with national and international

media made it a lead story in thousands of publications and newscasts. Strategically placed advertisements supported the message.

Special phone lines were installed, and employees from all departments pitched in to call each of the thousands of hospitality guests. More lines were devoted to the thousands of inquiries received each day. By keeping the local convention and visitors bureaus informed and involved, thousands more calls were handled off-site.

“And, simultaneously, we set out to accomplish the greatest project at hand, supporting our community during one of the biggest national disasters in its history.

“Our media contacts helped us here, too, on several fronts,” explains Campbell Baker. “They rallied our community’s resources and let people know to bring supplies to us for distribution to the fire fighters. We had citizens and local businesses bringing us everything from socks and underwear to freshly baked cookies and Daytona Beach souvenirs. But most importantly, the media told our community and the world that the ‘World Center of Racing’ had transformed itself into the ‘World Center of Fire fighting.’

“Through the constant support of the Speedway’s upper management and the cooperation and teamwork of numerous departments, we got to work. We rented 400 cots, installed showers and extra rest rooms, then turned one of our corporate office buildings into a hotel for firefighters and local evacuees. Each fire fighter received a goody bagged stuffed with shaving supplies, soap, shampoo, official Speedway tee shirts and other small items. And since Skittles had planned to reach approximately 200,000 people with a Pepsi 400 promotion at DAYTONA USA, the ‘Official Attraction of NASCAR,’ we had about 16 pallets of candy to distribute. No one left without armfuls of candy!

“We turned our infield and perimeter parking lots into a staging area for the National Guard, then challenged our catering company with the daily task of feeding thousands of firefighters and county staff breakfast, lunch and dinner – on the fire lines, at the operations centers and back at our own ‘Chateau Speedway’ evacuee hotel.”

Media support and community involvement with the Speedway’s efforts created media coverage filled with supportive articles and heartwarming editorials, and the collective PR departments supplied media with a wealth of inspiring news angles to cover, from hometown heroes to NASCAR drivers volunteering their time and talents as firefighters.

“Through it all, we were able to reinforce the message that the Speedway is a responsible and involved corporate citizen, and as a bonus, business section coverage of economic impact issues reinforced the value of racing events to ISC and NASCAR racing communities throughout the country. In the end, the community and surrounding areas lost nearly a half-million acres of trees, homes and businesses, but the situation revealed an amazing sense of camaraderie, both within Speedway personnel and in the community at large.

“It was one of those situations where we had all the resources in place, and a solid crisis communications plan brought them all together. The results were inspiring and long-lasting – making the evaluation part of the PR process quite a joy!”

With the eyes of the media – and in cases such as this, the world – focused on their every move, motorsports PR professionals are finding the field to be an exciting career proving ground, no matter what the situation at hand.

“For me, there’s no more exciting industry in which to work,” concludes Campbell Baker, “and no lack of opportunity to polish and test PR skills and creativity.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Lori Campbell Baker, APR, is the manager of community relations for Daytona International Speedway, a position she describes as "easily the most enjoyable job in the company."

Lori works on a variety of rewarding projects including community awareness campaigns, Make-A-Wish fulfillment, educational and job shadowing programs, and local charitable contributions.

She went to the Speedway in 1996 from her position as public relations director for the Daytona Area Convention and Visitors Bureau, where she helped promote not only the Speedway, but the entire Daytona Beach vacation area.

Her background includes marketing for the Edward J. DeBartolo Corporation, the owner of malls and shopping centers across the country; advertising agency creative work in her hometown of Melbourne, Fla.; and both on-air broadcasting and sales work for radio stations in Daytona Beach.

Lori has a home in the Daytona Beach area where she lives with her husband and two young children.



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