

COUNSELOR

PROMOTIONAL CA

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By John Corrigan & Christopher Ruvo

BEST CLIENT PROMOTION

AcrobatBranding Group (asi/104429)

AcrobatBranding Group (asi/104429) had to pull off a promotion that bore the pressure and intensity of a Final Four basketball game.

And that was appropriate, as the campaign was tied to college basketball's voraciously watched event in early spring.

The campaign involved everything from a household name client in CBS, to a complicated logo that was difficult to reproduce, to the need to distribute nearly 10,000 branded products across 18 companies, which included premier global brands like AT&T and Coca-Cola.

Pressure? You bet. But AcrobatBranding was clutch as a buzzer-beater.

Led by Craig Peck, executive vice president of business development/sales, AcrobatBranding was asked to deliver a promo solution that would incentivize and reward sponsors that advertised nationally with media giants CBS and Turner Sports during the broadcast of the 2017 NCAA Basketball Tournament, including the Final Four.

Working closely with CBS marketing and creative teams, AcrobatBranding developed a client-wow-ing merchandise package. The centerpiece was the versatile, multi-season Cutter & Buck (asi/47965) Beacon Full-Zip Jacket, which featured the Final Four logo in 3-D Emblem – a decoration process that effectively captured a logo that the client had said was notoriously difficult to replicate. Filling out the package was a golf shirt with an embroidered Final Four logo on the chest and network logos on the sleeve; caps with a 3-D-embroidered Final Four logo on the front and network branding on the back; and a performance T-shirt, pad-printed water bottle and embroidered duffel bag.

"We were able to add value to the campaign by branding the merchandise with unique and high-quality decoration methods," says Peck. "This was a critical factor to winning the business." Stellar performance on previous orders also factored into earning the opportunity. "We won the client's trust with our performance on smaller projects," says Peck.

As with the earlier orders, AcrobatBranding navigated the Final Four campaign with aplomb, deftly distributing merchandise to end-

users' corporate headquarters for recipients like media planners and account managers. Meanwhile, AcrobatBranding also ensured that end-user executives attending the games received the merchandise packages in person – along with Final Four tickets – at a host hotel in Phoenix, AZ. The campaign spanned the Men's NCAA Basketball Tournament, which started March 14 and finished April 3.

"We received tremendous feedback from our contacts at CBS," says Peck. "As the buzz spread, CBS has placed several reorders to meet additional demand."

Encouragingly, ratings for the Final Four were off the charts, with the championship game between North Carolina and Gonzaga averaging 30% more viewers than the prior year's championship game and setting a record for live video streams. That could lead advertisers to invest more heavily with CBS/Turner during next year's tournament, which sets AcrobatBranding up for an even bigger opportunity. We have no doubt the distributor will again hit nothing but net. – CR



CAMPAIGN AWARDS

and effective promotional campaigns in the industry.

BEST DISTRIBUTOR SELF-PROMOTION

NorthPoint (asi/285317)

At the end of the day, the purpose of every promotion is to generate return-on-investment.

Boy, has NorthPoint (asi/285317) ever achieved that with its “NorthPoint Backpack Campaign.”

Consider: The Waltham, MA-based distributorship can trace approximately \$300,000 worth of sales in 2016 directly to the initiative. A short while into the campaign this year, NorthPoint had already generated \$30,000 from it. “The success isn’t just in the numbers,” says Lauren Panaswich, a NorthPoint marketing specialist. “We’ve found it has helped maintain strong relationships with our clients and improved our client retention rate as well.”

The promotion starts with an OGIO Excelsior backpack, embroidered with the NorthPoint logo and tagline. Into this, NorthPoint puts a bevy of NorthPoint-logoed products the company believes recipients will appreciate – and will want to buy for their firms. The distributor changes up the product mix to include new offerings and address seasonal demand. Recently, products in the pack included an insulated bottle, magnetic auto phone mount, coaster with bottle opener, beach ball, slap wrap can cooler and much more.

“The purpose is to expose new, current and prospective clients to our favorite items of the season,” says Panaswich. “We want them to feel like they’re opening presents on Christmas morning.”

To enhance that feeling of receiving a special gift, NorthPoint has its courier hand-deliver the backpacks to clients and prospects within a certain distance. “Our courier is one of the friendliest people and brings a smile to everybody’s face,” says Panaswich. For intended recipients that are farther away, NorthPoint ships directly to the individual or presents the packs after an in-person meeting. “It’s great to see their positive reactions when they open the backpack,” Panaswich says.

Clearly, the promotion is driving sales. But that’s not all: It’s also building excitement and gaining NorthPoint broad exposure. “We now see NorthPoint branded products everywhere,” says Panaswich. “We’ve seen the backpacks in airports, beach balls tossed around at concerts, T-shirts at the gym, and even our new umbrellas in downtown Boston.”

Simple but clever, useful to clients and great at generating sales, comparatively cost-effective and imbued with a personal touch – the NorthPoint Backpack Campaign checks all the boxes of an ideal self-promotion. – CR



BEST SUPPLIER PROMOTION

Edwards Garment Co. (asi/51752)

Good suppliers work hard to become valued partners to distributors. Edwards Garment Co. (asi/51752) took the effort to the next level with a promo partnership that is bearing sales fruit for both the Kalamazoo, MI-based supplier and Top 40 distributor Boundless (asi/143717).

When Edwards, a Top 40 supplier of apparel and uniforms, introduced outerwear to its offerings this year, it teamed up with Boundless to promote the new line. The initiative centered on Edwards developing three-layer, soft-shell jackets with the Boundless logo embroidered on the upper left sleeve. At the start of 2017, nearly 200 members of Boundless' staff received the jackets to wear during sales calls. "We put the logo on the left sleeve rather than left of the chest because it sticks out," says Kerrie Turner, inside sales and special services coordinator at Edwards. "It's a different spot to feature a brand and comes off as higher-end."

Once end-buyers saw the lightweight and durable jackets on the Boundless pros, they couldn't wait to buy them. Indeed, a bevy of sales ensued – something helped along by Edwards providing special pricing, free digitizing on embroidery and no minimum order requirement. The bottom line on the collaboration? A big-time sales increase: As of April, sales with Boundless were up nearly 800%, according to Edwards.

"The results of the promotion have exceeded our expectations," says Taraynn Lloyd, Edwards' marketing director. "Edwards was able to build a strong supplier partnership with Boundless sales associates and increase outerwear sales with their clients."

The enormous success of the campaign shows that a creative, well-planned, mutually beneficial collaboration can be the best promotion of all. Given that, Lloyd says Edwards is open to working with other distributors in a similar fashion in the future. – JC



BEST MARKETING VIDEOS

SnugZ/USA (asi/88060)

When it comes to telling a great story through video, SnugZ/USA (asi/88060) is the Steven Spielberg of the promotional products industry.

Indeed, few in the ad specialty space create marketing videos with the entertainment value, narrative ingenuity and high-gloss production quality of the West Jordan, UT-based supplier. SnugZ's efforts earned the company gold in Counselor's Best Marketing Video contest in 2016 – a feat now repeated in 2017 on the strength of several videos Counselor is collectively honoring for their humor, creative flair and return-on-investment.

First up is "Germ Warfare." The video promotes hand sanitizer that SnugZ offers, but plays more like an endearingly quirky skit than a product pitch. The video features two characters dressed up with cartoon colorfulness as "bad nasties" – common germs that cause illness. A woman in the video comes into contact with the "bad nasties" at a water fountain, but then uses hand sanitizer SnugZ offers to eradicate them. The video includes jazzy background music and a female voiceover with a proper English accent that relates a couple key points about disease-spreading and how hand sanitizer can nip germs in the bud. Pushed out through social media channels and the SnugZ blog and newsletter, the video has helped drive sales and keep the supplier at the forefront of customers' minds. As of press time, the video had 2,441 views.

That stat count was, however, far surpassed by SnugZ's "Swag-Wow!" campaign – a set of three videos that garnered 11,558 views, 487 reactions, 49 shares and 75 comments. The videos feature actor Lucas Kappler, who portrays a laughter-inducing character

that is based on famous infomercial pitchman Vince Offer of the "Sham-Wow!" commercials. The videos helped build buzz around new products that ranged from a bottle with a carabiner to a lens cleaner, microfiber cloth and dual-use lanyard. Kappler's

character "Paully the SwagWow Man" hypes the products in pitchman fashion – all at once satirizing and leveraging the infomercial hard-sell tactic.

"Instead of fighting the hard-sell approach, we embraced it," says Brandon Brown, marketing director at SnugZ. "We began the creative process by watching more infomercials in three hours than a healthy human should consume in a lifetime."

For SnugZ, the investment in entertaining, narrative-driven marketing videos is a smart business strategy the company believes will stand it in good stead in the new era of marketing. "Intrusive, interruptive, self-centered marketing no longer works the way it once did, and its effectiveness will only continue to diminish," says Brown. "What will replace the legacy model? There's a one-word answer: stories. Good content marketing moves the brand needle, increasing awareness, changing perception, and creating desire and drive to purchase." – CR



BEST SOCIAL MEDIA PROMOTION

BrandVia (asi/145037)

February was full of puppy love at San Jose, CA-based BrandVia (asi/145037) as photos of employees and their canines engulfed social media.

As part of the company's Puppy Giveaway contest, followers were encouraged to respond by posting creative photos of their custom socks with the hashtag #bvcreates. Why socks? "When you get home and cuddle up with your pooch, you usually have your shoes off and feet up, relaxing," says Sam Brown, director of corporate marketing at BrandVia.

As for the contest's payoff for participants, BrandVia would award the person with the most creative photo (as decided by the company) adoption fees of a dog in a local rescue. The winner ultimately decided to have the distributor make a donation to Saving Grace Pet Rescue in North Carolina.

The campaign was a huge success, Brown says, as social media engagement numbers increased across all platforms. Facebook interactions, for example, grew from 525 in February to 856 in March. Meanwhile, LinkedIn interactions nearly tripled in the same period.

"The BrandVia marketing team has done a wonderful job of raising our social media profile," says BrandVia President Jim Childers. "They are always testing new approaches and measuring engagement in order to determine what works best for our community to

promote, inspire and educate."

Significantly, the digital conversation generated strong buzz for BrandVia's annual open house, Reveal. The event allows clients to browse the newest products and services while networking with BrandVia's team. "Our goal is to demonstrate to our guests that we have the understanding, creativity, experience, depth of services and breadth of technologies to simplify the demands of their day while helping them succeed in reaching their objectives," Brown says.

The puppy eyes on social media helped drive people to the event, with BrandVia reporting a 35% increase in attendance over the previous year. Further, 83% of sales members received a significant increase in their selling time due to the reduced effort to book appointments and connect with contacts. In what was perhaps the most promising news, all exit survey respondents said they left feeling that they had a more-thorough understanding of BrandVia's competencies – something the distributorship believes will translate to sales.

As BrandVia plans more promotions, you can bet social media initiatives will figure into the mix, generating positive ROI in their own right and helping enhance broader campaigns like Reveal. "We're already developing our next social media campaign not only for Reveal 2018, but for different events and occasions throughout the year," Brown says. – JC

