



At The Core - How Maximizing Communication Of The Fastest Billion-Dollar Public Highway Project Helped Overcome The Largest Scandal In UDOT History

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Summary: 2013 Silver Anvil Award Winner — Reputation Management / Brand Management — Government.

After a multi-million-dollar contractor settlement was exposed in the middle of election season, the Utah Department of Transportation's high public favorability rankings plummeted. As a result, UDOT needed to capitalize on the success of its largest highway project ever, the I-15 CORE, to improve its public reputation. UDOT created a campaign centered on communicating success and innovative leadership on the project. The effort worked to communicate I-15 CORE as the fastest billion-dollar government highway construction project in history. The campaign helped the department overcome arguably the largest scandal in its history, achieve its highest favorability rankings and win the praise of Utah's governor.

Reputation management / brand management includes campaigns are designed to enhance, promote or improve the reputation of an organization with its publics or key elements of its publics, either proactively or in response to an issue, event or market occurrence. The government subcategory includes all government bureaus, agencies, institutions or departments at the local, state and federal levels, including the armed forces, regulatory bodies, courts, public schools and state universities.

Full Text: SITUATION ANALYSIS / RESEARCH

When construction began in 2010 on the Utah County I-15 Corridor Expansion (I-15 CORE), the largest highway reconstruction project in Utah history, the Utah Department of Transportation (UDOT) was enjoying its highest favorability ranking ever of 79 percent. This was largely because of UDOT's national and international leadership in employing innovation to complete projects more quickly and efficiently.

Just months after construction on I-15 CORE began, the department's public reputation plummeted as UDOT faced arguably the largest scandal in department history. During an interim election in 2010 to replace Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. (appointed by President Obama to serve as ambassador to China), a \$13 million settlement to resolve a protest with a losing bidder on the \$1.7 billion project came to light.

In order to take advantage of a favorable bidding environment and to keep construction on track (a dispute on another project in 2001 led to a four-year delay and more than \$200 million in legal and other additional costs), UDOT leaders determined it was in the state's best interest to settle (for \$13 million). The UDOT communications team, because of several complicated matters, was unable to proactively release the bid settlement information before it was anonymously leaked.

The settlement was magnified when it became politicized by the governor's race, which created challenges outside of UDOT's control that had a detrimental effect on its reputation. Once elected, the new governor called for an audit, which prolonged the story for several more months. In the end, the audit cleared UDOT of any wrongdoing in the settlement; however, the

story and its damage lingered. According to UDOT's 2011 annual survey (conducted after the election and the release of the audit findings), UDOT's favorability ranking fell to 75 percent and the number of Utahans who viewed UDOT as "unfavorable" reached the highest level in the history of the department at 22 percent.

In an effort to respond to the situation, research was executed to measure public opinion, including a phone survey, focus groups, man-on-the-street interviews and a text-message-based survey.

The communications team made three key observations based on the research:

1. The public was still impressed with UDOT's use of innovative construction techniques;
2. The contractor settlement continued to be an issue with public perception. "Wasteful spending/misusing money," and "scandals/bribes" were listed as key reasons the public viewed UDOT as unfavorable; and
3. Drivers were growing tired of construction on I-15 CORE and had little concept of when the project was scheduled to end (late 2012).

PLANNING

With one year of construction remaining, the I-15 CORE communications team created a strategic plan to help rebuild UDOT's reputation by communicating the success of the I-15 CORE project, which would in turn help to improve public perception of UDOT. Measurable objectives included:

1. Maintain/Increase UDOT's 2011 overall "favorable" ranking of 75 percent,
2. Reduce UDOT's 2011 "unfavorable" ranking of 22 percent,
3. Achieve a neutral to positive tone on the overall media coverage for the project, and
4. Increase awareness of the project's end date to 50 percent of target audiences.

The target audiences included:

1. Utah County residents,
2. Statewide residents, and
3. Utah County businesses.

The I-15 CORE communications team employed the following strategies to work to rebuild UDOT's reputation during the final year of construction:

1. Determine an element to differentiate the success of I-15 CORE from other projects to increase the public's confidence in UDOT as a national leader in innovative road construction;
2. Incorporate research in development of new key messaging;
3. Employ media relations throughout the final year of construction to communicate key messaging;
4. Develop a broad mass communication campaign to complement PR tactics; and
5. Educate the target audience about the speed of construction, overall schedule and project benefits.

EXECUTION

Communication efforts hinged upon key messaging showcasing the project's success, completion and UDOT's leadership in innovative road construction. With several innovative construction techniques and an aggressive schedule to reconstruct 24 miles of freeway in an unprecedented 35 months, UDOT needed a way to differentiate this project. I-15 CORE more than met the status quo of "on time and on budget" (a standard message for successful projects throughout the country). Through further research, the communications team determined I-15 CORE was the fastest billion-dollar public highway project ever constructed in the United States.

The I-15 CORE communications team encountered a number of challenges in obtaining accurate information during this research. The Federal Highway Administration tracks projects that receive federal highway funding, but many large projects are funded solely by individual states. Project funding information is typically closely held by states. Many project websites were outdated or had only incomplete information. Once the research was verified, the communications team immediately worked to incorporate the new message in all communication, and spokespersons were trained to stay on message.

The I-15 CORE communications team planned a multi-pronged campaign to announce the completion of the project. Celebrating achievements and highlighting innovation throughout the year created the opportunity to demonstrate and communicate the new key messages. The communications team executed a press event in June announcing the completion of the first section of roadway, an informal media tour with the Governor in August, a media briefing in November to announce all lanes open, and a formal press conference in December to celebrate official completion of the project. In addition to using the messaging in earned media, the effort was supplemented by a paid advertising campaign, "The End is Near," which focused on the completion date and included billboards and movie theater and online ads.

EVALUATION

The effort exceeded all objectives and significantly improved UDOT's reputation as follows:

1. UDOT's overall "favorable" ranking in 2012 reached an all-time high of 80 percent (up from 75 percent in 2011). Additionally, respondents indicated that compared with a year prior, their favorable impressions of UDOT had increased by 44 percent.
2. UDOT's overall "unfavorable" ranking in 2012 was reduced by 18 percent (from 22 percent in 2011 to 18 percent in 2012).
3. The overall tone of media coverage for I-15 CORE was positive, with an average ranking of 5.7 on a 1-7 scale. This high number was achieved despite more than five percent of all project coverage being focused on the settlement.
4. Awareness of the project's end date grew to 65 percent, exceeding the objective by 30 percent.

The final year of the project received unprecedented news coverage, with more than 500 stories. According to a post-project media audit, project messaging was included in 78 percent of all print news coverage. In addition to extensive coverage by local media, trade magazines took notice of UDOT's impressive work and innovation. *Roads and Bridges* magazine featured UDOT on the cover of its October 2012 issue, and *Engineering News-Record*, the industry's most prominent publication, spotlighted the department and the I-15 CORE project in a lengthy feature article in the fall of 2012.

The success of the project and communication efforts led to Utah Gov. Gary Herbert, who had been reluctant to take a position, proclaiming publicly that because of the swift and efficient rebuild of the interstate it was apparent that UDOT had made the right decision by settling with the losing bidder. He further praised the project in his 2013 State of the State address, saying: "Lasting job creation and capital investment hinge on the free flow of commerce... There is no better example than the I-15 CORE project, built faster than any other billion-dollar highway project in America, and \$260 million under budget."