

## The Welcome Discovery Communications Campaign

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Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum, Jan 1, 2013

**Summary:** 2013 Silver Anvil Award of Excellence Winner — Events and Observances (Seven or Fewer Days) — Government

It isn't every day that a space shuttle arrives on your doorstep. But when *Discovery*, the spacecraft associated with the most historical and scientific milestones achieved during America's 30-year shuttle era, was transferred by NASA to the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum, participation by media and the public set records. Although the *Discovery* project had huge potential, creating a campaign plan was fraught with challenges, from public opinion issues, to logistical, security, and weather concerns, to a zero budget. To achieve results, the Museum's Communications team developed a strategic campaign encompassing traditional and new media, marketing, and public awareness.

Events and observances (seven or fewer days) includes programs or events scheduled for one to seven consecutive days (not including planning and preparation). Events may include commemorations, observances, openings, celebrations or other special activities, and must occur within a time span of one week. 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: The *Welcome Discovery Communications Campaign***

When NASA announced that the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum, would receive *Discovery*, the "champion of the shuttle fleet," the museum's Communications team began developing a strategic campaign to maximize media attention and public participation in the shuttle's arrival, a five-day event featuring a fly-over of the Washington area, the transfer ceremony, and a space-themed festival. The campaign was a public relations project in every sense: its success resulted from the partnerships formed to plan and execute the effort, and from the public's awareness of, and participation in it. This entry focuses primarily on getting the word out, and galvanizing public participation through a grassroots effort called "Spot the Shuttle."

### **SITUATION ANALYSIS**

Located on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum opened to the public in 1976. In 2003, the Museum opened a second facility, the Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center, in suburban Virginia about 30 miles from the flagship building. The space shuttle *Discovery* is housed at the Udvar-Hazy Center. When it arrived from Kennedy Space Center in Florida, it was atop a 747, which performed an exhilarating triple fly-over of the Washington area. The shuttle was transferred by NASA to the Museum in a ceremony two days later at the Udvar-Hazy Center. It was first of the four NASA shuttles to be delivered to its new museum home and the first space shuttle to go on public display.

Despite an agreement maintained by the Smithsonian and NASA since the 1960s which makes the National Air and Space Museum the official repository of the nation's space artifacts, the

competition among museums to acquire *Discovery*, *Endeavor* or *Atlantis* was spirited – and newsworthy. Unable to afford the \$30 million price tag associated with de-servicing a shuttle, the Museum negotiated an arrangement whereby it returned *Enterprise*, a test shuttle, to the agency in order to better position it to receive the “champion of the shuttle fleet” – *Discovery*. When NASA made its announcement, one year before *Discovery*’s arrival, the Museum and the agency had developed a shared set of themes and messages that provided the foundation for the *Welcome Discovery* communications plan.

The process of building out the plan required thorough study, represented in the SWOT analysis:

- **Strengths:** The Smithsonian’s exceptional reputation and Americans’ sense of ownership in its collections; American pride in the space program and all it symbolizes.
- **Weaknesses:** Lack of funds; Negative public perception about the “end” of the space program and the “retirement” of the shuttles; Prevalent misconception that the Smithsonian is the “nation’s attic” run by elitist, elderly scholars more concerned about the past than the future.
- **Opportunities:** Historical and scientific achievements associated with a true American treasure; Stories of people who participated in its development and missions; Involving people in an awe-inspiring experience.
- **Threats** Uncertainties relating to the complexities and logistical challenges of de-servicing, preparing, and transporting a space shuttle; Weather concerns that could prevent or delay flight; Security issues that might prevent or inhibit broad awareness and participation.

## RESEARCH

**Primary Research** – The Museum availed itself of new research conducted by the Smithsonian for the purpose of developing a brand strategy. The qualitative and quantitative research – surveys, focus groups, in-home interviews – established that, while 90% of the public recognizes and reveres the Smithsonian, people fail to understand its scope; its mission; historical, cultural and scientific assets; educational value; and relevance in the 21st century. The *Welcome Discovery* campaign was chosen to test themes and tactics of the branding initiative.

**Secondary Research** – The Museum benefitted from research conducted by NASA, with regard to public and governmental issues related to the space program and shuttle history. It drew information from visitor and exit surveys conducted at the Udvar-Hazy Center over nine years of operation, as well as the Museum’s flagship building in Washington. A market study conducted pro bono by Booz Allen Hamilton for the Udvar-Hazy Center emphasized the need to look beyond aging veterans, aviation and space enthusiasts, and typical museum visitors to young adults; families and children; “millenials;” “aware moms;” and underserved communities.

## PLANNING

Planning was accelerated in summer, 2011 when the Museum Director chartered a multi-disciplinary committee enabling Communications to work with the Space History (curatorial), Education, and Special Events departments to plan a four-day, space-themed festival to welcome *Discovery*. His primary directive: enable as many people as possible to witness the arrival, participate in the transfer ceremony, enjoy activities, and learn about the Museum and *Discovery* both on-site at the Museum and from a distance.

The team refined its plans to:

1. Produce and execute a media plan to generate international, national, and local coverage, in top-tier print, broadcast, and web-based outlets. Invite media to serve as partners in the public awareness campaign.

2. Develop and implement a flyover-viewing event – “Spot the Shuttle” – to engage the public.
3. Design and produce materials, text and image package that introduces and promotes *Discovery*. Partner with the Museum’s web team on a micro-site and social media package.
4. With NASA, create a prototype event for subsequent shuttle deliveries in other cities.
5. Develop key messages that would:
  - Launch *Discovery* into its new career as an educator inspiring future generations of explorers, scientists, thinkers;
  - Inform people of the vital, meaningful role Smithsonian plays in the life of America;
  - Tell the exciting story of the space program;
  - Establish *Discovery*’s new home in the company of the Wright Flyer, *Spirit of St. Louis*, and Apollo 11 Command Module .

## EXECUTION

The arrival of *Discovery* in the Washington area literally stopped traffic. Thousands of people gathered by landmarks, on rooftops, in schoolyards, and other locations to view the shuttle fly over the District of Columbia and Northern Virginia. The event was broadcast live in Washington and nationally on CNN, and dominated social media. Every network covered the story on multiple broadcasts and platforms.

**Launch Event.** Announce activities eight weeks in advance with a press, tourism and business leader breakfast timed to coincide with launch of micro-site, press materials, posters and event schedules

**Partnerships.** The success of the project depended on partnerships, with communications professionals of NASA, the FAA, and Washington Dulles Airport as well as public affairs officers of other Smithsonian museums; with tourism and business organizations in Washington and Virginia; with key media outlets who agreed to hold embargoed flyover details until security restrictions were lifted; with Smithsonian, NASA and other area photographers and videographers, including helicopters crews, who developed a consortium to cover and document all locations and activities

## TACTICS

- There was limited space at the airport for *Discovery*’s landing, so there was a two-pronged media outreach strategy: network and wire reporters were invited to the airport; local media were encouraged to cover the flyover in prime locations around the area.
- The museum reached out to specific media in specific beats: local weathermen in Florida and DC were targeted because weather was a fundamental factor in the story, for example.
- Non-traditional: the museum partnered with CNN iReport to encourage citizen journalists to send in their reports of the shuttle flying over Florida and all the way to DC. The museum created the hashtags #spottheshuttle and #OV103 for social media: soon local media organizations (TV, radio) started encouraging their audiences to submit images for their online photo galleries.

## EVALUATION

The Museum evaluated the success by the media coverage, including quantity and quality of coverage, and public participation. The latter could not be counted but as one individual who viewed the flyover from the roof of a tall office building recalled: “As I was watching the fly-over, I looked down onto other buildings and saw thousands of people on rooftops below, and on

sidewalks and streets. Traffic literally was stopped.” And as a national news show host said of the crowds gathered outside the Capitol, “For one hour, Washington was truly bipartisan.” Statistics on media coverage are as follows:

- 2-hour live coverage of flyover on CNN. Top of all network news broadcasts, morning and evening news; 104 page one articles in U.S. papers and a total of 10,766 stories
- Maximum media capacity onsite on April 17 and 19 (108 media at the Welcome event; 300 at ceremony)
- Set record at Washington Post for viewing of images: 4.5 million hits
- The CNN iReport [story/map/gallery](#) was featured on the CNN homepage as the top story and received 685,407 page views on the day of.
- #spottheshuttle hashtag: 1,500 tweets generated 8,718,615 impressions, reaching an audience of 5,667,247 followers within 24 hours.spottheshuttle and #OV103 were trending topic on Twitter.

Viewer and reader totals were:

- **Print:** 18,134, 873 circulation.
- **Television:** Nielsen Audience of 350,547,991.
- **Internet unique viewers:** 4,884,877,791.

The total cost of *Welcome Discovery* was \$250,000 including event costs. The total cost of publicizing and advertising, made available by sponsors, was \$46,630. The publicity value was estimated at \$31,231,078.

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