



We're All In This Boat Together - Engaging Boaters In The Effort To Protect Lake Tahoe From The Catastrophic Threat Of Aquatic Invasive Species

Smith + Jones Marketing and Tahoe Regional Planning Agency and Tahoe Resource Conservation District,
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Summary: 2013 Silver Anvil Award Winner — Community Relations — Government

When a devastating species of invasive mussel was discovered just a few hundred miles away from the famously-clear waters of Lake Tahoe, emergency actions including mandatory boat inspections were taken to protect the nation's second deepest lake. Boaters were concerned about access to the lake and their support was a top priority. Through an integrated campaign focusing on the shared commitment of target audiences, support today for the program breaks the 80 percent mark. Importantly, no invasive mussels have entered the lake. Lake Tahoe's inspection program has become a model for other lakes throughout the United States.

Community relations includes programs that aim to improve relations with, or seek to win the support or cooperation of, people or organizations in communities in which the sponsoring organization has an interest, need or opportunity. 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

In 2009, Lake Tahoe became the first lake in the Western U.S. to institute mandatory inspections of all motorized watercraft to prevent the introduction of Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS)—and the inspections would not be free. Aquatic Invasive Species (AIS) pose a catastrophic threat to Lake Tahoe, which is one of the most spectacular lakes in the U.S and designated an Outstanding National Resource Water. The potential infestation of quagga mussels alone would devastate Tahoe's native ecosystem and result in thousands of razor-sharp shells on rocks and rotting beds of dead mussels would cover the lake's pristine beaches. The potential damage would be unimaginable. AIS are mainly spread through standing water and wet areas of trailored boats and can be very difficult to detect. Their threat and methods to prevent their spread were new to boaters in the Western U.S., especially at Lake Tahoe. Boaters were expected to be surprised and disgruntled by the inspections and fee, but their buy in and support for the program were a high priority. With more than 50 organizations working to protect Lake Tahoe, the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency (TRPA) partnered with the Tahoe Resource Conservation District (Tahoe RCD) to create an integrated campaign that would prepare the boating public for the inspections and fees, improve their experience with the new program and give them the knowledge to protect all waters they use from AIS. Marketing firm Smith + Jones was contracted for creative direction and to help implement the initial year of the campaign. TRPA and Tahoe RCD launched the campaign in 2009 and have continued to evolve tactics through the main boating season every year, with measured results in 2012 far surpassing program goals.

RESEARCH

Level of knowledge and prevention practices were known to be low in Lake Tahoe. In 2005 and 2006, a survey at seven Lake Tahoe boat launches found that 82 percent of boaters “never” conducted as much as a visual inspection of their equipment for AIS after use. Potential impacts go beyond the ecosystem. The combined economic impacts to recreation value, tourism spending, property values, and increased boat/pier maintenance at Lake Tahoe from an AIS introduction is estimated at a minimum of \$22.4 million per year, whereas most inspections would cost \$30 per boat. As proven in many other waterways, in the case of AIS, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Results of the 05/06 surveys indicate that most visiting boaters are traveling to and from lakes that have similar recreational attributes as much as 500 miles away. While boaters are a diverse group (from fishing dinghies to offshore racers), a significant portion of the boating public includes local residents and second-homeowners. Past polling of these groups show they care foremost about protecting Lake Tahoe’s water quality and are in favor of TPRA’s regulatory role to that end. Word-of-mouth and local newspapers provide most information to local residents but they only make up 35 percent of the population while second homeowners are 66 percent. Seventy three percent of second homeowners live in the saturated media markets of Sacramento and the greater San Francisco Bay area.

PLANNING

With this information, the planning team identified the limited travel routes to Tahoe as a key factor in communicating. The overall strategy was to bring people together through a shared commitment to protect the lake they love and their own experience on it, while avoiding the fear-based, alienating campaigns being used in other areas to educate boaters.

Campaign Goals:

- Inform Lake Tahoe boaters of the watercraft inspection program and the threat of aquatic invasive species with a target of 75% awareness of the program as measured by boat inspection surveys.
- Develop a “buy in” to the program to alleviate frustration over inspections & fees, to be measured through telephone surveys of local residents and second homeowners with a target of two-thirds (66%) support.
- Reduce risk of AIS introduction and the need for watercraft decontaminations by increasing boater adherence to Clean, Drain and Dry habits, to be measured by decontamination records at inspection stations.
- Work with all agencies with authority to prevent the introduction of AIS, no new introductions.

A federal grant provided the initial budget of \$75,000 for the first year and \$50,000 per year thereafter. The cash budget was reserved for advertising while labor and campaign management costs were provided by in-house staff resources amounting to more than \$100,000 per year. To meet the campaign goals, a key message and call to action was to refer boaters to the website and/or call the inspection hotline for details. Boaters would be better prepared and less frustrated with clear, up-to-date information about inspection station location and protocols ahead of time and wait times would be reduced. Other key messages needed to focus on the potential impacts and financial cost of AIS introduction and the fact that inspection fees are being kept low by federal grants. Various media relations efforts would be used to raise the profile of Lake Tahoe’s inspection program and AIS worries and to gain the support of opinion leaders.

EXECUTION

To deliver key messages and improve community relations, an integrative campaign approach was used:

- Developed a strong visual brand and identity to express the role of all watercraft users and the protected status of Lake Tahoe, while including the national prevention protocol,

Clean, Drain, Dry as a tag line

- Customer Service training of inspectors to create program ambassadors at every inspection station and to put boaters at ease with the inspections
- Established an inspection hotline and website
- Billboards and outdoor advertising at strategic points on roadways used by boaters to get to Lake Tahoe
- Direct Mail—targeted mailings were adapted annually according to prior-year boater inspection information. In 2010, 25k mailers were sent to all registered mooring buoy owners and registered boaters in the six counties contiguous to Lake Tahoe. In 2011, 25k mailers were sent to registered boaters in the six contiguous counties who had launched at Lake Tahoe in 2010, and all registered boaters in the largest representative county in the inspection database (Sacramento, CA). In 2012, after awareness of the program had reached 97 percent, 8k mailers were sent to all out-of-basin boaters in the database
- Boat inspection newsletter and e-news service
- Print advertising in visitor and recreation-related publications and local newspapers
- Developed specific rack cards for motorized and non-motorized boaters and a waterproof Blue Boating Map with Clean, Drain, Dry message and giving readers specific information on how to be a “blue boater” as well as practical info about Lake Tahoe
- Bilge cloth giveaway and trade booth at boat and RV shows and classic wooden boat regattas
- Media Relations: Generated releases and media coverage about the fight to protect Lake Tahoe from AIS. Other stories focused on projects to control invasive species already in the lake that were introduced before inspections began
- To raise the national profile of the program, TRPA enlisted the support of congressional and state legislators to include funding for and language about the program in the reauthorization bill for the Lake Tahoe Restoration Act
- TRPA used the attention of the media to deliver positive messages about the inspections during the 2011 and 2012 annual Federal Lake Tahoe Summit to gain recognition of the pre-emptive steps and leadership Lake Tahoe had taken regarding AIS

EVALUATION

Campaign messages were successfully delivered through customer interaction, advertising, media coverage, outreach activities and opinion leaders to reach the target audience as effectively as possible. Website traffic and hotline calls increased year-on-year and inspectors received positive feedback from visitors and local boaters. Varying measurement tools were used. The first two years of the campaign resulted in 97 percent awareness of the inspection program among the target audience, surpassing the 75 percent goal. In the third year, public support for the inspection program broke 80 percent, and by 2012, the rate of compliance with the Clean, Drain, Dry method reached 63 percent. In the beginning of the campaign, only 18 percent of boaters did so much as a visual inspection of their boat at the ramps. However, the ultimate measurement of success for Lake Tahoe is that there continues to be zero detection of quagga mussel in the trillions of gallons of water in Lake Tahoe. Unfortunately, in the time that the campaign has run, more than 12 lakes in Western U.S. have detected the introduction of quagga mussels. Another result is creation of a popular, recognizable campaign that other watershed managers have requested to use as a communications umbrella for their own programs.