

Letting the world know

Comprehensive media relations campaign is an award-winner.

GEI Consultants (Woburn, MA) is a 450-person company that has completed over 25,000 projects in the U.S., Canada, and more than 20 other countries from around the world. As with most firms, they've benefited greatly from word-of-mouth advertising. But with stakeholders spread far and wide, simply letting their work speak for itself wasn't sufficient for spreading the word. GEI sought the power of the media.

"This business is built on reputation and experience, so highlighting strengths and getting the endorsement of clients and partners is valuable to our firm and brand. Lots of companies do great work, but it's worthless if no one knows about it," says Christopher Stockwell, GEI's chief marketing officer.

The idea

GEI enlisted the service of Rhino Public Relations and launched a national media relations campaign to increase the firm's visibility in the marketplace. Rhino and GEI's corporate communications team developed a program designed to enhance the firm's image as experts in their field, while branding them as "a leading national provider of consulting engineering and scientific services," and a "trusted advisor to clients."

"We have embarked on a very objective, factual-oriented campaign that doesn't boast about our accomplishments, but rather highlights projects and teams we're working on innovations, client milestones, technical awards, and company and employee advancements," Stockwell says.

DETAILS

FIRM SIZE: 450 employees.

MARKETING TACTIC: Media relations campaign.

COSTS: In 2009, a budget was set at \$92,700, with actual expenditures of \$85,000.

RESULTS: ZweigWhite Marketing Excellence Award (2010), SMPS Marketing Communications Awards (2009, 2010), Publicity Club of New England Bell Ringer Award (2009).



Christopher Stockwell, GEI's chief marketing officer, and Kelly Cohane, corporate marketing manager.

A market analysis identified media sources focused on GEI's service areas and that of its competitors. This research resulted in the creation of a media database, which includes not only media opportunities, but speaking engagements at industry functions as well. A ranking system for news releases was developed based on distribution area and a go/no-go process was implemented for quality assurance purposes.

The communications program was first piloted in 2007 and concentrated on the firm's staff in the New England region.

"Engineers are often skeptical when it comes to media relations, but we found that by introducing this program to one region first helped us to get buy-in and support, which helped to solidify and validate the need for the program," says Kelly Cohane, corporate marketing manager.

Other GEI offices from around the country subsequently received "PR 101" training to familiarize themselves with the specific objectives of the campaign. Staff members participated in idea strategy, and were given instructions on interviewing, writing and editing techniques. These sessions also helped to ensure that written materials maintained a consistent voice across practice areas and regions.

While Stockwell, Cohane and GEI's corporate communication team were responsible for determining the strategic direction, the task of producing content and tracking results was entrusted to Rhino. The collaboration is an ongoing process and has proven beneficial.

"We have an elaborate approval process and Rhino PR acts as a watchdog, making sure that nothing leaves the building without appropriate approvals. Every article, every press release, has to be perfect," Stockwell says.

The results

GEI's stated goal was to annually complete 36 media-related initiatives, a number that was easily surpassed in 2009, when 71 initiatives were completed. Using measurements that included number of press releases issued, published articles, editorial ops, speaking engagements and industry awards, last year's formal media campaign enjoyed five-fold growth over 2007's efforts, when an informal process was still in place. The 2009 campaign also resulted in 251 instances of media coverage.

In addition to increasing the firm's visibility, the campaign has also been recognized with several industry awards. GEI's efforts earned them first place in the media relations category of this publication's 2010 Marketing Excellence Awards. Rhino Public Relations took home a third-place Marketing Communications Award at the Society of Marketing Professional Services national conference this past July and a Bell Ringer Award from the Publicity Club of New England.

Want to try it?

According to research that was conducted during the campaign, not many of GEI's competitors have an active media relations program. With the current recession limiting project opportunities, increased visibility is essential to competing in the market place.

A program of GEI's magnitude would be difficult to implement entirely in-house. While there are no shortage of public relations consultants throughout the country ready to take such an assignment, Stockwell recommends finding one familiar with the needs of A/E firms and the markets they serve.

"The program really clicked for us and I think it has a lot to do with the fact that our media relations consultant understands our industry and has engaged with our staff on a very deep level," he says. In addition to finding the right consultant, winning the hearts and minds of technical staff is also imperative. GEI counts the approval earned from its technical staff as one measure of the program's success. ■▲