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PROMOTING NEWARK'S CHERRY BLOSSOMS: GOING OUT ON A LIMB?

BY

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ABSTRACT

Although every parks and recreation agency can benefit from a well-planned promotion program, it may be difficult to execute due to bureaucratic and budgetary restrictions. Such restrictions, however, can be overcome with creativity, intuition and lots of in-house support. This article discusses the success enjoyed by a county parks department in promoting an annual cherry blossom celebration in an urban area--despite lack of funds, a negative reputation and a number of unique problems.

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INTRODUCTION

Back in 1928, the sister of a department store magnate donated 2,050 Japanese cherry trees to Branch Brook Park in Newark, New Jersey. This wasn't the first time Branch Brook Park was singled out for a unique venture. Branch Brook is, after all, the first county park established in the United States and was designed by the famed Frederick Law Olmsted and Sons. So, the hundreds of thousands of visitors who flock to see the cherry trees blossom with millions of pink and white petals each spring are entirely appropriate; the park has a heritage which seems to demand a celebrated destiny.

Indeed, visiting Branch Brook's cherry blossoms has become a ritual which signifies the arrival of spring for many New Jerseyans. For three weeks in April, the park is aflame with the blossoms of 2,700 trees. During this short, yet spectacular period, visitors walk, drive and bicycle through the park, oohing and aahing as they smell the light, refreshing scent of fresh grass and budding blossoms.

A promoter's dream, right? An annual, well-known natural attraction which has been known to draw 150,000 persons in one 11-hour period must be a cinch to publicize. Actually, yes and no. There are many pros and cons in the positive promotion of the Cherry Blossom Celebration. Many issues arise which have a direct bearing on the public's receptiveness to the display. The following paragraphs will explain many of the problems--albeit some merely perceptual problems--and highlight the positive attributes as well. In addition, you will be "walked through" a successful promotional scheme useful for this type of endeavor.

Granted, Branch Brook's blooming cherry trees are breathtaking and have been quite well-known since World War II when they really took off in popularity. (The Japanese cherry trees were shunned during the war.) Reflecting their popularity are the hundreds of inquiries received by the Essex County Department of Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs, which manages the park. And yes, the park has more cherry trees than even the famous cherry blossom display around the Tidal Basin in Washington, D.C. (We have 2,700 to their 650). Yet, why does Branch Brook's Cherry Blossom Celebration suffer from an identity crisis?

There are several reasons.

- 1) The display is located in Newark and Belleville, New Jersey.
- 2) The display is not in New York City.
- 3) There is a lack of funding for promotion.

First of all, being located in Newark, even in part, is a detriment--Newark suffers a negative reputation. Because of bad press surrounding the city's 1967 riots many people perceive it as less than desirable to visit. Therefore, many fear travelling to Newark, even though they are safer walking through Branch Brook Park during a spring Saturday afternoon with thousands of other park visitors, than they would be in their own suburban backyard alone after dark. These people need to be reassured that the cherry blossom display is a safe, convenient family-oriented attraction.

Second, the cherry blossoms suffer from growing up on the wrong side of the (Hudson) river. Here in New Jersey, where we recently received our only Very High Frequency (VHF) television station, we constantly lose out when it comes to television coverage. Because six out of the seven VHF stations originate out of Manhattan, virtually all the news is New York-based. To twist a cliché, good news is no news, especially if it is from New Jersey. In other words, the little New Jersey news that is broadcast is usually about fires, murders or toxic dump sites. Trying to get television coverage for a positive event like the Cherry Blossom Celebration is, more often than not, an exercise in futility.

And finally, funding is a problem. Because the cherry blossoms do not generate income and because many people will come to see them with no promotion, it is difficult to justify funding when the county has so many other priorities, like keeping jails secured, roads paved and courts operating. For whatever reason, the Cherry Blossom Celebration gets virtually no county money except for staff time.

So, universal as well as unique problems exist. Do we go ahead and plan a celebration with no money, like interest from the television medium and a large, untapped audience which is scared to visit the attraction? IS IT WORTH GOING OUT ON A LIMB FOR CHERRY BLOSSOMS?

DEFINITELY! Using a variety of techniques, many of these problems can be overcome to a large extent. And should the cherry blossom celebration become successful, the County of Essex, the Parks Department, the cities of Newark and Belleville--even the state of New Jersey--will all benefit from the positive publicity and goodwill generated by the effort.

SOWING THE SEEDS

The Cherry Blossom Celebration consists of a month-long series of cultural and recreational events in Branch Brook Park and surrounding areas. The cherry blossoms appear each April regardless of these events. (Our maintenance staff spends 2,000 hours each year making sure they do!) We have the initial attraction--the blooming trees--but we go even further in providing additional enticements.

We choose a theme each year to tie the many facets of the celebration together. For instance, in 1983, we took advantage of Newark's history as a jazz mecca and called the celebration "Cherry Blossoms and All That Jazz." Obviously, numerous jazz concerts and workshops illustrated the theme. The 1984 celebration was christened "East Meets West," reflecting the Japanese origin of the trees. All cherry blossom events had a Japanese influence.

TENDING THE CROP

Once we had our theme and basic events in place, including cultural performances and an annual 10-kilometer race called the Cherry Blossom Run, we devised many ways to promote our product. Most media coverage is free due to lack of funds. We need to make the media aware of our events at little or no cost.

PUBLICITY

1. Hold a press conference. Each year, we run a formal press conference/luncheon to acquaint the press, county officials and local leaders with the month's activities. The conference is held late in March or early April, lasts one to two hours and is underwritten by a corporation or local organization. We have press packets available, which include a number of press releases, brochure and photographs.

2. Send out press releases. In all, the Cherry Blossom Celebration is the topic of 20 different press releases or more. A few may promote the Cherry Blossom Run, others the concerts, still others the history of the park. The key is to find a variety of ways to send out our message, which is "Visit the Cherry Blossoms." When we send out material announcing alternate bus service to the park, the prizes for the race or the performers for a concert, we simply increase our chances that the media will find the celebration newsworthy. Don't be afraid to send out more than one release on an event, especially if there is more than one "angle" to promote. Not every editor will use everything, but most editors will use something.

3. Use your own existing publications. The Essex County Department of Parks, Recreation and Cultural Affairs prints a quarterly calendar of its own events, which is a two-color, 12-page tabloid with a press run of 75,000 per quarter. The printing is included in the operating budget, and is used to the fullest advantage.

ADVERTISING

Very little advertising is purchased for the celebration. Usually the Race Director of the Cherry Blossom Run pays for two ads--one in a state-wide running magazine and one in the Sunday edition of Newark's daily newspaper. Total advertising expenditure is less than \$1,000.

1. Paid advertising. Closely examine the rates, reach, frequency, delivery, selectivity and efficiency of your advertising. Make sure you're getting your money's worth. For example, we discontinued the daily newspaper ad for the Cherry Blossom Run. The cost of the ad (\$700) did not return the desired number of race applicants. (Twenty-eight people sent in the coupon at \$5 per entry.)

2. Public service announcements. Send out psas to radio and television stations. Prepare them in 10, 20, 30 and 60-second lengths and send them out 6-8 weeks prior to the event. Accompany the television spots with color slides--it's the cheapest way to provide TV with visuals. We've cracked though New York stations with this approach, getting free psas at some of the highest-rated times of the day.

3. Billboards. Many outdoor advertising companies will give billboard space to non-profit organizations during intervals when no paid account is scheduled for space. The only cost is the printing charges, which may start as low as \$400 for 40-50 billboards. We've arranged for billboards to urge people to "Donate a cherry tree in Branch Brook." This reminds people to visit the park and it provides a way of increasing the tree collection.

4. Public transportation advertising. Buses, subways, trains and streetcars all carry advertising. Talk to transit companies for public service space. The PATH trains, a heavily utilized commuter subway between New York City and Newark, carries posters which direct people to Branch Brook's display, via their line. Also, local bus lines are providing similar advertising.

5. Brochures. Since printing dollars only go so far, we seek outside funding for a comprehensive pamphlet listing the many activities of the Cherry Blossom Celebration. More than 10,000 are printed free of charge by a local health insurance company.

PERSONAL CONTACT

Personal contacts are an integral part of an overall promotion program. To take advantage of this form of promotion, we've set up three important programs.

1. Cherry Blossom Information Booths. Years ago, two Japanese-style portable pagodas were donated to the county by a local community group. These booths are placed in the park during the cherry blossom weekends, when most of the tourists pass through. Staffed by knowledgeable and personable employees, the booths provide many things:

a) High visibility for the department.

b) A sense of safety and convenience for park visitors.

c) A chance to further publicize upcoming events through distribution of material.

d) Revenue provided by sale of film (to photograph cherry blossoms), postcards and posters.

This venture is virtually cost-free since employees receive compensatory time for staffing the booths. Volunteers from various community groups are also recruited to assist with staffing.

2. Group Tours. Sponsoring organizations provide their group with transportation and our department provides tour guides at no cost. Tours include a ride through the park with an interesting historical overview. Group tours are excellent ways of presenting your information to interested and focused individuals (a.k.a. captive audience!).

3. Reporter Tours. Upon request, we give tours of the park to reporters. Again, this is a vital, effective way of imparting information. You might try arranging a special group tour for

media personnel only--a type of press conference on wheels!

SPECIAL PROMOTIONS

Special promotions draw attention to your overall product and should be planned carefully and executed well. A few campaigns that have worked well in Essex County have been:

1. Special Limited Edition Poster. In 1983, a local graphic artist offered his services for the design of a poster. Printing costs were picked up by corporations and 300 of these limited edition frameable posters were sold out at \$20 each. Proceeds went to purchase new trees.
2. Cherry Blossom Photo Contest. Thanks to a local camera merchant who donated \$450 in prizes, we ran a successful photo contest at no cost. We yielded a stockpile of excellent photographs for future publicity purposes.
3. Display at World Trade Center. If Muhammed won't come to the mountain . Since New York media refuse to attend our press conferences and resist running our publicity, we took our message in the form of a display to the World Trade Center in Manhattan. While the press showed mild interest, the public was receptive and enthusiastic. Total cost was \$200 for set-up charges.

REAPING THE BENEFITS

There you have it--a month-long celebration which reaches millions of people for about \$5,000 in donated costs and services. In terms of staff, we use a coordinator of events, a coordinator of promotion, a graphic artist and a race director. Some 50 other staff members are called upon as needed.

The results range from nearly 100 new cherry trees a year to a healthy increase in park visitors. In addition, informal public feedback indicates a more positive and informed attitude towards the County Parks Department. The public's unsolicited reaction to the Department's efforts were received at the information booths, photo contest awards ceremony and Cherry Blossom Run. In general, the public not only admired the blossom display, but the willingness of the Department to enhance the public's enjoyment of them.

More specifically, many visitors became less reluctant to visit Newark, and more New Yorkers visited than ever before. (In fact, the New York newspapers run more articles each year and the television stations are, at least, acknowledging our phone calls.) Alas, funding still comes from private support and that gets harder every year. Perhaps when they see the Cherry Blossom Celebration on the six o'clock news . . .