

Case Study #CS588:

[Guerrilla Marketing to Aid Katrina Victims](#)

SUMMARY: Have you ever wanted to use your marketing skills to help mankind (instead of just your employer's bottom line)? Get inspired by this Case Study of six marketers who are currently putting in 40-hour weeks -- in addition to their regular day jobs -- to help Katrina victims find housing. Includes notes on how blog mentions can turn into a wave of public interest.

CHALLENGE

48 hours after Hurricane Katrina made landfall August 29th, Web designer Joel Otterstrom told his sister how frustrated he was that he couldn't personally help hurricane survivors in some palpable way beyond donating money.

"Isn't there something you can do with your Web skills?" she asked.

Galvanized, Otterstrom ran to his PC to register a new domain -- KatrinaHousing.org. Then he called two of his coworkers and together they worked through the night getting a site up online.

The idea -- to create an easily searchable online database where people could offer up housing to Katrina victims. The site launched at 1 a.m. on September first, and by 9 a.m., 10 Web visitors had filled out the online form to offer housing.

In the meantime, the Red Cross announced as many as 450,000 people would need housing. Otterstrom called a friend, marketing consultant Paul Wilson, and asked him to volunteer to get the word out about the site to meet this extraordinary need.

Not only was there no budget, there was very little time. Public interest in disaster relief is generally focused in a short time period -- days, perhaps a few weeks.

CAMPAIGN

Otterstrom had already done four things right:

- Instead of relying on himself, he reached out to tap voluntary power of his entire circle of colleagues and friends and, in turn, their connections. He created a community to help a community.

- His chosen URL KatrinaHousing.org felt official, was easy to spell, and easy to remember. It wasn't a personal URL or a tack-on folder at the end of a company or blog domain.

- The site was search engine optimized for maximum pickup by bots. Example, the home page title read "Katrina Volunteer and Housing Opportunities."

- The site's mission was highly focused, so it was more possible to be successful, and it could partner with non-competitive organizations also providing relief in the same area.

Now Wilson stepped in to take advantage of these factors with a concerted buzz marketing campaign.

Step #1. Partnerships make the world go around

Voluntary Web efforts to help Katrina victims were proliferating. Wilson immediately began pitching relevant ones on consolidation. He explained that it's not about ego -- it's about helping the victims and the best way to help them is to put the community's effort behind one central site.

In addition, volunteers contacted local and state governments, other nonprofits, and private industry asking for help, information and accreditation.

Step #2. Involve the blogging community

Next Wilson and a growing team of volunteers branched out across the Web looking for every blog, forum and online bulletin board they could find where the topic of hurricane relief was being discussed. They often found blogs and boards in unexpected places, such as a board on eBay.

If the blog asked folks to post notes about resources, Wilson's team posted a link to KatrinaHousing.org. They were careful to make the notes fit the site and not appear spammy (comment spam is a growing problem in the blog world, causing some blogs to shut down comments altogether).

Key: Notes clearly mentioned that KatrinaHousing.org didn't want to compete with any blog, but simply to complement them.

To that end, KatrinaHousing.org offered return links to all relevant sites and blogs requesting them. Bloggers and site owners could use an easy online form to submit their URL for a link from the KatrinaHousing.org site.

Step #3. Launch your own blog

The volunteers behind the site also launched their own blog, partly because they wanted to share their sense of excitement and community, but also because it was a smart search engine optimization tool.

In the first 48 hours they posted nearly 100 notes, including dashed-off updates and cross-links to related blogs and organizations.

Step #4. Mainstream PR

Wilson wrote up press releases for volunteers to post, including releases for posting on the .org site (great for search engine optimization) as well as a series of four releases for Otterstrom's company site.

Wilson didn't have a budget for a formal wire release, so he sent copies of releases via email to personal contacts in the local press and a few reporters he knew on the national level.

He also asked private industry who were donating services to help the group to issue their own releases via wire services if possible. The goal was to get the word out to the national press and also to get some releases into the feeds at Yahoo News and Google News where they'd be read by the public and picked up by yet more bloggers.

In addition, Wilson recruited Nick Sowards, a volunteer PR professional, to staff the site's PR email and phone line and deal with incoming calls so there would be as little delay as possible in the first critical week.

Step #5. Getting the word out to survivors

Most Katrina survivors who needed housing didn't have Internet access. So the team partnered with private industry to get a toll-free 800 line set up and staffed. A national company donated the use of its call center during the emergency.

Then Wilson designed a simple one-page flyer featuring the 800 number and had hundreds of them printed up at a Houston-area shop. Nathan Foye, a Texan volunteer who also ran his own Katrina-related site, KatrinaUnited, made a spirited plea at his local church for helpers to distribute the flyers to everyone possible at the Astrodome.

RESULTS

KatrinaHousing.org currently offers 171,107 beds. In its first two weeks, the baby organization had already placed almost 5,000 families and individuals in volunteered homes.

The first search engine crawlers showed up in a matter of hours, including bots from MSN, Google and AskJeeves. Site traffic began very slowly with a few hundred Thursday September 1st (Wilson's first day on the "job"), resulting in 800 bed listings (a single listing could have more than one bed).

Traffic bumped to 1,624 visitors on Friday, September 2nd, resulting in 7,100 additional beds.

Then traffic exploded over the weekend as consumers at home surfed the Web for Katrina news. 10,133 visitors came on Saturday and 11,937 on Sunday. (Link below to an Alexa site traffic chart showing the spike and subsequent drop-off rate.)

Wilson notes, it was only when beds available hit 100,000 that the numbers of new postings began to start slowing down.

Press mentions began slowly and mounted in the same way. Although Wilson sent out the press release on Friday, he didn't get any press calls until the following Tuesday after the Labor Day weekend. And then, the calls were coming from national media whom he had never contacted. It turns out that the local media wrote stories about the effort based on his press release, without ever contacting Wilson in person, and the national media picked up on it. Only after national stories began running did the local media begin calling.

Then partner press releases kicked in to keep interest sustained. Currently Google News lists 95 press mentions about the site. Wilson did interviews with NBC News, Fox News, CBS and The New York Times among other outlets.

The team's own blog was a definite aid to traffic, plus it helped potential partners quickly feel more comfortable with the real people behind the site. However, within a week the amount of potential fraud postings from the blog's comments field was becoming a real problem. Unable to police every comment, and unwilling to publish a blog without offering the public the ability to provide feedback, the team took their blog down later in the month.

External blog and bulletin traffic was responsible for much of the initial surge before press mentions kicked in. eBay's boards sent the most traffic.

Katrinahomes.billhennessy.com was second in terms of driving traffic. Nola.com, a favorite New Orleans website for locals, was third. Other blog mentions represented a true cross section of America, from the AskAStripper blog to HomeSchoolBlogger.

Useful links related to this article

Creative samples related to this campaign:

<http://www.marketingsherpa.com/katrina/study.html>

MyFamily Inc - the company that donated some lines in their Ancestry.com call center to handle survivor calls: <http://www.myfamilyinc.com>

Verio - the company that donated site hosting and also paid for a press release to go out over the wires: <http://www.verio.com>

WordPress - the blogging software the volunteers used to run their blog
<http://www.wordpress.com>

MarketingSherpa's Hurricane Katrina Resources Page for Marketing, Advertising, & PR Professionals (Open access):

<http://www.marketingsherpa.com/sample.cfm?contentID=3068>

MyTechSupport - Otterstrom's day job: <http://www.mytechsupport.com>

KatrinaHousing.org: <http://www.katrinahousing.org>