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Weber Shandwick Is No. 9 on Ad Age's Agency A-List

While Consumer PR Was Hit by the Recession, This Powerhouse Grew and Brought in New Accounts

By MICHAEL BUSH

NEW YORK (AdAge.com) – Ask any public relations honcho to name which agency consistently turns out effective consumer PR campaigns, and if they respond truthfully (remember these are PR pros we're talking about), they'll likely say Weber Shandwick. Even the fiercest of competitors routinely cite Weber as the one shop they least want to tangle with in a new business pitch.

And it's no wonder, since shops that went up against Weber in 2009 often came out on the losing end.

The PR powerhouse brought in \$50 million in new accounts last year, including the likes of Samsung, PepsiCo, HSBC, Juniper Networks, HP and Wisk. Consumer PR was a space hard hit by the recession, as Americans grasped for every last penny and traded down to private label brands. But Weber – which elevated value messaging for several clients – managed to grow its consumer business 5% nationally and more than 20% in its flagship New York office.

Along with new accounts, Weber grew business accounts like Unilever, American Airlines, ExxonMobil, Microsoft, Holiday Inn and Johnson & Johnson. It's worth noting too that while Weber's global revenues were slightly down to about \$400 million, its U.S. revenues were up slightly – a feat accomplished by few in the PR space in 2009.

But in many ways, Weber has always been an anomaly in finding success where others have not. After all, the agency, led by CEO Harris Diamond, Chairman Jack Leslie and President Andy Polansky, was formed in 2001 after a series of mergers between three shops. Agency mashups can be disastrous, but Weber's sum is better than its individual parts were.

Big ideas

Laurie Schalow, senior director of public relations at KFC, a Weber client since 2004, isn't surprised Weber managed to grow despite a tough economic environment. "I have worked with multiple agencies, and Weber is number one in terms of thinking creatively," Ms. Schalow said. "They bring us ideas that not only break through the clutter, but are brand-building, help generate sales and raise awareness."

Last year, KFC charged Weber with developing the strategy and execution behind the brand's grilled-chicken launch, and the result was a national PR sensation that became the fast-food chain's most successful product launch in history, generating over 300 million media impressions. Weber planned the unveiling of the product at New York City's famed Friars Club, which was "unofficially" called the "UNFriars Club" for the event. And to promote KFC's commitment to always serving "fresh" and never frozen chicken, the agency "refreshed" pot-



Sam Hadley

WEBER SHANDWICK

CEO: Harris Diamond

EMPLOYEES: 1,500

CLIENTS: KFC, Electrolux

holes across the country and spray painted the KFC logo on them after they were repaired.

"I am aggressive ... we don't do traditional PR 101 type things, and they are right there with me," said Ms. Schalow.

For client Electrolux, which charged Weber with the task of launching its new laundry appliances while continuing to shed its image as the maker of grandma's vacuum, Weber went digital. With the help of celebrity spokeswoman Kelly Ripa, Weber targeted on-the-go women aged 35-55 with a virtual bake sale for charity, and got out the word about a digital cupcake app created by Electrolux's creative shop DDB. The Electrolux Cupcake Maker allowed visitors to design their own cupcakes on Ms. Ripa's online community Kelly Confidential and on the community Facebook page, sold limited-edition "Wear Your Heart on

Your Sleeve” T-shirts and auctioned off a kitchen on eBay with 100% of the proceeds going to the Ovarian Cancer Research Fund.

The results were impressive. Electrolux laundry sales increased 61% during launch week compared to the week before; the target audience sent more than 165,000 cupcakes; Kelly Confidential got more than 174,000 visits, more than 3,000 Facebook fans, 904,000 page views and 43,800 new registered users; and more than \$45,000 was donated to OCRF.

Integration

Mary Kay Kopf, CMO for Electrolux Major Appliances North America, said Weber’s ability to inte-

grate traditional and social elements enabled the company to interact with consumers at a new level. “It drove perception and awareness of our brand and helped make a tremendous impact on our sales,” Ms. Kopf said. “They turned a launch campaign into a season that we can keep delivering every 90 days so we can stay fresh with our target consumers. We have built an extensive online community of people that are engaged with our brand and spreading awareness through word-of-mouth. And that’s driving sales.”

Weber is now staging social media efforts for more than 30% of its clients, and the digital practice was the agency’s biggest area of growth last

year. Mr. Polansky said: “More clients are looking to us to drive integrated campaigns, which we don’t look at as online or offline, but inline. We’re sitting in a great place to engage consumers across multiple platforms.”

“The myth was there were online and offline people, and that’s just not true,” said Mr. Diamond. “You have to be talking to them everywhere, and that’s where PR is the best tool for corporations now. More and more, we’re becoming the brand stewards rather than the brand tactical executors. Our people are being asked to drive the programs, whereas in the past the creative or direct guys were driving.”

CONTRIBUTING: MICHAEL BUSH

WEBER SHANDWICK

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