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2004 Creativity Award: Carmel-by-the-Sea: Dog Heaven on Earth

Year: 2004

Category: **Consumer Marketing - new & established product or service**

Country: USA

Client: Carmel-by-the-Sea

PR Agency: Graham & Associates, Inc.

Awarded Type: **Creativity Award**

Carmel-by-the-Sea, a village 2.5 hours south of San Francisco, California, was facing intense competition to attract local, regional and national visitors. Graham & Associates was hired to generate renewed media interest and subsequently increase tourism. Carmel, known for its old-world charm, offers little new developments or competitive specials, so the team had to get creative. With a limited budget, Graham developed “Dog Heaven on Earth” featuring Carmel as a dog-

friendly travel destination. The concept was a big hit with the media, and subsequent stories ran all over the U.S.

Statement of Problem/Opportunity

After September 11, 2001, America's travel habits changed with a dramatic drop in travel. Air travel hit all-time lows. Americans focused primarily on domestic rather than overseas travel. As a result, U.S. destinations launched aggressive marketing campaigns, announcing competitive specials, plus splashy new features. For Carmel, this trend was problematic.

Graham & Associates developed a 12-month marketing communications plan, including a Q4 campaign focused on packages. Given recent trends, media attention was increasingly difficult to capture. The agency faced two challenges: 1) lack of competitive packages and specials from Carmel compared to those offered by other destinations; and 2) lack of compelling news. As a result, Carmel experienced a dramatic drop in occupancy, and business was declining in its famous galleries and shops. Graham decided to re-invent the planned fourth quarter outreach to inspire renewed and ongoing media interest and consequently drive tourism.

Research

Research began in May 2003. In brainstorming ideas, one stood out: Carmel's dog-friendliness. There was at least one dog-friendly hotel and dogs ran unleashed on the public beach. If dog-friendliness was citywide – that was our campaign – "Dog Heaven on Earth." Considering the glut of travel news driven by specials and packages, Graham believed "Dog Heaven" would stand out with a warm, "furry" appeal. For confirmation, we tapped primary and secondary research sources.

The team combed city guides and websites identifying dog-friendly hotels, restaurants, galleries, shops, etc. We interviewed businesses owners, a long-

time resident and the mayor to gather dog facts and capture details on the city's love for dogs. Finally, an agency team member spent a day in Carmel with a resident dog, touring shops, galleries, the beach, hotels and restaurants. In the end, it was confirmed: Carmel was indeed dog-friendly.

We also researched recent travel trends published by national travel associations. Since Sept. 11, air travel dropped dramatically (TIA, 2002); car travel was on the rise (TIA, *Summer Travel Intentions Survey*, April 2002) and leisure travel was up (TIA, *Domestic Travel Market Report*, June 2002). More recent reports by AAA of Northern California (June 2003) and the Travel Industry Association of America (May 2003) also showed increased car travel, but, more interestingly, increased travel with family and pets.

We determined the campaign had mass appeal – people were traveling by car and bringing families, pets included, along on vacations.

Planning

The agency's primary objectives were simple: create renewed interest in Carmel with travel media on a local, regional and national level and generate coverage during the slower fall and winter months. With the campaign idea finalized, we identified which markets to target. Carmel attracts a large drive market from both Southern and Northern California. Additionally, the Monterey Peninsula, where Carmel is located, attracts visitors from all over the U.S. The PR program would target the regional California drive market, as well as national consumer media.

With a tight budget of \$17,000, our strategy had to be immediate and targeted. The strategy was as follows: 1) create a creative and unique campaign to attract media attention away from the "noise" in the market; 2) work with a select number of national/local newspapers and local radio stations to generate immediate attention for Carmel during the summer travel season; 3) use buzz from the first set of media targets to drive interest with long-lead consumer

publications, additional newspapers and broadcast stations to sustain coverage during the slow season.

Key messages communicated that Carmel remains a desirable destination for local, regional and national travelers, while leading the trend of catering to those canine travelers by offering dog-friendly hotels, restaurants, shops, art galleries, etc. A secondary message was that Carmel makes a great drive destination, pooch and all. Graham proposed the campaign to the City's Marketing Committee. Everyone was enthusiastically and unanimously on-board. Graham developed a fun and informative press release, highlighting relevant travel trends, Carmel as a dog-friendly destination, and key attractions, for example, the hotel owned by Doris Day welcomes canine guests and a local restaurant features a "Doggie Menu" with dishes like Hot Diggity Dog.

Execution

Beginning June 2003, the release was pitched to select media, including national/local newspapers and radio stations. Immediate response came from local radio – KGO-810 AM in San Francisco and KFCO in Santa Cruz, which helped generate awareness in the local drive market. Shortly afterward, one of the agency's main targets, *USA Today*, sent a writer to stay in Carmel with his family and dog. At the end of July, Carmel was on the cover of *USA Today's* "Life" section as a half-page color photo and text, plus a full page of text and photos on page 2. The story also ran on USAToday.com and included additional photos.

The *USA Today* piece directly resulted in a 2-page feature with photos in the *National Examiner*. Additional coverage included a radio piece on KNX 1070 in Los Angeles, and Knight Ridder picked up the *Contra Costa Times* story to run in 31 newspapers nationwide (dates pending).

Graham then followed up with long-lead publications, plus other newspapers and broadcast stations, resulting in articles in outlets such as Delta Airlines' *SkyWest* magazine, travel trade publications *TravelAge West* and *Travel*

Weekly, and a feature on NBC3 in San Jose, Calif. “Dog Heaven” was resonating with journalists.

Evaluation

By taking a quirky feature of Carmel –dog-friendliness – and tying it to current travel trends, the agency generated renewed interest from travelers and travel media. “Dog Heaven” accomplished the primary objective of re-establishing Carmel as a top vacation spot, generating stories that primarily focused on the various attributes of Carmel, including details of dog-friendly hotels and restaurants. Coverage translated into a dramatic increase in inquiries at the Carmel Visitors Bureau. Our client stated in the Chamber of Commerce newsletter, “The response to Carmel’s recent ‘Dog Heaven’ publicity has been overwhelming. Never have I received so many requests for pet friendly accommodations, restaurants and pooch boutiques.”

Print circulation combined is 12,207,559 or 36,622,677 consumer impressions (not including pending stories), with key messages frequently used and "Dog Heaven on Earth" as the news headline. The visibility garnered from the *USA Today* print and online pieces alone has an equivalent paid advertising value of \$475,860. The agency continues to respond to inquiries and currently has several media opportunities in the works, including in-flight publications (Southwest Spirit), consumer/lifestyle magazines (*Coast* in Orange County, Calif., *D*, the city magazine for Dallas, TX, *Angelino* and *Riviera* in Los Angeles, *Chicago Style* and *Sunset*). The nation caught on to what Carmel’s 847 four-legged residents have always known – Carmel is truly “Dog Heaven on Earth.”