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Contemporary Camping California-Style

[Graham & Associates](#)

In May 2002, the travel industry was in a tailspin due to September 11 and the economy in a slump. El Capitan Canyon, a campground just north of Santa Barbara, had just completely transformed the property into a luxury outdoorsy experience and approached Graham & Associates about a national launch. Old trampled campsites and RV hookups were replaced with plush cedar cabins and white canvas safari tents. A Canyon Kitchen served everything from sm'ore kits to lattes. A great concept, but was it the right timing to launch such a property, would consumers want to go?

With a mere few weeks to develop a strategic plan, there was no time to hit long-leads in advance, find and screen campers for testimonials or plan a stunt. In late May, with the reservation books looking grim throughout the summer, Graham & Associates had to develop a highly effective PR program and be in full swing by mid-June. It was a question of attracting visitors via PR or folding up the tents. Literally.

The program was bold, simple and understandably risky: establish a new travel category, Contemporary Camping, and aggressively hit short lead media outlets to immediately get press that would drive reservations. Not even 30 days into the program, bookings were up over 300%. As you will see, the plan worked.

Graham & Associates faced several challenges and seemingly fewer opportunities. Travel and tourism as a category was tanking, but on the other hand, what travel was taking place was close to home and more family orientated. El Capitan Canyon was close to major drive markets and suited to families. At the time, luxury camping was an undefined travel category with no consumer awareness whatsoever.

This fact was certainly a challenge especially given the short time frame Graham & Associates had to generate awareness, but it also afforded El Capitan Canyon the opportunity to be a leader in a new category. With the high-season just around the corner, and bookings too low to sustain the property, the stakes were really high. The PR launch of the luxury campground had to build enough awareness to fill tents and cabins in time for the summer rush. Additionally, the budget for the national summer launch was just \$27,000.

Given time and budget constraints, Graham & Associates did not conduct in-depth research, but rather tapped existing research. Study after study published in late 2001 and the 1st quarter of 2002 indicated that consumer travel habits changed significantly as a result of the events of September 11 and the economy: air travel dropped dramatically; occupancy rates at luxury hotels were off significantly; car travel was on the rise; leisure travel was way up; and people were vacationing more often with family and friends.

El Capitan Canyon, located in toney Santa Barbara, a place that draws a great deal of the drive market from California, was in a great position to fulfill a new untapped travel niche. Several facts supported this conclusion:

Leisure travel was on the rise: A report titled, Domestic Travel Market Report by the Travel Industry Association (TIA), found that leisure travel increased in 2001 and was forecasted to increase again in 2002. Total leisure travel to and through California was up 8.3%, and 12% among state residents. It went up again 10% in the 1st quarter of 2002. On a national level, leisure travel continued rising with a 2% increase for the first six months of 2002 (TIA 2002).

Travel modes changed. The TIA study stated that consumers didn't stop traveling because of the attacks or the economy, they simply modified the way they travel by traveling closer to home; taking shorter trips and taking more auto trips. The events of 9/11 led to a 17% decrease in air travel. In turn, there was an increase in car travel of 9% among leisure travelers.

But Graham & Associates found there was a bit more at work here than just 9/11 and the economy. American travelers love the great outdoors, as evidenced by the nearly 65 million Americans who say they have taken at least one trip away from home to an outdoor destination. That equates to 31% of all U.S. adults, according to a Travel Poll conducted in mid-2002 by the TIA. In fact, participating in outdoor activities is the second most popular trip activity overall by American travelers.

And finally California remains the number one destination for U.S. residents, according to just about every report.

With limited budget and time to execute a campaign, the approach was highly strategic and targeted. Graham & Associates immediately scheduled a messaging and positioning session that determined that "Contemporary Camping California Style" was to be the new name for what El Capitan offered.

Graham & Associates positioned what El Capitan was doing as uncharted waters in travel and tourism. Sure there have been campgrounds offering furnished tents, but never to the extent that El Capitan had – with its safari tents, cedar cabins with bathrooms, fireplaces and Jacuzzis. It had to be seen to be believed, which was part of Graham & Associates strategy (this eventually meant driving one of the tents to New York for a live segment on Good Morning America).

With the upgraded tents and high-end cabins (the deluxe cabins run up to \$350 per night), El Capitan Canyon was targeting an entirely different audience than the typical campground. Potential El Capitan campers were busy, middle- to high-income families and couples – groups used to the convenience of city life, yet seeking the outdoor experience: they wanted low-fat lattes over breakfast, a mini-fridge, down duvets, deep-tissue massages outdoors, hot showers and yes, a Jacuzzi tub.

El Capitan had never marketed to an audience like this: its owners were unfamiliar with how to do it. In fact, they'd done little marketing in the past – mostly tombstone ads in local papers. The PR program would need to reach Californians as well as a national audience.

Realizing that it was too late to hit the long-lead publications in time to drive summer visitors, the strategy was to go after the most influential short-lead media first and let this immediate coverage lead the way. Specifically, the strategy was four-fold: work with national newspapers on a story on the new style of camping; pitch 'contemporary camping' to TV, specifically news programs and morning talk shows with high viewership; use national media attention to help Graham & Associates pitch local travel stories and reviews on El Capitan in the media throughout California; use the press from the first three to drive interest from long-lead national travel publications, consumer magazines, and other media and sustain that interest (and occupancy) throughout the year.

On June 20, the first day of summer, Graham & Associates sent out over Business Wire a release that defined contemporary camping and put El Capitan Canyon on the map. The Wall Street Journal, with its high-end readership, was at the top of our media list. The day after the release went out, Graham & Associates was talking with the Journal's new Weekend Entertainment section on a story about luxury camping. The story ran three weeks later, on a Friday. The day the Journal story ran, complete with photos, Graham & Associates spoke to Good Morning America, who had already read the article by their morning planning meetings.

The producers of Good Morning America wanted the story too; in fact they wanted an El Capitan Canyon safari tent delivered to New York for the show the following Friday. Two days after the Journal story, The Los Angeles Times, based on Graham & Associates release, ran a review of the Canyon giving it a resounding 'thumbs-up' rating. The LA Daily News did a photo story. Fox News in Los Angeles arrived at the Canyon to do a feature for the evening news, which was later picked up by 11 other Fox News affiliates across the country. The word was out, the media were calling for pictures, interviews, etc. The contemporary

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camping campaign had caught on like a wildfire.

No longer was pitching your tent in the dark the only option for campers or at least wannabe campers. El Capitan's reservations shot up more than 300% from the same period the year before. The reservation phones rang off the hook and hits to the Web site went through the roof. The Canyon was booked for the remainder of the summer and into the fall. Later in the summer, one of the owners beamed, "all that media coverage really saved us." That media coverage he's referring to is more than 22.2 million readers Graham & Associates reached through print and broadcast media. El Capitan Canyon could now claim the contemporary camping category.

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