

IABC Gold Quill Awards

CommonGround Campaign

Division and category: Division 1, Category 15 (Multilingual Communication)

Organization: Prospero Communications

Client organization: European Crop Protection Association (ECPA)

Time period of project: September 2004 – May 2005

Brief description

The European Crop Protection Association (ECPA), representing pesticides manufacturers in the EU, wanted to be much more effective in communicating the benefits of pesticides to multilingual Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and their assistants, most of whom are non-native speakers of English. The CommonGround Campaign was devised to address this challenge by: capitalizing on language-based leverage points in the audience's existing perception of pesticides (uncovered by focus group research); developing more emotional benefits messages to be used exclusively with this audience (in clearer, less scientific English, for translation into the languages of ECPA's 24 national member associations); and disseminating those messages on a pan-European scale via a range of print-based media (both in the EU institutional capitals and key Member States). The final evaluation of the campaign showed that all of the goals and objectives had been exceeded.

Need/Opportunity

The business environment

ECPA was grappling with a range of economic, regulatory and political challenges. The industry faced a largely mature market in the EU (hence little prospect of significant market growth) and extremely demanding changes to the European legislation governing its product development (hence an unpredictable regulatory arena). ECPA also faced an additional, functional problem, which was diminishing its ability to adequately defend the business interests of its members: the trade association had been designed for political representation to the EU institutions more than 30 years ago, and was ill-equipped to meet new communications challenges in a now radically different socio-political landscape.

The public and political environment

These communications challenges included: public misunderstanding of pesticide residues and the environmental effects of pesticides; myths about pesticides promulgated by activists to consumers and European policy makers; and largely hostile media coverage of the role that pesticides play in food production today. Partly as a consequence of these three influential factors, the benefits of pesticides were not recognized in the European Parliament. This was confirmed both by difficulties in the lobbying the industry was pursuing and the focus group research that was conducted in the early phases of the project. A reluctance to tackle these key communications challenges (for fear of provoking further negative media coverage) was hampering ECPA's advocacy efforts with policy makers. With significant regulatory changes in the offing (in which MEPs would play a central role), there was clearly an urgent need to support ECPA's advocacy work with effective communications targeting MEPs and those who work closely with them.

Intended Audience

Audience segmentation

It was clear from the outset that in order to make any significant, measurable progress in the communications challenges faced by ECPA, we would have to make small, incremental steps as part of an integrated strategy. This meant that the intended audience could not, at this early stage



in ECPA's communications work, be the European consumer. It was widely agreed (on the basis of public opinion research carried out by ECPA's member companies since 1994) that a big consumer-focused campaign to promote the benefits of pesticides was likely to meet with little, if any success, given the scale of enduring public anxiety about pesticides. We therefore determined that we should begin with a campaign targeted at business-critical stakeholder groups within European public policy circles — the audience that has the most impact on the industry's immediate business interests. For ECPA, this meant MEPs.

Consequently and specifically, the intended audience for the CommonGround Campaign therefore included all MEPs (approximately 600 in total) and their assistants (roughly the same in number). Given that MEPs are extremely busy people with tight schedules who are notoriously difficult to contact, understanding and making intelligent use of their assistants is key to effective communication with MEPs themselves. The rationale for according such importance to MEPs assistants in the audience segmentation for the campaign was clearly thought out. MEPs' assistants are much more than administrators and researchers. In most cases, they are highly educated and ambitious young people, who are: actively involved in policy formulation on behalf of their MEPs; charged with unofficially (and sometimes officially) representing the views of their MEPs; and responsible for screening any communications targeted at their MEPs. To all intents and purposes they are the gatekeepers to the inner sanctum of the MEP's political world.

Focus group research

In order to gain a sound understanding of the ways in which MEPs perceive pesticides, ECPA's key messages on the benefits of pesticides (13 messages in total, both headline and amplification messages) were tested on a sample of MEPs' assistants. Participants were selected to form a representative sample right across the political spectrum in the European Parliament.

There had been very little, if any, questioning of the rationale behind the pesticides industry's benefits communication, which had historically been implemented on the assumption that the messages are educational and necessary in the context of prevailing public and political ignorance about pesticides. The focus group research revealed that the benefits messages that the pesticides industry had been using for decades were not effective with MEPs — and that the complex scientific and technical language in most of the messages was unintelligible.

The only messages that showed some potential were those that emphasized the ways in which pesticides help make food more affordable for people.

In summary, the focus group research indicated that:

- 1) MEPs are extremely sceptical about most messages communicating the benefits of pesticides, particularly messages that evoke health benefits. Many of them are seen to be, at best, overplayed, or, at worst, utterly incredible.
- 2) MEPs are least receptive to the messages that have been the mainstay of industry communications for decades. The "more food on less land" message is especially ineffective. Many of the messages that make a case for the industry's contribution to food safety are similarly rejected.
- 3) MEPs are most receptive to messages that highlight industry respect for public expectations and/or awareness of contradictions in public perception. These messages clearly connect with the primary concern of most MEPs: namely, aligning policy directions with the worldview shared by their constituents.

Goals and objectives

External goals and objectives

The external goal was to significantly boost positive media coverage of the key benefits identified as having persuasive potential with MEPs in the focus group research. This coverage would need to be run in key print-based media known to be frequently read by MEPs. The specific objectives were:

- 1) To see at least 10 individual news items (articles and broadcasts) in various European languages in the titles (and programmes) we had identified as crucial (the campaign-specific media);



- 2) To see that at least half of these items accurately replayed the main benefits message on food affordability (which became the central theme of the campaign);
- 3) To see that at least half of these items also accurately replayed at least 50% of the other campaign messages that were developed.

Internal goals and objectives

The internal goal was to significantly boost the involvement and commitment of ECPA's network of 24 national associations in the industry's communications efforts, given that there had been scant attempts to formulate any coordinated industry response to communications challenges in the past. The specific objectives were:

- 1) To see at least 10 national associations participating in the implementation of at least one of the key campaign tactics in their national language.
- 2) To see the industry formally commit to extension of the communications work launched via the CommonGround Campaign by endorsing additional communications initiatives.

Solution overview

The campaign strategy was supported by tactics in three core disciplines: key message development; media relations; and awareness raising.

Key message development

The results of the focus group research largely dictated the essence of the campaign strategy. Clearly, it was essential to formulate simple, easily translatable benefits messages in straightforward, non-scientific English that MEPs could not only understand, but also relate to. It was also essential to focus the campaign on the food affordability benefits of pesticides, as this message had shown the most potential. Building on the research findings, 12 key benefits messages were developed.

The main campaign message, which featured in all of the campaign materials, combined all of the revised benefits messages in a two straightforward sentences: "Crop protection products bring many economic, environmental and social benefits. They protect crops from dangerous pests and diseases, make food more affordable to consumers, and enhance biodiversity when used as part of integrated farming."

In total, twelve key messages were developed, serving the four themes that had been identified as central to the campaign: theme 1 on "food affordability and consumer choice"; theme 2 on "food free of pests and diseases"; theme 3 on "integrated farming for biodiversity"; and theme 4 on "public perception and food reality".

The official campaign messages were also translated by the national associations into their respective European languages for use in their national promotion of the campaign to their MEPs.

Media relations

We began by conducting a wide-ranging internal PR audit amongst ECPA's 24 national associations, which revealed that the industry had a significant and surprising degree of willingness to tackle the industry's longstanding shyness with the media. We determined that we should build on this strength and decided to make media relations a core component of the tactics to be implemented in the campaign on a pan-European scale.

We provided intensive media training (particularly in handling hostile interviews) for industry spokespeople, both within ECPA and its network of national associations. We then went on to carefully research a campaign-specific press list for ECPA at the EU level, as well as 24 country-specific press lists for all of the national associations. With the core expertise and press contacts in place, we then proceeded to draft press materials (features articles on the four campaign themes, press releases and integrated press kits). All of these were also provided on a dedicated private web site, so that the network of national associations could download, translate and print the material for national dissemination.



This work culminated in a highly successful international press conference in Brussels, marking the launch of the campaign. Given that the central theme of the press conference would be “food affordability and consumer choice”, we conducted a small-scale audit of food retailers in grocers to compare the costs of organic produce with the costs of produce grown with the help of pesticides. The results of the audit showed that organic produce was on average 122.35% more expensive. This was communicated to the press and visually demonstrated by way of a photo opportunity, consisting of two baskets of fresh produce (one organic and one conventional), with strikingly different price tags attached.

ECPA’s national associations translated the launch release into their respective languages and issued it to the national press lists we had researched for them. Media coverage after the launch was multilingual, widespread across the EU and far exceeded the specific objectives originally set (see below).

Awareness raising

The tactics in this component of the campaign included a wide range of communications efforts to further disseminate the campaign messages in print, online and in person. Four feature articles were commissioned to cover the four themes of the campaign, leadership speeches were drafted for campaign promotion at a range of external events, and several brochures and leaflets were produced and sent to MEPs as part of a dedicated mail-shot. Posters, flyers and a four-week advertising campaign in *European Voice* (the key Brussels political weekly) also helped to boost coverage.

In addition, the campaign was promoted publicly via a dedicated campaign web site, which featured all of the key messages and campaign materials. ECPA Danish, Polish and Spanish member associations also translated the CommonGround web site into their respective languages and actively promoted it to their MEPs.

Implementation and challenges

The project budget was intended to cover all costs associated with the campaign, both at the EU and national levels. Every effort was made to be as cost-effective as possible, given the limited resources available. We determined from the outset to hand considerable responsibility for translation and production of campaign materials to the associations themselves and therefore developed a dedicated private campaign site, where all of the key messages, graphics, publications and other content could be downloaded for local use. Given that some of the associations had seriously restricted printing budgets, we provided all of the design files for the publications in both full-colour and two-colour formats.

The other significant challenge we faced was lack of research expertise within the national associations. Many of the associations were keen to conduct focus group research of their own as part of their participation and we therefore provided them with dedicated training for the purpose. They were also provided with a series of ten online templates to help them through the whole process of setting research objectives, sample composition and recruitment, focus group moderation and analysis of session transcripts.

Measurement and evaluation

Evaluation was conducted through media monitoring and analysis (for the external objectives) and documented observation (for the internal objectives).

External outcomes

The final assessment showed that:

- 1) 31 individual news items (published articles, television broadcasts and radio interviews in 6 EU languages) were obtained, covering the campaign in Brussels and the Member States;
- 2) 100% of the coverage accurately replayed the central message on food affordability;
- 3) 64% of the coverage accurately replayed at least 50% of the other main campaign messages.



Internal outcomes:

The final assessment showed that:

- 1) 14 national associations participated in the implementation of at least one of the key campaign tactics in their national language;
- 2) Based on the success of the CommonGround Campaign, ECPA's Executive Committee formally committed to fund further communications work in this field.