

**BuySmart, BorrowSmart, RentSafe – *Alerting Consumers to the Challenges and Opportunities of Today's Housing Market***  
**Communications: Creative Media**

**Summary**

A commitment to serving those in need, coupled with the realities faced by individuals and families throughout our state, led Rhode Island Housing to embark on a comprehensive public service campaign that utilizes long-standing and new partnerships, and both traditional and emerging communications strategies to successfully inform and educate all Rhode Islanders about the challenges and opportunities of today's housing market.

**The Challenge**

The burst in the housing bubble, falling home prices, and historically low interest rates have driven many consumers into the housing market. Unfortunately, not all are armed with the knowledge and education they need to safely purchase and keep a home. In fact, many homes now available on the market are there because their owners could not manage to retain their homes during these turbulent economic times.

Add to this a state with a huge budget deficit, cities and towns with little to no funding available to offset the rising needs within their communities, and lending predators ready to strike again in a state that has already been hard hit with the highest percentage of subprime loans, 2<sup>nd</sup> highest unemployment rate, and record high foreclosures. Rhode Island Housing could see trouble brewing again and needed a proactive campaign to combat these and other troubling signs.

**The PSA Campaign**

The PSA campaign is a product of a comprehensive and fully integrated marketing communications plan. The campaign includes the following components:

- Creation of our *Buy Smart, Borrow Smart, Rent Safe* and '100 Things You Need to Know' Public Service Campaigns;
- Comprehensive and consistent media outreach;
- E-news blasts (utilizing branded e-newsletter templates for each division and initiative) tailored to audience and issue;
- *Issue Briefs* that educate and inform policy makers, our Congressional delegates, housing partners, homeowners and homebuyers and renters;
- Press conferences relating to each aspect of the campaign;
- English and Spanish TV, radio and interactive web advertising;
- Statewide paid and non-paid media;
- Re-designed, expanded and user-friendly website;
- Stronger partnerships and collaborations with community agencies, policy makers and local, state and federal housing partners;
- Use of social networking sites such as FaceBook to further spread our message.

All campaign components build upon and reinforce our agency brand and respond to the needs of our state's residents and the current economic and housing climate we live in, while proactively responding and planning for when we emerge from this crisis.

**The Message – Smart and Safe Decisions**

The foundation of this endeavor is our *BuySmart, BorrowSmart, and RentSafe* public service campaigns. Rolled out in quick succession to one another, each builds upon our long-held belief that homebuyers, homeowners and renters need to be educated consumers to both find a home and keep it. One of the few positives coming

out of the current economic and housing crisis is a leveling off of home prices. Experiencing a dramatic decrease in home prices following years of accelerated increases, homes are becoming more affordable throughout the state. In response to this, Rhode Island Housing launched its *BuySmart* public service campaign. Realizing that as the real estate market continues to change and homes in Rhode Island are becoming more affordable, now may be a good time to buy a home for those who are adequately prepared for the responsibility that comes with homeownership. Understanding that at the same time, first-time homebuyers can get carried away or commit to a loan that is unsafe, we have developed a message that we want people to understand that they must buy with their heads and not just their hearts.

Buying a home is often the biggest financial decision that people make. Coupled with our *BorrowSmart* PSAs, these resources remind homebuyers that knowing what one can safely afford and preparing for all the responsibilities that come with homeownership is critical to becoming a successful homeowner. The campaign includes PSAs designed to encourage people to seek the education and counseling they need to make safe, informed decisions about buying, borrowing and keeping a home that's right for them.

*The message is clear:*

With the cost of homes now returning to pre-bubble prices, now may be the smartest season in years to go shopping for a new home. Prices are at the lowest point in five years and the federal government is providing many incentives for those who buy this year. But whatever the season, there are always those looking to separate the uninformed from their hard-earned money. Therefore, it is more important than ever to *Buy Smart*. As a companion PSA, *Borrow Smart*, helps Rhode Islanders safely and affordably borrow the money they need to maintain or repair their homes without putting the home or their financial future in jeopardy.

As an agency whose mission calls for educating consumers on safe borrowing practices, Rhode Island Housing's *BuySmart* and *BorrowSmart* public service campaigns work to better inform Rhode Islanders. Now is actually a great time to buy, but the message of these PSAs is critical: know to stay within your means, take a Homebuyer Education class, read the fine print, and always insist on an inspection so you know what you are buying.

The agency's companion *RentSafe* public service campaign also helps Rhode Islanders make sound, informed decisions. *RentSafe* provides direct access to resources and assistance and to a free listing of homes to rent or buy through HomeLocatorRI.net. We realize that not everyone is ready to become a homeowner and those who rent also need to be armed with information to help them find safe and secure homes. Our *BuySmart*, *BorrowSmart* and *RentSafe* campaigns illustrate our commitment to providing tools and resources to help Rhode Islanders live and thrive in a safe environment they can call home.

Consistent with Rhode Island Housing's emphasis on homebuyer education, our public service campaign includes *100 Things to Know Before You Buy a Home*, a listing of 100 things potential homebuyers should consider prior to buying a home. Created in collaboration with our housing counseling partners, *100 Things* includes messages such as: *Know what you are buying*. Many sellers want buyers to purchase properties "as is" with no rights of recovery if major defects are discovered later. We encourage all buyers to insist on a provision in the purchase and sale agreement that allows for a home inspection and right to relief.

In conjunction with these specific aspects of the overall campaign, we have completely re-vamped our website to prominently feature our PSAs and the message of safe, informed decisions. With a motto of "*Working together to bring you home*," every aspect of our new website, whether servicing Rhode Island residents directly or through various partners, is designed to help Rhode Islanders find and keep a safe, healthy, affordable home in a vibrant community.

### **Identifying Threats on the Horizon**

The campaign strives to combat mis-information that is out there, especially mortgage foreclosure rescue scams and other unsafe loan products. In recent months we have expanded our campaign in response to the new foreclosure and mortgage rescue scams that prey on homeowners in trouble. Scams that promise to “rescue” troubled homeowners from foreclosure are popping up at an alarming rate nationwide. Here in Rhode Island, which is currently ranked 10th in the nation for foreclosure activity, distressed homeowners are at particularly high risk from predators. Joined by members of our Congressional delegation, our housing counseling and community partners, Rhode Island Housing is proactively cautioning Rhode Islanders about this fraudulent activity, providing timely and helpful information on how to recognize scams and how to avoid them. This part of the campaign includes press conferences, media releases, interviews, e-news blasts and updates to our website alerting consumers to this latest predatorial scheme and letting them know that they should never pay a fee in exchange for housing counseling services or modification of a delinquent loan and providing them with the information they need to obtain free counseling services from HUD-approved counseling agencies.

### **The Results – Cost-Effective Ways to Create a Stronger Statewide Presence**

Our *BuySmart*, *BorrowSmart*, and *RentSafe* campaigns have been well received from our housing partners, counselors, congressional delegation, homebuyers/homeowners and renters who are looking for help in navigating the troubled housing market. The success of our PSAs has positioned Rhode Island Housing as the ‘go to’ source for informed housing decisions, resulting in a stronger statewide presence for the agency.

Our *BuySmart* and *BorrowSmart* campaigns have driven an increasing number of homebuyers to Rhode Island Housing. With lending markets wounded and real estate sales sagging, Rhode Island Housing is playing a growing role in the home loan arena. Our efforts have helped to restore trust in the overall lending industry and buyer confidence so that families can take advantage of lower costs to obtain better homes, while jumpstarting the businesses of real estate, banking and homebuilding.

Our campaigns have minimal associated costs as most rely on electronic means of communication; although we are aware that our constituents may not have access or use of internet so we offset this with limited and targeted communications in traditional outlets. Costs are kept to a minimum as we use tools already at hand: our website, social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, and e-news templates that are easily customized and tailored to specific topics and targeted audiences. Our in-house communications staff is easily able to update our website, link and post information on our Facebook page, modify e-news templates and distribute email alerts. We also utilize our community partners and close ties to local media outlets to help spread the message. The campaigns have been highlighted in our traditional newsletter and links to our website are now embedded in all outgoing emails. The campaign benefits from qualification as Public Service Announcements (PSAs), which allows for every ad purchased to be run additionally for free in many markets. Depending on the type of media, Rhode Island Housing receives at least one to two more free ads for every ad it purchases, including television.

Our mix of traditional marketing solutions combined with the utilization of new and emerging technologies has helped us to reach deeper into targeted communities while building better and stronger relationships with the media and our partners. These efforts have resulted in our most effective and comprehensive campaign to date and has helped many to the challenges and opportunities in today's housing market. Our innovative approach has kept us in front of customers and served a market need.