

## Answering the Call: *Effective Outreach in a Tough Economy* Communications: Creative Media

### Lean Times

The closing years of this past decade have brought some of the toughest economic times our nation has ever experienced. The weakening of Rhode Island's economy left record-breaking unemployment rates and a housing market halted by foreclosures and mortgage delinquencies. With a five-year statewide decline in overall population and the median price of single-family housing plummeting nearly 25 percent in as little as one year, Rhode Island was in desperate need of homebuyers to stimulate its economy and breathe life back into our neighborhoods and towns.

### Opportunity

Signs of relief came with the Worker, Homeownership, and Business Assistance Act of 2009. Through this Act, qualified first-time homebuyers were given the opportunity to obtain an \$8,000 tax credit towards the purchase of a principal residence. When news of the credit extension arrived, we knew we had to act fast to seize this opportunity. Luckily, we were also gearing up for the spring home buying season and were planning a re-launch of our homebuyer mortgage services – renamed FirstHomes100 and FirstHomes100+. Despite the quick turnaround and planning needed, coupled with the fact that we have a very lean budget for communications, we were able to launch an innovative and cost-effective media campaign that accomplished the following:

- ✚ Helped to boost our ranking from 5<sup>th</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> in Rhode Island for purchase money mortgages;
- ✚ Effectively highlighted the tax credit and helped homebuyers take advantage of it;
- ✚ Created a statewide, public-service enriched campaign that educated first-time homebuyers on the many opportunities available to them;
- ✚ Raised our profile throughout the state among homebuyers, realtors, lenders and others.

By marketing the federal tax credit program alongside our own mortgage products, we were able to highlight the many advantages of the 2010 home buying season. In doing so, we stepped outside our comfort zone by crafting an inventive and budget-friendly campaign that utilized every existing resource available to us and effectively adapted to meet the tax credit extension deadline.

### The Call

*Necessity is the Mother of Invention.* With little time and little funding, we crafted a media campaign that centered on a partnership that we initiated with our market's #1 television station -- WJAR Channel 10. This partnership resulted in an appearance on their **Special Assignment** program, with our various community partners, and a **Call-In Panel** that aired during the evening news. The panel was made up of four Loan Specialists, including the Director of Homeownership/HelpCenter. By utilizing our own staff, we were able to provide expertise as well as present the face and voice of our staff to the general public. For ninety minutes, our seasoned lending specialists fielded calls related to buying a home in the current market. Translation services were not necessary as one of our Lending Specialists is bilingual, allowing us to broaden our targeted audience of first-time homebuyers at no additional cost.

In conjunction with the call-in segment, a WJAR reporter interviewed Laura Marlane, a Rhode Island Housing customer who was able to purchase and make repairs to her first home using our FirstHomes100+ loan. This particular loan has been successful because, along with low-interest rates and 100 percent financing and support for the life of the loan, any repairs necessary are able to be grouped with the mortgage loan in one, easy transaction.

The 90-minute segment ended with 44 calls answered in total. Our panel answered everything from tax credit questions to mortgage application requests; many of the callers specifically referenced the success Ms. Marlane experienced with our mortgage products, illustrating the effectiveness of the interview segment in capturing the public's attention and promoting our loans.

## **A Coordinated Approach**

The key to a successful housing finance agency is the ability to adapt to the ever-changing needs of its customers while strategically utilizing all existing resources. As the tax credit extension was announced at the end of 2009 and required purchase and sales agreements signed by April 30, 2010, we knew we needed to tailor our campaign to encourage all eligible Rhode Islanders to take advantage of the credit while it was available. The call-in panel not only launched our campaign, but coordinated with the larger campaign, which had many strategies within it, all of which led to the same goal.

### **Hitting the Road**

To meet a person who has never been able to afford to own their own home is not uncommon, especially in these difficult times. They drive to work everyday, or perhaps take public transportation to save some money. These individuals, hardworking and possibly looking to start the next phase of their life, were exactly who we needed to reach. This campaign was about getting directly to those who needed our products, and perhaps a little guidance, to move to that next step.

This aspect of our campaign consisted of taking to the streets. We designed a **billboard ad for FirstHomes100/100+**, showcasing that we offer no down payments as part of our home loans. The design supports our overall campaign messaging and features a quick and memorable tagline for commuters to take with them wherever they may be heading.

Commuters listening to the radio may also have heard our **FirstHomes100/100+ radio spots**, aired over five different radio stations in both English and Spanish. Our staff translated the radio spots into Spanish, as they did for our print and bus ads as well, allowing us to reach a much larger portion of the market at no additional cost to our budget.

Because public transportation is also something used frequently in Rhode Island, we knew we wanted to advertise on RIPTA Buses. However, to save money and better target our audience, we focused on those *riding* the bus. **Interior bus ads for FirstHomes100/100+** were installed and translated into English and Spanish. Knowing that bus ridership is high during these lean economic times, we recognized that this would be money well spent. Additionally, ridership numbers are readily available to us, allowing us to track our overall outreach in this initiative.

### **Direct Marketing**

Without proper strategic objectives, direct mailings can become a vacuum of our precious resources or just another piece of mail for recipients. However, by narrowing down specific target audiences and designing a piece that was aesthetically pleasing and easy to read, we were able to successfully reach Rhode Islanders in a timely manner to coincide with the tax credit deadline and the beginning of the home buying season.

Our target audience became Rhode Islanders, 21-39 years of age, who were currently renting their home with good credit. In all, 6,481 residents were mailed our self-mailer highlighting quick **“Did You Know?”** facts about our FirstHomes100/100+ program and the Federal Tax Credit. The design of the pamphlet is eye-catching yet straight-forward; a quick read that encourages recipients to take a look and discover their options.

Our next direct mail piece was to 4,874 realtors in the state of Rhode Island, mailings that were even more cost effective because they featured collateral pieces that we already had on hand: our **FirstHomes100/100+ brochures**, as well as **“In The Know”** flyers that we were able to print in-house. We also promoted our Facebook page in the letters sent out with the brochures, tying in our social networking capabilities with these outreach efforts.

Both direct mail initiatives were excellent examples of how we were able to utilize resources on hand while tailoring to strategically target our audiences. And though the tax credit deadline meant adjusting our timetable and our traditional outreach methods, we were able to quickly adapt and support a successful homeownership campaign.

### **On the Web**

Our customers and partners rely on our website for everything from links to home listings to how to enroll in our free foreclosure workshops – even a mortgage calculator to ensure you can afford your monthly loan payments. Therefore, it was vital that we incorporated as much of our campaign into our website as possible. By taking language already in our FirstHomes100/100+ brochures, we were able to duplicate numerous facets of our campaign on our website in a way that preserved a consistency of language as well as saved our staff time and money.

Educational videos were uploaded, highlighting experiences of actual customers and advice from staff members. In **“Rhode Island Housing and Realtors,”** two families who were able to successfully secure their homes are featured, as well as a local realtor, who recommends our products to all her customers. These are linked from our **Homebuyer Education page**, which lists upcoming workshops as well as key contacts and vital resources.

Social media, the fastest growing method of communication in this technologically savvy age, was something that we had been using but with this campaign we took it to the next level. As part of this campaign, we focused our energy on this free and marketable method of communications. Links were posted from our website to our **Facebook page**, which we constantly updated with the latest news and information about our agency and the housing market. A **YouTube page** was also updated to showcase all of our videos and tips.

### **In Print**

For so many people looking for a home, it comes naturally to open up the newspaper and look in the “Classified” section. And with so many different homes available to be advertised across Rhode Island, **print ads** were essential to our campaign. We placed ads in Real Estate books which covered all of Rhode Island. English and Spanish ads were featured in statewide media outlets; because many areas have high concentrations of Portuguese citizens, we also placed these ads in appropriate outlets. In total, circulation of these ads reached over 200,000, an extremely successful method of outreach of which the benefits surely outweigh the costs. And just as with the direct mailings, we were able to be put in contact with those looking to buy a home as well as realtors who are in contact with those searching.

### **Results:**

Unique and innovative initiatives, such as the Call-In Panel, as well as the incorporation of the Federal Tax Credit information into all facets of our strategic efforts, created a successful and optimistic campaign for all involved. From our “Hitting the Road” initiative to our constant website and Facebook updates, every ingredient in our campaign featured, and successfully reached, a targeted audience of Rhode Island renters and realtors that yielded the ability to trace and measure all results.

The Call-In Panel and partnership with local media outlets is something other HFAs could emulate with their own campaigns. Our various social networking efforts are a few examples of budget-friendly avenues of communicating with customers that could easily be replicated by other HFAs. Furthermore, all of our posted information is gathered from existing resources to ensure an easy and consistent transfer of language and information.

***Throughout all strategic endeavors, even in the leanest of economic times, it remains our driving force to work, with the community and through various partnerships, to bring every Rhode Islander home.***