



CONSUMER PRODUCT CASE STUDY: Solatube International, Inc.

Summary

Solatube International, Inc, based in Vista, Calif., is the innovator and industry leader of the tubular skylight product. Solatube revolutionized the skylight industry in the 1980s by developing a tube-shaped skylight that offered a compact, leak-proof, inexpensive alternative to traditional box skylights. Both trade and consumer media were important audiences for our public relations program. While Solatube received extensive coverage in the trade press, the company was having a hard time getting coverage in the consumer media. The traditional new product press releases that worked so well with the trades, simply were not being picked up by the consumer press. We needed to find a better approach.

The client did not have a budget for market research, so we conducted our own research, utilizing a national clipping service to track all mentions of Solatube in the news, as well as tracking all competitors' coverage. Each month, we produced an in-depth report to track results of our publicity program, as well as examine the competition. Additionally, we interviewed a number of the company's constituents, including installers, competitors, Solatube's CEO, head of R&D, home owners, dealers, news media, contractors, architects, corporate customers, etc. We attended dealer conferences and went along on both commercial and residential installations to learn more about the process. We did an audit of competitors' web sites and even monitored home improvement chat rooms. We conducted Internet research for the latest findings on the various benefits of natural light. We tried to utilize every vehicle possible to gather information (without conducting formal — and expensive — market research). Through our research and reports, we were able to determine that

Solatube was indeed receiving considerably more coverage in trade media. While this was a key audience for them, we all agreed that a big market was being missed by not having greater coverage with consumer media, including print, radio and television.

In order to break into consumer media, we would need to try something completely new. Up until this point in our public relations program, we had largely focused our press releases on the introduction of new products. Because Solatube was heavily invested in research and development and staying at the top of technology within the industry, this was a critical aspect of the program. The trade media also "ate up" these announcements since they fit its demographics — builders, architects, designers, etc. The consumer media presented a much tougher "nut to crack." They were unreceptive to new product announcements, so we needed to figure out a way to get their attention with something that they could actually use. After considerable brainstorming, our agency came up with a new concept — "Solatube's Home Lighting Tips" — that would serve the purpose of a news release but would be presented in a more visually interesting, non-traditional format. These consumer-focused tip sheets would work together as a series of story angles and would be distributed to key print and broadcast media over the course of the year with the idea being that one of these would eventually strike a chord with a particular media contact. By providing the consumer media with information on topics they were interested in — such as how to make your home sell faster or how to make a home office more productive — we were offering a story and not just a self-serving new widget announcement.

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While unique from the traditional news releases we were doing for Solatube, these tip sheets would need to be included in our existing monthly budget, without interrupting work on a myriad of other PR activities for the client. (After all, we could not abandon the nuts and bolts of our program for what was essentially an experiment into the consumer market.) The audience included consumer news media (print, radio and television) in the United States and Canada.

It would take careful planning to get the “alternative news release” concept into a form that we could present to our client, who was very sensitive to expenses. We were careful not to present an idea that would be expensive to implement, because we knew any extravagant copy writing, design or printing costs would never be approved by management. Therefore, we needed to come up with a format that could be produced in-house within our existing budget.

First, we came up with a preliminary list of tip sheet topics. We familiarized ourselves with the publications and programs on our consumer wish-list and identified various angles that could be used to capture their attention. The result was a starting list of more than a dozen concepts, from how adding more natural light can lift your mood, to how daylighting can make a room look bigger. Next, the design issue needed to be addressed. We would need to rely on our own creativity and basic computer programs to design a tip sheet that would be reader-friendly and eye-catching on a shoestring budget. Our solution was to create a tip sheet template using Microsoft Publisher and send it to a small local print shop to be printed with a metallic blue foil ink. This ideal for-

mat “reflected” (pun intended) Solatube’s key product feature — a high-tech reflective tubing that allowed it to capture as much daylight as a box skylight several times its size. Best of all, the printing of the mastheads cost only pennies per sheet. We presented the tip sheets to our client contacts, Solatube’s marketing manager and the vice president of sales and marketing, and they couldn’t have been more thrilled. The idea was completely different from anything we had done in the past, and best of all, we weren’t asking for any more money to do it. They were anxious to give it a try.

Results

Within the first few months of the program (designed to take place over 12 months), we had already received tremendous feedback from the consumer media. Although it is sometimes difficult to trace exactly which tactics in a comprehensive PR program trigger a response, we know that the tip sheets were directly responsible for an interview on “Home By Design” radio as well as a story by syndicated columnist Michael Walsh of the Universal Press Syndicate which resulted in hits in daily newspapers in at least 11 of the top 25 U.S. markets. Additionally, the tip sheets have been added to Solatube’s web site for even greater exposure. We were also able to make in-roads with Bob Vila (which is on the top of Solatube’s wish-list), and secured segments on PBS’ “For Your Home” and various Home & Garden Television (HGTV) programs. The tip sheet program was extended into a second year and is recognized by the company as one of the most valuable PR tools we have ever implemented.

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