

REDISCOVER ROSARITO: A PUBLIC DIPLOMACY INITIATIVE FOR THE LOCAL COMMUNITY IN ROSARITO BEACH, BAJA MEXICO

J. Gregory Payne, gregory_payne@emerson.edu, Emerson College

Daniel Seet, daniel_seet@emerson.edu, Emerson College

INTRODUCTION

Rediscover Rosarito is a cross-cultural public affairs graduate class initiative started in February 2008. That year, 28 graduate Communication Management (CM) students from diverse backgrounds and nationalities, taught by Dr. Gregory Payne of the Communication Studies Department, reached out to elected governmental leaders, public officials, citizens and expatriates of Rosarito Beach in Baja Mexico. Together, they launched a public affairs campaign that stressed the importance of grassroots public diplomacy as a major strategy.

The goal of the program then and now is to develop and implement an ongoing campaign to help restore the image of this heavily tourism dependent beach community, which had been devastated by a drastic drop in visitor levels as a result of Mexican President Jose Caledron's 'war on drugs,' a violent reaction from the drug cartels against this action, as well as biased media coverage regarding the crisis from sources on both sides of the border, which reflect the all too often proclivity of the media to sensationalize such stories in the effort to secure readership (Jackson & Jamieson, 2007, pp. 22-23).

GETTING INVOLVED AT THE GRASS ROOTS

A group of eight students made their first ever fact-finding mission to Rosarito Beach on 1 Mar 2008 (History of the project, 2008). The team interviewed members of the local community (including government officials, residents, businesses and expatriates to gain a better picture of how the city and the public had been impacted. Members also met with several journalists from San Diego during their trip to gain various perspectives about the complex problem.

A strategic communication plan produced by the class, authored by Ashley Clevenger and supervised by Dr Payne, was presented to Rosarito Beach Mayor Hugo Torres Chabert, his public affairs counsel, Ron Raposa, and other members of the municipality (Rosarito en la Noticia, Mar 2008).

KEY INITIATIVES IN 2008 – STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION PLAN FOR REDISCOVERING ROSARITO – TAKING THE FIRST STEP

Of the multifaceted strategic plan of 2008, the main initial focus was the founding of a website – www.rediscoverosarito.org – in Spring 2008 to serve as the main flagship communication platform for the Emerson College CM public affairs team (Rediscover Rosarito, 2008). The creative webmasters were Konstantina Georgaki and Adam Lucas.

Conducting extensive field research and documentation in Rosarito, San Diego and the Baja for the project were Joseph DeNisco, Konstantina Georgaki, Mary Ann Cicala, Mary Malito, Leigh Larkin, Sarah Moniz, and Michael Paydos. Many of these strategic team members translated their first hand observational research into blogs, vlogs and podcasts which are currently featured on the website. The website was conceived as an outreach platform to both English-speaking and Spanish-speaking Americans, as well as to Mexicans in general. The translation of the content from English to Spanish was completed by graduate student, Juan Pravda Ruiz.

A team of students – Erica Skov, Allyson Ramsey and led by Nicole DiNoia – were involved in offline publicity efforts in this multi-level online-offline campaign. The team developed press kits about the Rediscover Rosarito initiative and began to engage news outlets from across the U.S. to focus on the project and its objective – spreading the word that that Rosarito is a safe tourist destination. Included in this pitch was the fact that the crime rate for Rosarito was lower than that in Boston, St. Louis, and many other American cities (refer to the 2009 article by Greenburg on the most recent crime statistics in American cities). Other major points being emphasized is that Rosarito and Tijuana are two distinct cities, and that Mexico is a large country that shares with the United States a common border of over 2000 miles.

SPECIAL EVENTS IN A SAFE, SERENE AND SECURE ROSARITO: THE ROSARITO STUDENT FILM FESTIVAL

The two-week Rosarito Film Project of 2008, a collaborative effort with the Campus Movie Fest (the world's largest student film festival), was a summer continuation of the Rediscover Rosarito program (Baja Times, 2008). Twelve local students from the greater Rosarito area, ranging from 18 to 32 years of age, were selected in a citywide competition as the inaugural participants in this two-week program. An announcement and press conference was held at the Rosarito City Hall with proud participants in attendance as well as members of the Emerson public affairs team, as well as film and media professionals from Los Angeles.

During the summer program, the Mexican student participants were asked to make a 5-8 minute documentary aimed at communicating stories about their hometown. The subject matter and storyline were chosen and developed solely and independently by the students from Rosarito. During the film project held at the historic Rosarito Beach Hotel, the participants had the unique opportunity of attending workshops and lectures by special guests from the film industry in Los Angeles and New York, who also provided commentary on the student projects. Spanish, Portuguese and American college students from the LA Program (an inter-culturally oriented internship initiative) also visited with the film students during this intensive workshop.

Konstantina was the student coordinator of the Rosarito Film Project and Dr. Payne was the overall coordinator. Film expertise was provided by Michael McManus (BA, Political Communication), who coached the students in transforming their raw materials into well-thought stories. Michael was the recipient of the Campus Movie Festival's Outstanding Actor Award in 2008 for his award winning documentary, "Staying the Course." Another Emersonian, award-winning producer Jerome Lewis (BA, Journalism and Communication) from Trinidad & Tobago, where he manages several radio and TV stations, also provided daily insights on film-making. Elyce Taylor (BA, Journalism) coached on storyboard development and other important production areas.

Eight original documentaries and short films were produced. Each documentary offered a different perspective from the eyes of the students. The films helped bridge the gap and were in contrast to the mediated reality of the spiraling violence. It was delivered to publics on both sides of the border by the media. In early August 2008, a special VIP Premiere of the Rosarito Student Film Project for friends and family was held at Foxexploration Studios (Titanic and Master and Commander were filmed at this major local attraction) south of Rosarito.

WHAT'S BREWING FOR 2009?

In 2009, a new graduate public affairs class is continuing the second year of the collaborative Rediscover Rosarito public affairs program. New projects have been developed as well as are currently underway. These include a revamping of the Rediscover Rosarito website – led by Rob Rykowski and Heather Linz – with the integration of even more multimedia and interactive components.

Another important addition is the Baja Media Watch module (Rediscover Rosarito, Mar 2009). This component features public affairs students putting their critical thinking and deliberation skills to the test by analyzing media content to identify and highlight examples of sensationalism and biased reporting, as well as to champion factual accounts about Rosarito and the situation at large in Baja California.

Jeffrey Werner is spearheading the Media Watch project. Assisting him in content development is Daniel Seet, Heather Linz, Soltana Bin Laden, Laura Gardner, Stephanie Lam and Subhrata Barot. Currently, the Media Watch team is exploring new strategies to 'export' their content to other areas on the Web where conversations about Rosarito are on going, including the creative application of social media platforms and viral marketing.

It should be pointed out that this is not an effort to sanitize negative news coverage. The goal of Baja Media Watch is to ensure that the facts, whatever they may be, are made evident and presented to the public. If something happened, we want it publicized, but we want actual dates and credible sources featured. Too often, our two-year study has shown that the media tends to sensationalize stories for ratings, often at the expense of accuracy. A typical example recently occurred on CNN where reporter Randi Kaye filed a two-year-old story about the robbery of the Hall family in Mexico as if it had just occurred (Kaye, 2009; Cearley & Center, 2007). Our effort is to provide interested publics and credible journalists with a platform for fact checking against the claims made in such stories.

In another media project, graduate student Chuck Boardman, is taking the vlogs component of the Rediscover Rosarito website a step further by developing several short awareness-generating documentaries for the beach community. Other diverse community projects include the Art Resonates Peace initiative (spearheaded by Nada Farhat, a medical doctor and talented artist from Saudi Arabia) and the Rosarito Ambassadors (developed by Allison Teixeira and Stephanie Lam), which aims at enlisting grassroots advocates from various professions and socio economic and demographic groups as email/phone contacts for those who want first hand conversations about life and events in Rosarito. Health Communication student Rachel Nanica and Dr. Farhat have also developed the Rosarito Juvenile Diabetes Prevention Program, which will involve teachers and students in Rosarito in educating the youth about the

dangers of this disease. Elsewhere, a documentary on a Rosarito orphanage, “El Rancho del Nino,” is being produced by Jennan Al Homoudi, and this short film will be premiered in Rosarito this summer.

Plans are also underway for 2nd edition of the hugely successful and well-received Rosarito Student Film Festival. A major premiere of the 2008 and 2009 Student Film Projects will be held in Rosarito in August 2009, and in New York, Chicago and Boston in the fall and winter of 2010. The documentaries will be presented to the U.S. State Department as examples of public diplomacy following an invitation from Sec. of State Clinton’s office for submission of such grassroots, community-oriented projects.

A “Baja, Burritos and Baseball” outing for Rosarito youths to attend a San Diego Padre baseball game is planned for this summer. Students from Spain, Portugal, New York and Ohio will also participate in several arts and crafts exhibits with Rosarito students during the summer in events coordinated by the Emerson public affairs class.

CONCLUSION

2009 is another exciting year for the on-going Rediscover Rosarito effort. As of this writing, the swine flu epidemic has added another serious challenge to the effort to persuade tourists to once again visit Rosarito and the Baja. There have been warnings from various governmental agencies to delay or postpone non-essential trips to Mexico during flu crisis. Yet, Rosarito, located on the Baja peninsula, has not experienced a case of swine flu. The closest has been in San Diego in the United States. Evidence would suggest that the same over generalizations that have permeated media coverage of the drug cartel violence are now evident in the media’s hype regarding the H1N1 flu virus. In both instances, the challenge is to separate the facts from the fiction and mediated reality, which are often at odds. The key is to seek a reliable source in deliberating on such important claims, and credible journalism – as initiatives such as the Baja Media Watch is designed to seek out – ought to help people sift the gold from the informational dross (Jamieson & Waldman, 2003, p.23).

There are, however, positive signs that opportunities are arising from such crises. The recent focus by President Obama and Sec. of State Hillary Clinton that the drug issue, and thus the cause of the violence, is a challenge both the U.S. and Mexico must face together (AFP, Apr 2009). This theme is an important step forward in advancing the two-year message of cooperation and dialogue of the Emerson public affairs and public diplomacy project. The historic meetings of the U.S. President and the Secretary of State with President Calderon and his Ministers will certainly help to draw attention to the need for more grassroots efforts in communicating and furthering understanding among the peoples of our countries.

The goal of the Rediscover Rosarito project is to continue this dialogue and campaign dedicated to rediscovering the beauty and serenity of Rosarito by urging the public to “Come See for Yourself.” The central thread that runs through the diverse programs that make up Rediscover Rosarito is the understanding that public diplomacy and community engagement sometimes operate as government-led initiatives at the international, national and state levels. Yet, the Rediscover Rosarito campaign is proof that impact and change can come one day at a time from the grassroots among people from all walks of life who are committed to making a difference.

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