



Columbia & Capital Malls: Parental Escort Policy Introduction

Situation

Shopping malls across the country have become a popular social destination for teens and ‘tweens. In some cases, large numbers of unsupervised youth at malls on weekend nights have discouraged families and older mall patrons from having an enjoyable mall experience. In late 2006, two malls in Missouri enlisted our help to launch a parental escort policy designed to re-establish a family-friendly atmosphere.

Objectives

Our communications goals closely aligned with those of the two malls:

1. Inform youth, their parents, retailers and other current and potential mall patrons about the new parental escort policy through the use of an integrated public relations and marketing effort.
2. Obtain positive or balanced media coverage about the announcement.
3. Establish the malls as family-friendly, enjoyable shopping environments for all.
4. See a decrease in the amount of incidents occurring at the malls.

Cornerstones for Success

Our strategic approach for introducing and communicating the new policy had four cornerstones:

- Communicate the new policy in a clear, effective manner to youth and their parents, the community as a whole, and retailers prior to and throughout the first few weeks of enforcement

- Prepare response for negative reaction
- Proactively communicate with select audiences and community leaders to gain support and endorsement
- Position the Columbia and Capital Malls as family-friendly destinations

Building a Solid Foundation of Support

To build support for the malls’ new parental escort policies, well-known community members were identified who could provide a third-party endorsement of the malls’ new policy. Outreach to these individuals – as well as to community youth groups, churches and civic organizations – began in advance of the launch of the program in order to address concerns and ensure understanding.

A New Brand Emerges

In order to carry a consistent message to the media, community members and mall patrons, we developed a solid message platform that clearly communicated the facts about the new policy, addressed why the malls had made this decision, and described the desired outcome of implementing the policy. The message platform also addressed particular issues that the opposition will most likely raise. To further prepare designated mall spokespersons and retailers who had agreed to speak on the malls’ behalf, we conducted media training exercises.

Branded materials for distribution included press releases, fact sheets, a handout for youth and parents, and a new, informative Web site section about the policy. In addition, one-on-one meetings with key media outlets underscored the importance of the policies to the communities as a whole.





Capital Mall

COLUMBIA MALL

Results

In order to be successful, media coverage about the launch of the parental guidance program needed to:

1. Begin in advance of the program's start date, so mall patrons would understand and anticipate the policy change;
2. Be positive about the program; and
3. Saturate the local markets to encourage increased family shopping.

All success criteria were met, with every local TV station covering the program. Mall representatives and local officials were prepared to speak with the media and made themselves accessible, resulting in overwhelmingly positive reports in the media. One local station featured an online poll that generated 350 responses, 80 percent of them in support of the new program.

Most importantly, mall representatives reported that on the first weekend of the new policy, the malls were very busy with families, a major change from previous weekends.

In fact, Katie Essing, senior general manager of the malls, told us: "We had many people stop us and comment that they hadn't been to the mall on a weekend in years. Thank you for your guidance in launching this program. What a difference it has made!"

