

# PRWEEK

## CAMPAIGNS

### COMMUNITY RELATIONS

## TX sports enters whole new arena

**Client:** American Airlines Center, Tom Hicks (Dallas Stars), Ross Perot Jr. (Hillwood Development), Mark Cuban (Dallas Mavericks), Center Operating Co.

**PR Team:** The LeMaster Group, Allyn & Co., Burson-Marsteller, Cinco Media, Howland PR, Yellow Rose of Texas, in-house staff for American Airlines Center

**Campaign:** American Airlines Center grand opening

**Time Frame:** April 15-September 1

**Budget:** \$1.1 million

On July 27, the much-anticipated American Airlines Center in Dallas was unveiled. The event culminated a four-month long PR campaign introducing the new sports arena and entertainment venue.

Dallas voters narrowly approved a referendum in 1998 dedicating \$125 million in hotel and rental car taxes to partially fund the facility, now home to the NBA's Mavericks and NHL's Stars. In addition to combating negative messages from arena opponents, the PR team had to serve a broad array of principals, as well as educate the public about traffic on new streets surrounding the center.

### Strategy

"I operate on the drip, drip, drip theory," explains PR team leader Lisa LeMaster of The LeMaster Group. "I don't think you should ever announce something in one big shebang."

The PR team meted out specific ideas to targeted markets months in advance, and special emphasis was placed on the center's website as an information hub. "We were trying to make the building, the parking, the access, and the amenities all familiar to the public long before we opened the doors," Le Master says.

### Tactics

A steady stream of press releases included announcements about sponsorships, "platinum seat" sales drives, accessibility features, food concessions, minority contractors, and the 49-foot-wide scoreboard. Despite angst among con-

struction supervisors, the PR team also led many site tours for journalists and opinion leaders.

Collateral produced by Allyn & Co. included detailed guides for fans and reporters, and an accessibility brochure with information on parking and getting around inside the massive building. About 500,000 fan guides were distributed through civic clubs, chambers of commerce, and non-profit organizations, as well as by the Stars and Mavericks. In June, Burson-Marsteller helped publicize the new streets built for the center by having professional drivers break them in prior to a race at the nearby Texas Motor Speedway.

One of the lighter press releases pointed out that the center would have more toilets per capita than any other building in the country. Fifteen radio stations ran listener contests for the privilege of participating in a "flush out," when all toilets in the arena were flushed simultaneously.

### Results

Coverage included a special section in *The Dallas Morning News*. The opposition drew some attention, but "the few little negatives were just buried within the positives," says Dave Brown, the center's general manager. One article on traffic flow called the center "this new Xanadu by the interstate" after city officials said traffic continued to run smoothly even after a sold-out Eagles concert.

Brad Watson, a business reporter at the local ABC affiliate, said The LeMaster Group kept TV deadlines and visuals in mind when pitching stories. *The Dallas Morning News* sports business columnist Richard Alm claimed that The LeMaster Group was responsive and did not pitch marginal stories until the last few days



American Airlines Center... huge scoreboard was part of PR push

before the ribbon cutting.

A few less positive stories have begun to surface more recently as the excitement wears off. Some Stars fans, who now pay the NHL's highest ticket prices, have complained about less-desirable season-ticket seating assignments, and *The Dallas Morning News* reported that developers want to broaden a tax increment financing district to raise more money for Victory, a planned retail development associated with the center. "The LeMaster Group" SVP Carey Conner says the seating issue is being addressed by the Stars' in-house PR team, and plans are being made to respond to allegedly inaccurate reporting on the tax issue.

### Future

The PR team still has its work cut out for it in publicizing individual team grand openings, positioning the center with national reporters during basketball and hockey seasons, and comparing it positively to other venues in the state and nation, LeMaster says.

**Sherri Deatherage Green**