

“Be Gator Safe!”—A Privately Funded Safety Campaign for the Southeast

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Abstract: Amid the phenomenal population growth taking place in Florida and other southeastern states, an increase in human encounters with wild alligators is inevitable. Unfortunately, such encounters have yielded a proportional increase in confrontations between humans and alligators and, during the past 11 years, a dramatic increase in human injuries and fatalities inflicted by alligators. In partnership with a nonprofit organization and a public relations firm, the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission addressed the problem with extremely limited funds.

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The Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission (GFC's) Office of Informational Service (OIS) bears primary responsibility for ensuring accurate, prompt information is available to news media during situations in which the agency is caught up in news events. This responsibility requires OIS to maintain a body of reference materials to be readily accessible during breaking news events such as alligator attacks on humans.

During the early 1980s, OIS prepared an alligator attack fact sheet to be updated at least twice a year. It is designed to provide answers to the questions most frequently asked by news media when alligator attacks occur, such as “How often do attacks occur? How many fatalities have there been? What should people do if attacked?” and so on.

By the mid-1990s, a casual glance at the fact sheet revealed some alarming trends. For instance, between 1948 and 1995 the agency logged 226 alligator attacks on humans. Of these, 151 of them occurred between 1985 and 1995. In addition, 5 of the 9 fatalities occurred during that 10-year period.

Although the Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission (GFC) already had a public information campaign in place to promote public safety around alligators, the campaign was without much substance and with no real budget. OIS set out to design a more dramatic campaign that would focus resources on educating newcomers and visitors to Florida regarding living peacefully with alligators. The campaign, titled "Welcome to Florida . . . You Might See Some Alligators Here," was the result. It included provisions to provide informational brochures at welcome centers, golf courses, retirement communities, airports, colleges, military installations, bus stations, utility companies—basically any place where the information had the potential to reach large numbers of people who were likely to encounter alligators for the first time. The campaign also included public service announcements for radio and television, news releases, and various other mass communication devices.

What the campaign did not include was a source for the estimated \$10,000 it would cost to produce and distribute the materials. Consequently, the campaign lay dormant for 2 years, until the nonprofit organization The American Alligator Cycle of Protection (AACOP), and an environmental company got wind of it and offered to form a partnership to try to make the campaign happen.

Within a few months, the environmental company down-sized its staff and withdrew from the campaign during an economic crunch. However, a laid-off public relations professional who was working on the project at the environmental company continued working on the campaign with AACOP when she launched her own firm, Smittle and Associates, Inc., of Gainesville, Florida.

The 3 parties—Lynanne Lawhead, executive director of AACOP; Karen Smittle of Smittle and Associates; and I on behalf of the GFC, signed a memorandum of understanding, defining the partnership and the scope of the campaign.

The GFC agreed to provide technical review, writing talent, distribution of materials, and news media relations. The GFC also agreed to seek the endorsement of the directors of the Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (SEAFWA). Getting SEAFWA's endorsement was an extremely unusual and delicate matter, but one that was invaluable to the campaign's creditability and fund-raising efforts. AACOP and Smittle and Associates were responsible for producing publications and other materials, and AACOP was responsible for raising funds.

The parties agreed to expand the campaign to encompass the entire southeastern United States and changed the title to "Welcome to Our State . . . You Might See Some Alligators Here!" They also sought input from other state wildlife agencies' alligator management staffs concerning what should be included in the campaign.

The campaign also became the first phase of AACOP's classroom curriculum to expose youngsters, in a learning environment, to information about alligators.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Lawhead contacted wildlife agencies in all southeastern states that have alligator populations asking for their endorsements as well. Ultimately, wildlife agencies in Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, Texas, Arkansas, Mississippi, and even West Virginia (which does not have alligators) endorsed the campaign. Louisiana replied that it would not endorse or participate in the campaign, indicating it had a state-level campaign in progress. Alabama has yet to commit, and North

Carolina declined, saying it lacked adequate funds to distribute the materials. Interestingly, museums, non-wildlife agencies, and other entities in non-participating states have requested copies of the materials to distribute as a public service and educational tool. SEAFWA directors also endorsed it with a provision that they would have authority to approve any changes in the campaign.

Once the campaign's basic structure and endorsements were in order, fundraising proved to be more of a challenge than anticipated. Numerous potential sponsors expressed an interest at first but ultimately declined to offer funding after hearing the full sales pitch for the expanded \$60,000 campaign. Even though the campaign offered potential sponsors an opportunity to have their logos on hundreds of thousands of brochures throughout the Southeast, have their company names associated with a massive effort to promote public safety and have their corporate images boosted in news releases issued by the GFC to 700 news media and freelance writers in Florida alone, they simply were not convinced they should participate.

The partners had tested the campaign materials at Orlando area schools, parks, and other locations, had documented a need for the materials, and confirmed that people learned from the materials and retained what they had learned about alligators. Still, aside from a small grant from Gatorland of Orlando to finance the pilot program, tourist attractions, supermarkets, and other logical sponsors just wouldn't buy into the campaign.

It was a difficult riddle for the partners to solve, but fortunately, the GFC's marketing expert, Dennis MacKee, agreed to help.

After a 30-minute conference with Mrs. Lawhead, Mrs. Smittle, and me, the problem was obvious to MacKee. The flaw was in the presentation to potential sponsors, rather than in the campaign itself. For instance, potential sponsors were unimpressed with the promise that their logo would appear on 250,000 poster/brochures. Without a detailed distribution plan to assure them the poster/brochures wouldn't languish in storage closets, sponsors had no handle to attach a dollar value to the posters. Likewise, plans to produce a 3- to 5-minute video for use by the Public Broadcasting System sounded real nice, but hardly something to get excited about, until the potential sponsors learned the video offered a potential to reach 15.8 million viewers—a media value of \$79 million. Those were the kinds of numbers potential sponsors wanted to hear.

“(With public relations activities as well as advertising) sponsors want to know ‘Is this going to help me sell more tickets at the gate or sell more of my product,’” MacKee said. “That’s the bottom line.”

The partners also incorporated the theme “Be Gator Safe!” into the campaign to condense its message.

Jack Hanna of television's “Jack Hanna's Animal Adventures” and Spectrum Productions, Inc., were the first to donate their time and production of the 10-, 30-, and 60-second master copy of the television public service announcements (PSAs). Hanna volunteered to lend his celebrity status to the campaign by narrating the PSAs, which were released throughout the Southeast. Spectrum Productions' services had a value of \$5,800.

Billie Swamp Safari, a Clewiston, Florida, tourist attraction with a close dependence on the presence of alligators and other wildlife, agreed to fund \$25,000 of the campaign. Gatorland, an attraction at Orlando, funded \$12,500 on top of the \$4,500 it had contributed to fund the preliminary testing of the campaign a few months earlier. Florida Media, Inc., a magazine chain based in Lakeland, agreed to run ads and articles in four of its publications with a combined circulation of 466,000. That offer boosted the appeal to other potential sponsors since it represented a minimum exposure value of \$38,676. Meanwhile, the Florida Alligator Marketing and Education Advisory Council (FAME), paid \$6,500 into the campaign. Still another cash contribution came from the nonprofit Florida Wildlife Federation—\$5,000 for printing adhesive signs to warn recreationists to be cautious at boat ramps, swimming holes, and other spots where they are likely to encounter wild alligators.

By August 1998, all the initial components of the campaign were funded and in place. Each participating state, depending on its size and alligator population, received 5,000 to 50,000 poster/brochures bearing the logos of the sponsors and partners and the names of wildlife agencies that had endorsed the campaign. A series of news releases, written to be generic to each participating state, went out to wildlife agencies throughout the Southeast for release to news media at appropriate intervals and at times of the year when stories about alligators would have news values. For instance, one news release, focusing on the fact that alligators are most active in warmer months, will be released in late spring or early summer. Another news release points out the contributions alligators make in the balance of nature by wallowing out gator holes in wetlands, providing drinking water for other wildlife during droughts. That release would appeal to news media during dry spells.

A generic magazine manuscript about alligators went to each wildlife agency for adaptation and publication in their state-produced wildlife magazines at no charge by the author.

Along with the printed materials, participating state wildlife agencies received the videotaped public service announcements in VHS and Beta formats. The VHS versions are suitable for public speaking presentations and included one continuous-loop tape for playing the 60-second public service announcement repeatedly without frequent rewinding at parks, tourists attractions and other locations where large numbers of people might benefit from the information before they encounter alligators. The Beta tapes are suitable for release to television stations, which immediately began requesting copies when the Florida partners launched the campaign with a press conference.

In addition, each state wildlife agency received a compact disc with a prepared promotional ad for the campaign.

Most importantly, each package of materials to each state wildlife agency included a form to be completed at the end of the initial 3-month phase of the campaign. The form will furnish details about how the agencies distributed the materials—how many went to parks, rest areas, tourist attractions, campgrounds, golf courses, and so on. The results will enable sponsors and potential sponsors to attach

a monetary value to their participation in the campaign, and hopefully, encourage them to renew their participation when future components take shape.

Aside from the mass media components of the campaign, the program will be part of AACOP's classroom curriculum to promote among children a respect for the nature of alligators and the need for caution around the reptiles.

After the 3-month initial phase of the campaign ends and evaluation is completed, the Be Gator Safe! program partners hope to attract new funding to continue the campaign indefinitely. Also, plans include a new component—publication next year of a coloring/activity book about alligators and public safety. The Florida Department of Agriculture has offered to develop the publication. AACOP is attempting to find sponsors to fund the press run of 250,000 to 1 million of the books and their distribution to participating states.

Creating and carrying out the campaign has been a learning experience that forced the partners, particularly the GFC, to come to terms with new realities in the world of public relations. This field, which we entered into thinking of it as an art, is now turning into something more akin to a science. Well-written words may still be the most powerful tools for promoting a cause, but now more than ever, we have to sell them in a business world where the professionals think in terms of numbers.

"It will promote a positive image of your company," no longer is an acceptable answer when the businessman's question is "How much will this boost my sales volume?"

Our new challenge is to adapt to this new arena where numbers are everything.