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bigchalk Leverages Icon to Create "bigchalk Mania"

by Linda Graham

THE VOLKSWAGEN BEETLE WILL probably go down in history as the most talked about and most remembered car of all time. An icon of both the flower-power 60s and the over-achiever 90s, the beloved Bug is perhaps the only automobile that evokes warm memories from the middle-aged and gleeful recognition from preschoolers. And what other car earned a title role in its own Disney movie?

Well move over Love Bug, Herbie rides again, this time as a key component of an integrated tradeshow marketing program. But this time the Bug had second billing while the leading role was played with style and finesse by bigchalk.

Bigchalk uses the Internet to provide research, assessment and standards, supplementary curriculum, professional development, library research, and web resources and services that support learning for the K-12 educational community. The company debuted at the Florida Educational Technology Conference (FETC) in 2000, where its integrated tradeshow marketing program had achieved the goal of creating industry-wide recognition for the bigchalk name and brand.

One year later, bigchalk's mission was to take the next step: to add knowledge to the awareness it had already created by educating its target audience about the scope of products and services it offers. Its ingenious plan? Harness the memorability, notoriety and warm fuzzies of the Volkswagen Beetle by developing attention-drawing strategies and tactics that would enable the company to rule the show, resulting in "bigchalk Mania."

PLANNING THE JOURNEY

The bigchalk team started its planning process for FETC with a brainstorming session. The discussion focused on the company's need to reinforce the message that educators and their students can use

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bigchalk to get comprehensive, accessible, and easy-to-use online resources. Then came that magic "aha" moment. "When someone came up with the metaphor that our products enrich and improve the educational journey, we had our solution," explains Paula Jackson, the company's director and vice president of marketing. Playing off of the word "journey," bigchalk selected the theme "Your Partner on the Road to Learning." This concept was then further expanded to leverage the drawing power, notoriety and desirability of the Volkswagen Beetle, using the distinctive vehicle as both a visual icon and incentive/grand prize.

Next, bigchalk called in its supplier team, which included tradeshow marketing agencies Live Marketing and Traffic Builders and graphic designer Wagner Design. "It was imperative to have the right support team in place," says Susan Russel, bigchalk's exhibit manager.

At the same time, the company set some very specific goals to drive its program. "We wanted to continue our branding of bigchalk as a leading educational product provider, introduce the organization of our products into five product categories, and drive interest and traffic to our bigchalk portal, www.bigchalk.com," says Russel. In addition, bigchalk set another highly strategic goal — to develop the sales funnel process for its assessment and professional development products that would aid its sales force, and enable prospects to quickly self-qualify and recognize which products were of interest to them.

For its measurable objectives, bigchalk's goal was simple: beat the previous year's landmark performance.

MULTI-PRONGED ATTACK

The attendees' first exposure to bigchalk's "Your Partner on the Road to Learning" campaign was through a direct mail invitation to the exhibit. Through this mailing to approximately 6,500 pre-registered attendees, bigchalk introduced its theme artwork: a blue VW Beetle dri-

ving by a street sign listing the five bigchalk product categories. The mailer also introduced its in-exhibit promotion with a blue VW Beetle as the grand prize. This message was repeated on a room drop to 2,000 attendees staying at hotels near the conference, and by bigchalk reps who handed out additional brochures in the hotel lobbies.

All three of these communications shared a flashing VW Beetle-shaped pin that read "I'm on the road to learning with bigchalk.com." Attendees were required to wear the pins in order to register for a chance to win the car, and in the process, they became active participants in spreading the word on the show floor. "It seemed like everyone at FETC was wearing a bigchalk pin," reports Elaine Cohen, president, Live Marketing. "Everywhere you went at the show, all you saw was bigchalk, bigchalk, bigchalk."

Leaving no stone unturned, bigchalk rented a billboard truck to carry its message back and forth in front of the convention center during the show. "We knew to be successful we had to be everywhere," says Russel.

BIGCHALK MANIA

When attendees entered the exhibit hall, they were impressed again by the quantity and variety of bigchalk messaging. Its integrated tradeshow marketing campaign continued through every aspect of the company's exhibit presence, and the company's existing 20X40 exhibit was given a graphic facelift, covering virtually all strategic surfaces with theme artwork. And as though the moving billboard, flashing pins, mailers and graphics weren't enough, bigchalk placed the blue VW Beetle grand prize along a high-traffic aisle, capturing even more attention from the attendees.

Most attendees entered the exhibit through the theater area where bigchalk alternated between two live presentations, one for its Homeroom assessment product and one for its Gen YES profes-



sional development program. At the end of each presentation, visitors who returned their completed lead cards were rewarded with a blue VW Beetle pen, and the chance to win a bigchalk goodie bag containing a 12-inch model VW Beetle and bigchalk T-shirt.

"The response to the presentations was overwhelming," says Russel. "We had 15 chairs which were always full, as well as between 15 and 35 more people standing."

SALES FUNNEL AT WORK

A key element of the program was bigchalk's "sales funnel." Attendees started this process by visiting one of three demo stations that were used to register people for a chance to win the car. To enter the drawing, attendees were asked to scan their badge, then review

a chart that organized the list of bigchalk's products into the five cate-



gories and designate which bigchalk solutions they were interested in.

From there, many attendees moved on to the live presentation area to learn more about bigchalk offerings. If their

interest continued, reps were on hand to speak with them at one of six product demo stations. Demonstrations started with an onscreen chart view of the same chart of bigchalk's product categories attendees had seen when they registered to win the car. From there, visitors had the option of linking to more information on the specific products they were interested in, or enlisting with the help of a racing shirt clad member of the bigchalk sales team. For participating, they were rewarded with a matchbox-sized VW to take home. It, too, bore the slogan: bigchalk — your partner on the road to learning.

Because attendees had already familiarized themselves with bigchalk's products when listening to the live presentations and registering to win the car, they had a basic overview of the company's product offerings

prior to speaking with the sales team. This enabled the sales force to concentrate its attention on specific questions rather than on giving general overviews. "The sales force reported that the quality of its individual conversations was very high. Almost everyone we spoke to already had some knowledge of our products, and most had very specific products they wanted to discuss," says Jackson.

In addition to its events on the show floor, bigchalk held key meetings with customers and press, including an Author Breakfast with children's author Peter Reynolds for its key customers. A group of bigchalk reps also held one-on-one customer meetings at a nearby hotel suite.

BIGCHALK MANIA ACHIEVED

Anxious to capitalize on the momentum created at the show, bigchalk began its follow-up efforts immediately afterwards by notifying its grand prizewinner and distributing its leads to the sales force. In addition, every exhibit visitor who had registered to win the car received a personalized letter thanking them for visiting the exhibit, naming the winner, and reiterating bigchalk's interest in being their partner on the road to learning.

As they reviewed their results, the bigchalk team realized that they had really created "bigchalk mania" on the show floor. None of bigchalk's competitors exhibiting at the show had anything comparable, and attendees had willingly lined up in record numbers to participate in all of bigchalk's exhibit promotions and educational activities.

"The attendees were so excited by the prizes and incentives that many asked our staff 'What else can I do in your booth?'" reports Russel. "And the grand prize VW Beetle giveaway was so popular that stanchions had to be brought in to manage the crowd of people waiting to register."

"The crowds were so large we even had to adjust our staffing," reports Cohen. "The show floor was so busy that we had to reassign staff from the hotel lobbies to the exhibit, and most of the sales staff worked beyond their assigned hours to help process the overflow crowds."

Even by the numbers bigchalk was a winner, easily beating every qualitative and quantitative benchmark from the year before. Based on a combination of on-site spot checks and the number of flashing pins distributed, nearly one-third of all attendees were wearing the

flashing VW Beetle pins throughout the show. With nearly 6,000 in-exhibit impressions, bigchalk drew almost 30% of all attendees to its exhibit, with half of these registering to win the car. Even more impressive, the sales force more than doubled the number of high quality conversations it had with prospects in the exhibit.

"Our 'sales funnel' worked," reports Russel. "Instead of giving quick overviews, we were able to use this limited face time with prospects to answer their questions regarding very specific needs."

An unexpected result of "bigchalk mania" was the positive energy and enthusiasm that infected the bigchalk team. "The group who participated in the show brought the enthusiasm back to the office where it infected the entire company," Russel says.

But the most impressive aspect of bigchalk's success was the memorability they created for their name and their products. "By capitalizing on the popularity of the car, we were able to transfer much of its notoriety and excitement to ourselves and our products," says Russel.

After all, the Beetle's still got it. 

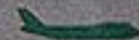


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