

Showcase Your Showdown

Union Carpenter Apprentice Skills Competition

By: Phil Cooney, Director – NJ Carpenter Contractor Trust

On June 28th of this year the NJ Carpenters Joint Apprentice Education and Training Fund revived their Apprentice “Contest” after a 10-year hiatus - and they did it with a “bang.”

“The Contest was always a great event *internally*, but as far as getting the attention of important industry groups and the media, that’s an element that could have been improved upon,” explained George Laufenberg, Director of the Fund. So with a 14-month planning schedule ahead of them, the Fund set out to re-establish the program, and they did so by including a public relations plan as part of the mix.

Every year, considerable time, money and effort are poured into Apprentice “Contests” by various trade unions. While contests are a great internal morale builder for any organization, it’s important your particular industry is aware of your event. Foot traffic, bright lights and the attention of key decision-makers are elements that help justify the expense when hosting an event of this magnitude. For the 2006 event, the Fund and its Planning Committee understood the importance of this mind set and strategically developed a public relations plan encompassing branding, audience-building and publicity techniques in an effort to draw a large crowd and capture industry attention.

The first branding element was the re-labeling of the event from a “contest” to a “skills competition.” While this change was subtle, it was important. The Planning Committee realized the label of “contest” had a somewhat trivial connotation, while “skills competition” suggested a more serious tone of professionalism. While branding decisions of this ilk were being addressed, audience-building techniques were initiated through a mix of advertisements, save-the-date post cards and press releases. Creating an event website as a central hub of information was also critical to the success of the event. The site served as the gateway to registration, posted critical event information and functioned as an electronic brochure that could be updated as the event evolved during the planning stages.

Because of these communication methods, the Committee garnered the attention of key industry groups throughout the 14-month planning span. The result yielded 1,000 attendees at the Atlantic City Convention Center throughout the day, most notably from the NJ Chapter of the American Institute of Architects, the Eastern Seaboard Apprentice Conference and three contractor associations—Building Contractors Association of New Jersey, Associated General Contractors of New Jersey and Drywall Interior Systems Contractors Association of New Jersey. While the systematic branding and planning were critical to the competition, so too was the choice of venue. The Atlantic City Convention Center, a first-class destination, presented a big-time atmosphere that generated excitement and helped lead to the large crowd.

Adding to the “buzz” of the event was the calculated effort of bringing in sponsors to support the competition. Through the sponsors, demonstrations, prize giveaways and technical seminars were made available throughout the day. The sponsorships added to audience building and the exciting atmosphere by further diversifying the activities of the day. The event culminated later that evening in an awards banquet that celebrated the effort of all 46 competitors and bestowed awards to the 5 winning carpenter apprentices in the categories of general carpentry, residential carpentry, interior systems, floorlaying and mill cabinetry.

The entire competition and 14-month planning effort were rewarded with important media coverage. That evening, a 30-second feature aired on the local NBC television affiliate during the 6pm news broadcast. And, the next morning, an article featuring the competition appeared in the Press of Atlantic City.

The moral to this great organizational success is this: If you are having a big event—plan with realistic lead time, make your industry aware of what you are doing, and get the attention your event deserves by developing an effective public relations plan. In other words...*showcase your showdown.*

A listing of competition winners and event photos can be found at: www.njcct.org