

Soul City Series 11 case study

Issued by [Grapevine Communications](#)

28 Mar 2012

The Soul City Institute was established 17 years ago as a 'social change communication organisation' to communicate important health and human development messages to the public, and package these messages in an edutainment format (education via entertainment).

The institute is behind the award-winning, real-life drama series on SABC 1, *Soul City*, which has been working together with Government's HIV and Aids and STI Strategic Plan for South Africa since 2007, with the aim of decreasing new HIV infections by half. The series provided a wealth of information about health and social issues while engaging the audience with entertaining storylines.

With the eleventh series about to launch, the Soul City Institute was looking for a new approach to creating awareness around both the educational and entertainment aspects of the show. They approached Grapevine Communications to promote the three main themes that would be interwoven with the script - preventing mother to child transmission of HIV, the controversial topic of male medical circumcision versus traditional circumcision, and managing personal finance. On the entertainment side, Grapevine needed to create hype around the high-profile cast of Series 11 to drive audience numbers.

This would require publicity in consumer media (entertainment, health, financial), as well as Grapevine identifying angles for the media and marketing press.

Entertainment

Grapevine first set out to secure pre-publicity to encourage people to watch the first episode, which would draw them in to continue watching the series. This was achieved by exploring all possible angles regarding the cast. Grapevine found out where they hailed from and profiled cast members in the community media of their hometowns, highlighting the success of these locals who were now TV stars. This also served to attract audiences from around the country.

Grapevine communicated to all the SABC commercial and community radio stations that Series 11 cast members were available to be interviewed and garnered substantial airplay in this way.

Grapevine then used cast members to communicate key messaging about the Series 11 themes to the public, and in the process, they became role models. The young up and coming stars were particularly popular and also hungry for the publicity, so they proved a perfect fit for the task. Grapevine also discovered that some of the cast members had personal experience of the themes and created platform for them to speak from the heart, helping the public to identify with them.

PR was even achieved for typically behind-the-scenes people like the producer and the technical team on set, once again indicative of how every possible angle was explored.

Soul City Series 11 was the first TV programme to launch a social media campaign and it became a significant component of the PR campaign. Grapevine encouraged viewers to tune into the show and then join weekly live chats on Facebook and Twitter, where cast members and health experts discussed various topics and concerns. Grapevine also created content that told the public things they didn't know about their favourite *Soul City* Series 11 stars - their real selves, not their characters.

In addition, Grapevine promoted the competition element on *Soul City*'s It's Real Facebook page where viewers had to answer a question about the latest episode via SMS and they could win a BlackBerry smartphone every week. The winners were then announced so there was continuous follow-through.

Grapevine also gave members of media the rare opportunity to experience set visits and meet with cast members, which encouraged them to give the series coverage. Grapevine managed to secure several cover stories from this exercise.

Meanwhile weekly updates and plot synopses were sent to the consumer press to keep the series top of mind.

Education

In terms of the educational themes, Grapevine set up interviews with medical professionals and health experts on talk radio to discuss key messaging. The live chats on social media were also a platform for viewers to address the experts. Press releases were written from an educational perspective incorporating advice from financial institutions, for instance, and referred back to episodes in which certain issues were raised.

Grapevine also partnered with a consumer magazine to create a Q&A platform whereby viewers could send in their questions and these would be answered by the relevant expert.

Achievements

In just three months from September to December 2011, Grapevine achieved a 75:1 return on investment, which translates to over R12 million. "This was obviously an excellent return on investment for us and Grapevine managed to secure massive pre-publicity and then maintain the hype and coverage for the duration of Series 11 which continues to filter in six weeks post the last episode," says the Soul City Institute's marketing manager, Zanele Gule.

Grapevine also proved their ability to target publications not targeted before, and to leave no stone unturned in terms of angles.

Soul City's online popularity steadily increased over the 12-week period with 2 982 'Likes' on their Facebook page, with 485 people involved in the live chats. There were also 602 Twitter followers, 461 tweets and 528 YouTube views on average.

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