Strong PR effort supports IIHF World Championship partnership

Minor hockey survey helps introduce Henkel to Canadian consumers

UNLESS YOU'RE RECENTLY decamped from Europe, you can be forgiven for not recognizing Henkel as a brand representing 50,000 employees and $17.6 billion in worldwide sales. In Canada, it is best known through its familiar consumer brands, such as Dial, Purex, Right Guard, Lepage and others.

That's going to change. Dusseldorf-headquartered Henkel doesn't want to weaken its consumer brands, but it does want to raise the profile of the corporate brand in North America, as it has in Europe and elsewhere. Friends and family of children involved in minor hockey in Canada got a taste of that effort as 2007 drew to a close, when a widely-reported Henkel-sponsored national survey made news about Canadians' attitudes toward recreational hockey. It was the first salvo in a series of PR and promotional blasts that will leverage Henkel's rights as a sponsor of next May's International Ice Hockey Federation World Championships, which will face off in Quebec City and Halifax.

Diana Robinson, President of Diana Robinson & Associates, says Henkel initially envisioned a low-key PR effort meant simply to communicate its sponsorship of the World Championships. She immediately set about convincing them that in the Canadian marketplace, particularly around hockey, they'd have to do a great deal more to be noticed.

One way to get noticed – and earn media – is to generate news. Robinson pitched and Henkel bought an independent national survey, conducted by Harris Decima Research, into the style of play in minor hockey, as well as its cost. The results were predictable, and fit well with Henkel's strategy. Parents in particular objected to the aggressive style of play – some would say dirty – that is often encouraged in minor hockey, and the cost of the sport was rendering it inaccessible to many. The top lines of those findings were spun to support a Henkel campaign and contest themed "Play fair, play clean," tied to consumer brands Purex, Right Guard and Lepage. In support of greater access to recreational hockey, Henkel made a $25,000 donation to KidSport, and further committed to an additional $5 contribution for every entry to its online essay contest, accessible through www.henkelpowerplayers.ca.

Good fortune, if one may call it that, played into Henkel's hands. On November 23, little more than a week before the scheduled release of the survey's findings, Canadian media, bloggers and YouTube were seized by an ugly hockey brawl among 8-year-olds at a tournament in Guelph. The story was kept alive as police weighed whether or not charges should be laid against coaches and parents. When the Henkel-sponsored survey was released, the story was still fresh.

Robinson's is a business where impressions matter. The result? As of early February, impressions totalled 700 million, with an "editorial endorsement value" of almost $16 million. By those metrics, the cost per impression was zero.

Robinson maximized news coverage by spinning the survey findings around several separate story lines, such as the cost of play and the influence of overly-zealous parents. All referenced the Henkel sponsored contest that encourages kids and parents to submit a 500-word essay on the meaning of playing clean and fair, with a top prize of a family trip to Halifax to attend the 2008 World Championships. Contest entrants are introduced to the Henkel brand as the website loads. Once inside, branding is shared with Purex, Right Guard and Lepage.

Two other contests on the same website are aimed more broadly, one a simple enter to win with an entertainment package as top prize, the other an interactive "ultimate sports fan" contest with a $500 cash prize linked to the World Championships.

More interactive bells and whistles will be added to the henkelpowerplayers.ca site as the Championships draw nearer, says Robinson, and instore and on-pack activation is just about to hit the street, again focusing on the Purex, Right Guard and Lepage brands.