

# CELEBRATING AN ANNIVERSARY, AND A SEASON 40 PREMIERE, WITH THE WORLD

Since debuting on television four decades ago, Sesame Street has arguably become the world's most famous informal children's educator, with a cast of lovable characters promoting fun learning.

With larger-than-life characters such as Big Bird and the Cookie Monster, and nearly a half-century of creative and evolving themes, Sesame Workshop recognized that the entire world deserved to celebrate the show's 40th anniversary together.



To commemorate Sesame Street's 40th anniversary, Sesame Workshop crafted a robust campaign celebrating the show's iconic legacy and marketing its new segments, format and CGI animation style. Despite having a limited budget, Sesame Workshop (which operates as a nonprofit) and its agency of record FerenComm crafted an expansive public relations strategy with one ambitious goal: to be everywhere.

With only eight people between the two organizations on the campaign, they sought a presence in fashion, sports, reality TV, entertainment, food, gossip, news and pop culture.

## STRATEGY

Eighteen months prior to the anniversary, Sesame Workshop decided to change the launch date of the season 40 premiere from a typical August start date to November to coincide with the exact anniversary of the first broadcast of the premiere episode of Sesame Street on Nov. 10, 1969.



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“We created a PR campaign that went hand-in-glove with a marketing campaign by developing all of our press materials, marketing materials and our online components to align with our new overall look and feel, which we called ‘chalk art,’” says Ellen Lewis, VP of corporate communications for Sesame Workshop.

Sesame Workshop’s PR efforts aimed to remind the media, opinion leaders and the public about the immeasurable, enduring popularity of Sesame Street and its impact on the world through extensive outreach and several unique partnership opportunities.

Once such opportunity was with Google. During the week leading up to the Nov. 10 anniversary date, Google ran a week’s worth of Sesame Street-themed Google Doodles on its homepage. Typically reserved for the birthdays of noted artists, scientists and major events within the Google brand, the Doodles ensured Sesame Street’s most famous characters would be seen around the world.

The enthusiasm around the anniversary wasn’t limited to the tech sector. Presidential figures were involved as well, as First Lady Michelle Obama appeared in the first episode of season 40 to teach the Street’s residents about the many benefits of planting a garden and eating healthily.

“The Obamas are the first couple in the White House that grew up watching Sesame Street, so it was fitting to invite [First Lady Obama] to be in our premiere show,” says Lewis. The first lady’s Lets Move initiative, which focuses on promoting healthy eating and exercising, was a good match for Sesame Street’s modern programming focus on promoting healthier lifestyles for children.

While securing time with the First Lady and a weeklong Google Doodle may seem like enough to make any campaign a success, the Sesame Workshop team worked to secure other partnerships and coverage. Sesame Street anniversary events were planned in several major cities across the country, including a month-long photo exhibit at Union Station in Washington D.C., a meet and greet Sesame Street panel discussion at The Smithsonian Discovery Museum and a six-month Sesame Street anniversary exhibit at the Brooklyn Public Library.

Jason Carey, director of marketing and communications for the Brooklyn Public Library, says the library’s partnership with Sesame Workshop was a win-win for both organizations. “We share a similar philosophy, with a strong focus on literacy that made working together an obvious decision,” Carey says. The library made 30,000 Elmo-themed library cards, all of which were registered over the course of the three-month campaign.

For the Sesame Workshop team, keeping up with the overwhelming global demand for media coverage of the anniversary was a problem of riches. One media platform that the Sesame team did reach out to was mommy bloggers, who, says Lewis, provided a viral component to the campaign.

## RESULTS

In the days, weeks and months leading up to the season 40 premiere, Sesame Street was everywhere.

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Here's a sampling of coverage and results:

- ▶ While filming season 40 in 2008, the Today Show and Nightline filmed stories featuring the anniversary, which became cornerstone pieces for coverage.
- ▶ A Facebook page, a character-run Twitter account, and a YouTube channel with celebrity clips were all launched in early November, with the Facebook page attracting over 43,000 fans, and the Twitter page landing more than 102,000 followers.
- ▶ The Google Doodles generated over 1.4 million visits to SesameStreet.org during the one-week period—three-times the traffic of the previous period and four-times the traffic over the same period in 2008.
- ▶ Major media highlights included national news shows talk shows, late night shows, reality shows and a satellite media tour covering 19 domestic morning shows and eight Spanish stations.
- ▶ Major print features ran in The New York Times, USA Today, Newsweek and Time.

Nov. 10, 2009, was deemed Sesame Street Day In New York, complete with a street-naming ceremony on Broadway directly outside the Sesame Workshop office.

Sesame Workshop had successfully leveraged its 40th anniversary celebration by attracting the public's attention and showing that Sesame Street is just as relevant today as it was when it began. The show's rating went up almost 60% in Feb. 2010 compared to Feb. 2009, becoming the favorite show among preschool children ages 0-5 and tying for the second-most-watched preschool show.

The campaign not only charged up millions of Sesame Street fans, it also recharged the Sesame Workshop team. "The feeling the show's creators had in 1969 must be similar to how we feel now," says Alicia Durand, publicist for Sesame Workshop. "Who knows what exciting possibilities will be out there in 10 years?"

## LESSONS LEARNED

While preschoolers aren't the key demographic targeted with social media campaigns, the PR team at Sesame Workshop was able to reach thousands of people who no longer watch Sesame Street regularly, but still wanted to celebrate its 40th anniversary. Here's some insight into making social media work for secondary audiences:

**KNOW YOUR FAN BASE.** Clearly, 2-to-4-year-olds are not on Facebook, but other fans were, including moms, college kids who grew up watching the show, and parents who grew up watching it that now have their own kids.

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**REACH OUT TO KEY INFLUENCERS.** Mommy bloggers were a huge viral component for Sesame Workshop's social media efforts. "They really helped get the word out," says Lewis.

**STAY WITHIN YOUR BRAND.** The Sesame Street Twitter account featured five different characters as its voices. By tweeting through the characters rather than a corporate voice, Sesame Workshop delivered messages that resonated with followers.

*Editor's Note: A version of this case study originally appeared in PRNEWS in February 2011.*