

ohc

O'Herlihy Communications

**Santa's Kingdom**

**PRCA Award for Excellence 2002**



### A: The Brief

For five years two Irish businessmen and friends Gerry Bolger and Padraig O'Hara had nurtured the idea of replicating in Ireland the experiences of Lapland at Christmas. Real snow, reindeer, Santa's village, elves and Santa himself, a unique experience for all the family, but at a significantly lower cost than flying to the North Pole.

On 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2001 Santa's Kingdom was launched to the Irish public with the objective of creating maximum publicity, impact and awareness among Irish families. From the moment of its announcement, the concept of replicating a Lapland experience with real snow fired the imagination of the media and public.

When the brief was received initially by BOHC it still was in the drawing stages. BOHC saw its massive potential and agreed to be commissioned to market and launch it in Ireland as the "must not be missed" family Christmas event.

Based almost exclusively on a creative, sustained and positive PR Campaign, Santa's Kingdom sold some 160,000 tickets in just ten days on the back of print and radio publicity in the national and regional media.

However Santa's Kingdom was not entirely without controversy. Visitors who attended the event over the first three days experienced long queues and delays, which received adverse publicity in print and broadcast media. The issues were identified and resolved almost immediately by the organisers and BOHC were successful in communicating and re-assuring the general public through media channels.

### B: Statement of Objectives

Creative communication was fundamental to developing, promoting and publicising the Santa's Kingdom brand as the ultimate winter wonderland. It was marketed as a unique experience that would capture the imagination of both children and parents nationwide. The communication objectives were:

- Create nationwide hype and awareness in order to boost pre-event ticket sales and ensure Santa's Kingdom became the "must-attend" attraction of the year.
- Educate the media on the concept and uniqueness of Santa's Kingdom.
- Inform targeted audiences through national, local, consumer and trade press of Santa's Kingdom ticket availability, accessibility, location and facilities.
- Promote the corporate profile of Santa's Kingdom's executives in order to give the company weight and credibility.
- Build and sustain the momentum following the initial launch in October and ensure that in the run-up to the Christmas period Santa's Kingdom is on every kids Christmas wish list.
- Plan, execute and event manage a star-studded launch event
- Manage ongoing PR and marketing process throughout whole campaign including crises management procedure

The key target audiences were outlined as follows:

1. Parents, kids, families nationwide
2. All national and regional media including television, press and radio

### C: Programme, Planning & Strategy

To meet these defined objectives a creative and strategic programme was devised by BOHC. It ultimately took six distinct stages as outlined below.

#### **Stage 1: Planning**

A detailed launch proposal outlined the creative strategies and event management involved in launching Santa's Kingdom to the Irish public. It also dealt specifically with media liaison across the board.

BOHC set up a series of introductory meetings with key personnel in RTE including The Late Late Show, Den TV and 2FM. BOHC chaired these meetings and from these emerged a competition agreement with The Late Late Show and a commitment from Den TV to come on board as a media partner, where they would publicise the event and film their Christmas Special from Santa's Kingdom. Den TV would also run competitions during the duration of the event to ensure on-going publicity to give ticket sales an additional push.

From experience, BOHC recognised the impact of running regional competitions and promotions around the country and a series of promotions on 16 radio stations were set up, giving away tickets to Santa's Kingdom daily. BOHC added in a specific clause when negotiating the promotions, that all stations would agree to interview Gerry Bolger or Pádraig O'Hara on their high listenership mid-morning chat shows before 30<sup>th</sup> November when Santa's Kingdom would officially open.

During this timeframe plans were put in place for the launch of Santa's Kingdom in Dublin's City Centre. In BOHC's estimation a jaded press corps had to be captivated by the idea of what was to come. Ideas were thrown about as to how to unveil the World's First Ultimate Winter Wonderland - by creating a Winter Wonderland setting in a city centre hotel or sending out a teaser Christmas decoration as an invitation to create curiosity among the press. Eventually the decision was taken to go with the following launch....

#### **Stage 2: Press Launch and Snowman Photocall**

The press briefing was scheduled to take place on 23<sup>rd</sup> October at the Westin Hotel in Dublin's City Centre. It was not only chosen because of its proximity to the Irish Independent and Irish Times but also the fact that there was a traffic island very close by with a high density of passing traffic. Work started on crafting an unbranded giant ice-sculpture of a snowman on the traffic island 8am. It gained huge attention from passers by and gardai were on location to keep crowds at bay. The press briefing took place at 11am which consisted of a 3D Visual Presentation and also a demonstration of how the 'real snow' would be created. BOHC had set up a pre-interview with the Evening Herald and the story ran that lunchtime. The press briefing was very well attended and photographers from all newspapers were present to capture the completed ice-sculpted scene, along with models dressed as Santa's Helpers. The launch received blanket publicity with pictures and articles appearing in The Irish Times, The Irish Independent, The Irish Examiner, The Star, Sunday World and broadcast publicity on 98FM, RTE Radio One, Country FM, East Coast Radio etc. The story also appeared on the global wire service Reuters which generated media interest as far as Tokyo and New Zealand.

BOHC put in place an in-depth media programme. Press releases, pictures and interview opportunities were immediately sent out a cross section of press. Interviews commenced on all radio stations including Lite FM, RTE Radio One, Midlands Radio, Eastcoast Radio etc. The business angle and investor side of the project was publicised through interviews with The Sunday Business Post, Business Plus and Business & Finance. The pictures from the launch were featured in Hot Press, In-Dublin and on the front page of the Greater Dublin based free sheet City Wide News that reaches over 90,000 homes. Following

the launch, Santa's Kingdom seemed to have captured the imagination of press and general public alike. BOHC, Ticketmaster and 98FM who were covering news on Santa's Kingdom were inundated with enquires about ticket availability.

BOHC at this point began working closely with Ticketmaster and compiled an e-zine message that was forwarded to over 21,000 email accounts nationwide alerting them to the fact that tickets were going on sale on the 1<sup>st</sup> November. AIB came on board as a sponsor and with the assistance of BOHC distributed information to over 13,000 staff members both in the Republic and Northern Ireland about their upcoming link with Santa's Kingdom.

### **Stage 3: Announcement of Ticket sales and build up to opening**

Tickets for Santa's Kingdom went on sale on 1<sup>st</sup> November 2001. To publicise and heighten awareness BOHC organised an exclusive picture with The Star and organised the 2FM Roadcaster to be positioned outside HMV on Grafton Street promoting ticket sales. Press announcements were sent to media nationwide and generated publicity on 98FM, Lite FM etc. BOHC spoke directly with Ian Dempsey and Garrett O'Callaghan who both went onto promote Ticketsales on their respective shows. An array of competitions were organised from the 2FM Saturday Show to the Sunday World, from The RTE Guide to The Sunday Life in Northern Ireland. As these kicked in and the regional radio stations competitions commenced, ticket sales started to spiral nationwide. Long queues were reported at Ticketmaster outlets in shopping centres across the country on Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> November. Pdraig O'Hara and Gerry Bolger had initially outlined they would be happy with selling 100,000 tickets – this number was by passed by the following week. Tickets at all times of the day were snapped up despite earlier concern that the morning and daytime would be most difficult to sell as children would be in school. However within 10 days of the tickets going on sale they were officially sold out! An article in Ireland On Sunday announced *“Santa threatens to sleigh Bono in the box office stakes!”* as Santa's Kingdom sold out as many tickets as U2's two Slane gigs put together.

The sharp and focused PR campaign saved the organisers over £100,000 on advertising as all ads were pulled on television and in press after four days due to the phenomenal success of the ticket sales.

As tickets sold out the Buy and Sell Website was dominated by people looking to purchase tickets to the event. BOHC shifted the emphasis of the communications programme from selling tickets to educating the public. A 'sneak preview' photocall was organised by BOHC featuring Santa's elves outside his toy factory in Goff's generating coverage in The Star and Evening Herald. This further heightened expectations. From an education point of view, AIB promoted their link with Santa's Kingdom through their Better Ireland Programme and BOHC coordinated the concept of bringing a gift to Santa's Kingdom which would, inturn, be distributed to their beneficiary, Barnardos.

### **Stage 4: The Official Opening**

The Official Opening, in planning since September 2001 was a VIP Star Studded occasion managed entirely by BOHC, with over 800 guests attending Santa's Kingdom on Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> November. With Gerry Ryan as MC the official opening of Santa's Kingdom became the most sought after ticket of the season.

The attendance of so many Irish celebrities including Gavin O'Reilly, Pat Kenny, Joe Duffy, Miriam O'Callaghan, Dave Fanning, Mary Kennedy, Marian Finucane, Stephen Rea and Lord MountCharles with their respective families demonstrated the level of excitement, hype and anticipation generated about Santa's Kingdom.

As the date for the official VIP family opening got closer there was a huge surge in media interest – RTE’s Nationwide, RTE News, Den TV and TV3’s News confirmed that they would cover the event. The photo opportunities for press of Gerry and Padraig sliding down the giant snow slide and the opportunity to capture local school children who were in for a test run proved immensely popular with the huge press corps. The blanket coverage the following day included a front page picture on the Irish Times as well as a front page picture on their business section was a huge coup in PR terms. All national papers covered the event in detail including The Examiner, The Star, The Sun, The Mirror and the piece ran the following evening on RTE News and TV3 News. It received mentions on Today FM, 2FM, 98FM and Radio One. The night was a resounding success and the coverage the following day reflected this.

### **Stage 5: Crisis Management**

Queuing and operational problems occurred at Santa’s Kingdom from Friday 1<sup>st</sup> December to Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> December – the first three days of operation and the radio coverage on the Monday 4<sup>th</sup> December went on to reflect these issues. Radio One’s Morning Ireland ran a balanced piece recorded over the weekend which covered the queuing difficulties but also highlighted the very positive response from visitors to the experience.

BOHC, when informed of the problems reacted quickly and curtailed the damage by implementing the crises management plan which included liaising with all media, issuing a statement listing immediate improvements, organising interviews, reviews and being available around the clock with advice and pro-action.

Under the direction of BOHC Santa’s Kingdom voiced a strong opinion against the discontentment expressed on the Marian Finucane Show, Joe Duffy Show and Gerry Ryan Show which in turn ensured that all pieces the following day in The Irish Examiner, The Star and The Mirror were balanced. By Tuesday’s Gerry Ryan Show (5<sup>th</sup> December) and The Evening Herald the press had turned in favour of Santa’s Kingdom and the Irish Times piece on Wednesday 5<sup>th</sup> December outlining all that was positive about the experience and listed the improvements being made at Santa’s Kingdom as a direct result of listening to it’s visitors. By extremely proactive media relations the tide was turned back in favour of Santa’s Kingdom and the organisers.

BOHC recommended creating a complaints procedure so dissatisfied visitors who had attended Santa’s Kingdom on the first three days of business would be dealt with on a personal level. Manned telephone lines were set up in Goff’s, Co Kildare which advised people that all complaints were to be put in writing to a PO Box and would be responded to personally by January 31<sup>st</sup>. Media were immediately informed that complaints would be dealt with on an individual basis and indeed many people went on to receive refunds and complimentary tickets to other children’s events.

### **Stage 6: Keeping the Momentum going- Media Reviews/ Research**

As Santa’s Kingdom moved into it’s second and third week of business BOHC maintained the media momentum by arranging journalists to attend the experience and review it. These included The Sunday World, UK’s Daily Mail, TG4, CRK and a host of regional publications. TV3 who had covered the launch on their News were keen to film news slots featuring children to be aired before Christmas. BOHC organised the logistics of this shoot and also with the Late Late Toy Show. Den TV also filmed their Christmas special, which appeared on Christmas Eve on RTE.

Santa's Kingdom and BOHC strategically believed scientific market research would be critically important in measuring the success of the experience and commissioned Lansdowne Market Research to carry out independent research. It was used to compare views and experiences of adults & children, measure experience against the expectations created and likely attendance in future years. Results found "Overall satisfaction levels were exceptional particularly among children...the public reaction suggests an excellent platform for its continued future success!" and that is what is planned for 2002.

D: Measurement

Because of the power of the media campaign devised and managed by BOHC Santa's Kingdom received a level of publicity unprecedented in terms of promoting a Christmas event in Ireland. It also had the additional bonus of a £100,000 save on advertising spend. From the moment of its announcement, the concept of replicating a Lapland experience with real snow captured the imagination of the media and the public and was by any measurement an outstanding example of creative, strategic and innovative PR in action.

E: Budget

€64,000 - €125,000

F: Appendix

Selection of Press Coverage (Print & Radio)  
Television