

Social Marketing Campaign Case Study:

Rock the Vote Campaign

In Brief:

Rock the Vote is a nonprofit organization started in 1990 for political advocacy in the United States. The organization, founded in Los Angeles, was created with the mission of engaging and building the political power of America's young people. Each year, Rock the Vote evaluates and continues their campaigns, moving forward and continuing their efforts. The organization was founded by Jeff Ayeroff, a Virgin Records executive, and stands out because of its influence with the young music scene.¹ Rock the Vote was founded and based where popular culture and politics intersect, influencing a new young batch of potential voters. The campaign has registered over five million people to vote since its start.² Rock the Vote has been an extremely popular and well-known campaign, still continuing its efforts over 20 years after its start. The campaign is often recognized for its smart branding strategies. Its name, logo and design is identifiable even years after its start.

Aimed toward America's young people, Rock the Vote has had great success with the changing times. Of course, the young people of today have different taste and preferences in music, as well as ascertaining their information and influences in different ways than in 1992. Some young voters were not even alive when the organization was

¹ "Rock the Vote" Shows Industry At Its Best. (1991). *Billboard*, 103(15), 11. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com.proxyau.wrlc.org/docview/226969215>

² Rock the Vote (2012). Press Kit: 2012 Programs. Retrieved from <http://www.rockthevote.com/about/press-room/electronic-press-kit/rock-the-vote-press-kit.pdf>

founded. However, Rock the Vote has managed to maintain relative popularity and vast brand recognition, while also still recruiting new voters every year.

As the campaign has continued, it has evolved into a stronger one, changing its focus from its original message. After its early success after its start in 1992, the campaign dedicated itself to “freedom of expression and helping people utilize their power to affect change in the civic and political issues of their communities.”³ Through strategic partnerships and new campaigns each year, the Rock the Vote campaign has survived 20 years of success.

The Problem:

In this case, the problem that prompted this marketing campaign is not overwhelmingly clear. In the early 1990s, voter registration among America’s young people was low. Rock the Vote attempted to engage more young people in the voting process, encouraging them to register. However, this may not have been the music industry’s only motive.

The music industry was coming under legal scrutiny in the late 1980s, as many tried to enforce legislation to censor or partially censor popular music. Many people in the music industry became frustrated with this legislation, and knew that young people could help influence these votes in their favor. By promoting freedom of expression and encouraging America’s young people to vote, the music industry may not come under such strict legal restrictions.

³ “History of Rock the Vote.” (2011). Rock the Vote. Retrieved at <http://www.rockthevote.com/about/history-rock-the-vote/#1992>

Still, the music industry saw both the lack of young voters and the censorship of popular music as problems in need of fixing for the social good of the community.

Formative Research:

It is difficult to determine what research was used to formulate this campaign back in 1992. Rock the Vote does not make this information available. However, based upon the motive behind the organization and the information that they publicized, the research for starting this campaign involved voting statistics. When the campaign began, there was a significantly low number of young voters.

As the campaign has progressed, however, they have made research and statistics much more available. Before the 2008 campaigns, Rock the Vote published much of their research. They explained that they have reached out to this specific target audience because of the sheer number of potential voters. More than one-fifth of the electorate is between the ages of 18-29, which is a total of 44 million potential voters.⁴ They also note that voting becomes a habit, which really means that if the campaign encourages people to vote when they are young, they will become loyal voters as they get older.

The campaign, in recent years, has seen much criticism because while the organization is considered a nonpartisan non-profit, many believe the true motive has a liberal bias. Statistically, the influencers in the music industry have been more left-winged, and many believe the campaign promotes a more liberal agenda. Additionally, the young people of the United States are also generally more left leaning, so surveyed

⁴ "Winning Young Voters: A Handbook for Campaigns, Candidates, Political Parties and Organizations." (2008). Rock the Vote. Retrieved at <http://www.rockthevote.com/assets/publications/research/winning-young-voters.pdf>

research historically would prove that recruiting young voters would give a liberal push to the country as a whole.

In recent years, they have also done more research to better understand their target audience. They determined the demographics of the audience, as well as how they perceive themselves as well as the state of the country. According to this research, in 2008, the number one issue the target audience was most concerned with was the economy.

Additionally, research to determine the marketing mix has been done since the start of the campaign. For example, in 1992, television channels like MTV were the best way to communicate with the young adults and potential voters of the time. However, with the popularity of the Internet and social media always growing, the campaign's research proves that the "millennials" are spending more time on the Internet and are better influenced by these messages.

Target Audience:

The target audience of the Rock the Vote campaign was young adults in the United States ages 18-24. This audience represents the young people who often are not registered to vote. Many young people are somewhat apathetic and unconcerned with the issues that face the nation. By targeting this age group, Rock the Vote is attempting to reach a powerful population of new voters and encourage behaviors from a young age. If the Rock the Vote campaign gets young adults to register and become engaged and excited about the idea of voting, those people will continue those habits for years into the future. More specifically, and unofficially, the target audience in this campaign would be young people involved in or influenced by the music industry, as

that is where much of the campaign is based. More recently, the campaign has expanded beyond the celebrities of the music industry to influencers in many industries, especially the Hollywood scene. This is a downstream audience because it focuses on influencing the behaviors of individuals. However, by encouraging people to vote, the campaign can also affect an upstream audience of policy makers and influencers.

Target Behavior:

The target behavior of the Rock the Vote campaign has evolved over the years. Rock the Vote was founded in response to a series of “attacks on freedom of speech and artistic expression.”⁵ Encouraging people to vote was the targeted behavior to accomplish this outcome. As the campaign progressed and expanded, the mission developed as well. In 1998, the organization expanded its mission to inspiring young adults to affect change in their communities.

Behavior Theory Foundation/Behavior Change Model:

The guiding theories of this campaign are the Theory of Reasoned Action/Theory of Planned Behavior and the Social Cognitive Theory. First, the Theory of Reasoned Action is that intention to act is the best predictor of behavior. This intention will outweigh the costs and is influenced by the benefits of the behavior. This is relevant in the Rock the Vote campaign because the intention to vote, or register to vote, will influence the behavior of voting and becoming more active in politics and the decision making of the community. The audience is influenced by the perceived benefits of the

⁵ “History of Rock the Vote.” (2011). Rock the Vote. Retrieved at <http://www.rockthevote.com/about/history-rock-the-vote/#1992>

campaign and the social norm of becoming a voter and an American active in the democracy and decision-making process.

Secondly, the Social Cognitive Theory suggests that adopting a behavior is linked to the idea that benefits outweigh the costs. Because there are so few costs of registering to vote, other than time, many people in the audience see the benefit of having an influence on their community or country as outweighing the cost.

Additionally, by making the process of registering to vote easy and accessible, Rock the Vote increases the belief that the audience and the individual possesses the ability to vote and influence decisions.

Marketing Mix:

The marketing mix in campaigns involves product, price, place, and promotion elements that are crucial to success. Though Rock the Vote has changed over the years, it has evolved in a great way.

Product:

The product in the Rock the Vote campaign can be broken down into the three categories: core product, actual product and augmented product. The core product of Rock the Vote is having a say in government issues and legislation. The core product is the benefit the audience gains by registering to vote. In registering, the audience gains an awareness of the issues the country is facing, while also becoming empowered to be a part of affecting change.

The main actual product is voter registration forms and information disseminated to the target audience. As the campaign has progressed, the actual product has

become easier to attain. In 1996, Rock the Vote began the first call-in and online voter registration access points.

The augmented product of the Rock the Vote campaign is a sense of empowerment among the young people of America, as they are able to see the ways in which they can affect change and empower their own communities.

While the campaign has evolved over the years, the product has remained the same, as the goal is to get people to register to vote and become involved and empowered in their communities.

Price:

There does not seem to be direct monetary price to the Rock the Vote campaign. Registering to vote does not cost anything, so the product does not have a monetary cost. While some of the events that are used to promote the campaign, like music festivals, have a monetary cost themselves, people will not pay for these events to register to vote, but they will be paying for the event itself; the monetary cost comes from wanting to see their favorite bands, not registering to vote. Additionally, there are many ways to register to vote without attending these events, like, for example, online.

There are also very few nonmonetary costs of this campaign. Registering to vote can take time that many young people do not want to sacrifice. Additionally, if someone registers to vote, it will take them a significant amount of time to educate themselves on issues and candidates before Election Day.

Place:

Through the years of the campaign, the place where the target audience performs the desired behavior has changed. When the organization began in 1992, the

campaign encouraged people to register to vote, which meant taking the time to go to get registered. When the “Motor-Voter” Act was passed in 1993, young people were able to register to vote when receiving or renewing their driver’s licenses. However, the true success of this campaign was extending the voter registration to phone-in and online options. With so much of America’s young people on the Internet, keeping up with the times and making this option available as a place for the campaign, where potential voters could easily take action themselves.

As years passed, Rock the Vote also saw more potential in bus tours. In 2000, Rock the Vote went on a 25-city bus tour, and in 2001, they stated the “Fight For Your Rights” tour with MTV’s Total Request Live. It was in these places where they reached young people and fans of the music industry in a new way. In the most recent presidential election year, 2012, Roadtrip 2012, a bus and concert tour through 16 states, continued this tradition of bringing the target audience to register through their favorite music acts.⁶ Similarly, Rock the Vote is active at many popular music festivals like Lollapalooza, which bring music fans of all kind together.

The campaign also saw success at college campuses, where many students have easily registered for the past 20 years. As recently as the 2012 election, Rock the Vote placed a great deal of focus on schools. A 2012 program called, “Democracy Class” was a collaboration of educators, artists and elected officials with students to excite potential voters as they reach the voting age. Additionally, March 23, 2012 was

⁶ Rock the Vote (2012). Press Kit: 2012 Programs. Retrieved from <http://www.rockthevote.com/about/press-room/electronic-press-kit/rock-the-vote->

named “Democracy Day” where educators were asked to teach their students about democracy and the power of participation.⁷

Promotion:

Rock the Vote is well known for its promotion and branding strategies. The campaign has branded itself so well that it is very easily recognized even over 20 years after its initial start. The best promotion of the entire Rock the Vote campaign is the way it has become an enormous part of the music industry and its influence on politics. From Madonna’s MTV advertisements in 1992 to Miley Cyrus promoting the #WeWill Rock the Vote campaign public service announcement in 2012, Rock the Vote empowers the young people of the United States with popular music influencers, the best promotion and branding strategy they have.

Rock the Vote’s messaging to encourage young adults to register to vote and empower them to become involved in the politics and decision-making efforts in their communities and the country itself has remained relatively consistent. The campaign’s main message expresses the idea that registering the vote will empower you as young adults. The main message is that registering to vote is the first step in making this possible.

The campaign also has used many communications channels. The first public service announcements were promoted on popular television channels like MTV and VH1, which reach music-loving young adults. As the times have changed, the campaign has used more channels and mediums to reach their audience. For example,

⁷ Rock the Vote (2012). Press Kit: 2012 Programs. Retrieved from <http://www.rockthevote.com/about/press-room/electronic-press-kit/rock-the-vote->

with the invent of social media, Rock the Vote has many new ways to communicate their messages with their audience. For example, in 2010, Rock the Vote took to Twitter to launch the Tweet the Vote campaign, which garnered nine million impressions. The public service announcements are now easily available on YouTube.

Evaluation:

The Rock the Vote campaign saw quick success when it began in 1992. The campaign registered 750,000 young Americans to vote. Also in this first year, over 11 million young people voted in the 1992 election, a seven percent increase from the last presidential election in 1988.⁸ The Rock the Vote campaign has also been credited for helping to get the National Voter Registration Act, also known as the “Motor Voter Act” passed in 1993. This legislation helps make it easier for people to register to vote in every state.

In 1996, Rock the Vote introduced the first program that allowed people to register to vote via phone call. In the same year, knowing and understanding the power of the Internet among young people of America, Rock the Vote also became the first website to offer online voter registration. Becoming available on these new technologies reaches a younger audience and engages them, making it much easier for the target audience to register to vote.

Each year, it seems Rock the Vote is responsible for garnering hundreds of thousands of new voters. In 1998, the organization registered 250,000 people for the

⁸ “History of Rock the Vote.” (2011). Rock the Vote. Retrieved at <http://www.rockthevote.com/about/history-rock-the-vote/#1992>

Congressional election, and the year 2000 brought in 165,000 new voters.⁹ In 2004, after a partnership with CNN in “America Rocks the Vote” campaign, over 1.2 million voter registration forms were downloaded.¹⁰ Additionally, 45% of 18-24 year olds surveyed visited the Rock the Vote website in the months before Election Day.¹¹

The campaign continued to change with the times. In 2008, Rock the Vote saw the largest drive in voter registration history, with over 2.5 million registration forms downloaded. In 2010, Rock the Vote focused their attention on college campuses, and began the “Tweet the Vote” campaign. This campaign garnered nine million impressions.¹²

The greatest strengths of the Rock the Vote campaign are its branding and ability to adjust with the times. For a campaign to last and thrive over 20 years after its start, and still be seen as relevant is impressive. Similarly, the campaign has not lost the “edginess” that made it popular at its start.

One weakness of the campaign is the criticism it has gained in recent years as pushing a liberal bias. However, the strengths and statistic success of this campaign, which has empowered millions of young adults, pushes more than the core product of registering to vote, which is why it has been so successful.

⁹ “History of Rock the Vote.” (2011). Rock the Vote. Retrieved at <http://www.rockthevote.com/about/history-rock-the-vote/#1992>

¹⁰ “History of Rock the Vote.” (2011). Rock the Vote. Retrieved at <http://www.rockthevote.com/about/history-rock-the-vote/#1992>

¹¹ “History of Rock the Vote.” (2011). Rock the Vote. Retrieved at <http://www.rockthevote.com/about/history-rock-the-vote/#1992>

¹² “History of Rock the Vote.” (2011). Rock the Vote. Retrieved at <http://www.rockthevote.com/about/history-rock-the-vote/#1992>

Because Rock the Vote has made voting popular and “cool” among young adults, it has also empowered many people to take action in their communities. This is a major underlying success of this campaign.

Each year, Rock the Vote finds new and innovative ways to encourage voting and political activism, and the campaign has become a social marketing and branding success for this reason.

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