

# A Virtual Partnership Works Out the Kinks to Inspire Safer Driving—and Healthier Spines—Among Teens

**Company:** ThinkFirst Missouri  
**Agency:** Perrygraf, Graphics by Design  
**Timeframe:** 2007-ongoing

Every year, nearly 500,000 people in the U.S. sustain a debilitating brain or spinal cord injury. Among children and teens, it's the leading cause of death, yet a majority of these injuries are preventable—especially those related to car accidents. **ThinkFirst Missouri**, a nonprofit trauma prevention program sponsored by the **University of Missouri School of Medicine** and the **Department of Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation**, launched an awareness campaign in 2007 targeting teens learning to drive.

ThinkFirst Missouri's quickly commenced its program by outlining its goals, which were simple.

"The whole idea was to think before you act," says Karen Vidoni, account rep for **Perrygraf**, a self-described "dimensional marketing" agency based in Carol Stream, Ill., that worked on the project since its inception. "Think

of the consequences of doing anything impaired, whether it's drugs or alcohol. ThinkFirst always says 'use your mind to protect your body,' because they're talking to kids all the time who are thinking they're immortal."

## HITTING THE MESSAGE HOME

ThinkFirst Missouri also has a roster of speakers in wheelchairs—young people who have sustained paralyzing injuries and are trained to speak to other youths, warning them of what can happen when they don't think.

"Their main goal was to get adults, such as youth leaders and school administrators, to call them and book one of their speakers to really bring [the message] home to young people," says Marybeth Bittel, marketing manager for Perrygraf, the creative partner on the project.

ThinkFirst Missouri also wanted to develop marketing solutions that were both tangible and tactile. The group's inspiration, according to ThinkFirst director Michelle Gibler, were the three-dimensional pieces they



Photo courtesy of ThinkFirst Missouri

Penny Lorenz, assistant director of ThinkFirst Missouri, shares the details of her car crash with students in Lake Ozark, Mo.

saw displayed on tabletops in fast-food chains such as **McDonald's**.

"As we have aged from 1980 [when ThinkFirst Missouri was launched] to 2008, the way young people send and receive messages has changed," she notes. "We were looking for ways that would both appeal to and impact them."

Contacting **Graphics by Design**, ThinkFirst's longtime lead agency, Gibler relayed this tabletop idea to the firm, which suggested a viable alternative.

"They said rather than do this tabletop, let's take this to the next level and do a box," she says, describing the origin of the print piece that would become a centerpiece of the campaign.

"ThinkFirst Missouri wanted something they could pass around to everyone that would pop. They had a couple of ideas they wanted to focus on, but they didn't know quite how to do it," Bittel relates. "They brought a few things to us

and said, 'We want something that's dimensional and appeals to teens and to the 'boosters,' who were the adults involved in the program.'"

## TAKING IT TO THE WEB

While Perrygraf was developing a few ideas for the campaign, ThinkFirst Missouri kicked things off by launching a new Web site ([www.thinkfirst.missouri.edu](http://www.thinkfirst.missouri.edu)). Among elements featured on the Web site are a list of VIP speakers, Missouri chapters, news and events, resources and names of staff members.

Work on the campaign was a collaborative effort between the two agencies and the organization.

"[In the early stages of the program,] there were bits of pieces of information presented to us by ThinkFirst," recalls Vidoni. "[As the campaign progressed], we kept presenting them with different ideas, different focuses, until we [all agreed] on the final product."

Even though Graphics by Design has enjoyed a long

## RETROFITTING A MESSAGE

A key lesson Michelle Gibler, director of **ThinkFirst Missouri**, learned while working on ThinkFirst's recent campaign, the linchpin of which was a three-dimensional paper piece, was if you have something good in another format, don't discard it.

"On each box [used for the ThinkFirst Missouri campaign] is printed three words, 'woulda, coulda, shoulda.' They were adopted from a large jumbo poster we created for a prior campaign, which we left behind in schools. The poster was an award-winning one that targeted teens. Graphics by Design, which did not design the poster, said let's take an already existing winner and adapt it to fit on the box. So what they did was extend the reach of the poster and make it into a new medium to maximize its impact. What this proved was you don't have to do something fresh every time if you already have something that works."

relationship with ThinkFirst Missouri, the two companies have never had any face-to-face interaction. Their collaboration has always been virtual.

"How times have changed," Gibler says, summing up the successful working relationship, rendered even more unique by the fact that the principals have never met in person. "Graphics by Design is very accommodating electronically. They send us PDFs that we can open and access readily and act as an intermediary with Perrygraf." The latter firm has also never had any face-to-face interaction with ThinkFirst Missouri.

Consequently, in developing the right look for the campaign, it was imperative that channels of communications between all three firms be clear. After a few early misses, Perrygraf created a dimensional piece made from paper that was specifically designed to fold flat for cost-effective mailing, yet pop open to grab instant attention.

Once open, the 3-dimensional piece stood on its own to serve as a tangible, tabletop reminder that could be picked up and passed around, according to Bittel. Photos of the speakers in their wheelchairs interspersed with first-person commentaries scrawled like graffiti on the piece underscored the in-your-face approach desired by ThinkFirst Missouri.

A limited budget, as well as

finding the right media, were also challenges. But Bittel took it all in philosophical stride.

"A lot of times, you get a client, and he or she says, 'I want to do this but I don't know quite how to do it.' But in this case, they wanted the marketing to jump out and grab attention for two vastly different demographics. So for us, it was about how can we recommend a medium. It turned out to be print, which would achieve their goals, be cost-effective and reach out to their desired targets."

#### **QUALITY—AND COST—CONTROL**

Knowing it would need to print out a large inventory, ThinkFirst Missouri was worried about the prohibitive costs. "The pop-up box itself was expensive because we needed to create so many [that would be mailed out to all the principals of Missouri's junior and senior high schools, along with a cover letter saying they wanted to talk about safety,]" says Gibler.

Navigating the labyrinth of the new postal regulations was also problematic. "Flat is mailed a lot more cheaply than something that is lumpy," says Bittel. "They wanted something to pop up, but they also couldn't mail something that's in a pop-up form because we can't afford that. What we did was come up with a rubber band that flattens it out so you can put it in an envelope and

## **OVERCOMING CLIENT MYOPIA**

Sometimes when you work on a campaign, it's important to read between the lines of what your client is telling you, and then plan according to what you feel would be the best solution, says Marybeth Bittel, marketing manager for **Perrygraf**. This can help you save a lot of time during the planning phase.

"Clients can tell you, 'We want to achieve A, B and C.' Sometimes they have a preconceived notion on how that's going to work. They've thought through their message so much they'll block themselves into wanting to do it in a specific format. In our case [with the ThinkFirst Missouri campaign], we said to them, 'Have you thought about using paper as a medium?' It's cheaper and flatter. ThinkFirst Missouri was going along the lines of what we can send them that's dimensional. We had to look at what was in existence. We needed to think of something that they didn't think of that would satisfy their budget requirements."

it comes in flat. The envelope is a little bit larger so it gets people's attention."

Unlike other campaigns in which media outreach is nationwide, this one was initially localized and confined to the direct mail route—that is, until the response became so impressive, that the chapter brought it to the attention of the national organization. "The ThinkFirst Missouri team showed them what they did and suggested that maybe they could adapt the campaign to some of their other regional chapters," Bittel says.

As a result of the direct mail flat pop-up boxes sent to junior and senior high schools, ThinkFirst Missouri received 50 phone calls expressing interest in having spokespersons from the program visit their schools.

"We dropped this really

cool item on their desks," explains Gibler. "They read the letter, picked up the phone and called us."

#### **DRIVING SAFELY**

Ultimately, for Bittel, the campaign reached its objective effectively without exhausting company coffers.

"If you're on point with your message, you don't have to break the bank. A lot of companies think they have to hit every outlet. But [what we showed] was that one well-thought-out piece was able to pull in hundreds of calls and unify dissimilar groups." **PRN**

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