

## IABC/Washington, DC 2005 Silver Inkwell Awards Statement of Objectives and Results

### **ENTRANT DATA:**

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### **ENTRY TITLE:**

SBA Message Development  
Marketing Research

### **CATEGORY:**

8. Government & Military Communication

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*The U.S Small Business Administration's marketing efforts were at a crossroads.*

*The Office of Marketing was unsure of which messages or channels to use in addressing today's small business owner and field offices were putting together their own materials, creating an SBA branding hodge-podge.*

### **AUDIENCE:**

There were two audiences in this project: small business owners and internal officials. The SBA target customers are small businesses of varying sizes and longevity and their owners vary in business experience, gender and ethnicity. In order to succeed they need financial and business advice and assistance. Additionally, the SBA needed to assess the attitudes and perceptions of their own staffs in Washington and throughout the U.S. on the current and future marketing program of the agency.

### **BACKGROUND:**

In the years leading up to the research project, the marketing office had waned, lacking leadership and direction. The focus was primarily on development of print products that often sat in the warehouse, and there were little, if any, multi-approaches employed to reach the public. Without a strong marketing program or direction, various components of the organization had developed their own approaches to branding and messaging. The new Director made key decisions to eliminate alternative versions of the logo and to change the agency's positioning statement to "Your Small Business Resource." In addition, the marketing office consolidated the agency's many program messages into six points of Starting Your Business, Growing Your Business, Financing Your Business, Contracting Opportunities, Recovering from Disaster and Your Voice in Government (advocacy).

At the same time, the agency had recently completed a realignment of its field operations, focusing on improvement of service delivery at the grass-roots level. More than ever, attention was being focused on customer outreach and, by extension, marketing of the agency's programs and services. To address these issues, the SBA and JDG Communications joined forces in 2004 to assess the information and resource needs of the small business community and determine the most effective means of delivering the information and resources needed. The timing of the research project was particularly important because the Office of Marketing would be delivering its 2005 Marketing Plan in the first quarter.

## **GOALS & OBJECTIVES:**

**The overarching goal was to learn how best to reach the target customer audience and provide input for the Calendar Year 2005 SBA marketing plan.**

To accomplish this the following overall objectives would need to be met:

- Determine what themes and messages would best convey the mission of the SBA to serve and support small business in the U.S.
- Determine what channels would deliver those messages to the target audience.
- Learn from field offices their most effective practices in messaging and delivery.

## **DESCRIPTION:**

To accomplish these goals, the project consisted of a two-pronged approach:

- Focus groups with small business owners in 3 cities – Baltimore, Dallas and San Francisco – to determine what customers find most helpful and useful in terms of the information they receive and the methods of delivery;
- An internal communications audit to determine what SBA officials and partners in Headquarters and the regions consider most effective in reaching out to customers; and
- An analysis of key findings and recommendations to the SBA for future action.

Focus group participants were recruited using the SBA's lists of small businesses in the three cities selected. Recruitment focused on diversity within each focus group so that both genders, various levels of business longevity, revenues and ethnic groups were represented. JDG designed a focus group discussion guide for approval by SBA that provided for specific questions to get the information that was needed and open discussion of group concerns. The Baltimore focus group was held at an SBA facility. For other cities, the groups were held in hotels; all groups were led by experienced JDG facilitators.

For the communications audit, JDG designed a telephone interview script and arranged for individual 30-minute interviews. Nineteen executive and staff members from SBA district and regional offices, as well as representatives from various program offices and resource partners, were chosen by SBA as participants and were interviewed.

A comprehensive research report was submitted to the SBA on Dec. 31, 2004. The report included key findings from the focus groups and the communications audit. It also discussed the interrelationships of the key findings from the two research approaches as well as recommendations from JDG on how to put the findings to use within the 2005 SBA marketing plan.

## RESULTS & EVALUATION:

The results were delivered to the agency just as the marketing plan for Calendar Year 2005 was being prepared. As a result of the research, several important changes and additions were made to the plan, certain parts of the plan were tweaked, and some initiatives were validated and, therefore, unchanged.

Research findings generated specific recommendations that the SBA has included in its plan:

- An effort to increase partnering efforts with other business organizations to expand outreach, building on relationships that already exist in the agency. (Business owners reported that the information they most trusted came from their professional and trade associations.)
- A proposal to expand and formalize the agency's exhibit program, thereby reaching more small business owners (who indicated that they attend trade shows local and national).
- A usability study on the agency's Web site and a project to improve design, navigation, look and feel of the site, based on both the research conducted by JDG and the usability study findings. (Business owners said they preferred being reached by email and Web and provided suggestions on improving the current Web site.)
- Plans for a success story campaign in print and on the Web site featuring real people – winners honored at SBA's Small Business Week events in Washington DC. (Business owners said they wanted to see real people like themselves in the ads, photographed in true business environments.)
- Ongoing focus at national, regional and field levels for consistent and cohesive branding and messaging to ensure customer needs are met. A network has been created consisting of national, regional and district office staff engaged in various forms of outreach and marketing to improve information delivery to customers and stakeholders.
- New training and communication tools involving national, regional and field staff, including online, hands-on training seminars and an internal e-newsletter to improve internal communications. Best practices will be shared with other offices through these efforts, as they requested.
- Many plans and initiatives are additionally reflected in the agency's Score Card goals and are being tracked along with other projects as a means of achieving the agency's mission.