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## SPORTS + ENTERTAINMENT + MEDIA SILVER WINNER “we share” *PBS KIDS Sprout*

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In the summer of 2004, Comcast, HIT Entertainment, Sesame Workshop, and PBS joined forces. They sought answers to the following questions: In today’s frenetic world full of emerging distribution channels, is there a way to provide quality preschool kids television programming to parents 24 hours a day, seven days a week, whenever and wherever they want it? In a cable universe already crowded with “edutainment” brands, could this new partnership identify and articulate a unique positioning for a new brand that differentiates it from competitors, resonates with key audiences, and ultimately aligns with the brand’s programming lineup?

To inform strategy development, the launch team conducted a series of focus groups with moms of kids ages 1-6. Group respondents discussed their lives as moms, their successes and challenges, and how technology is helping with managing their demands. Each group participated in a card sort exercise where a variety of statements and attributes were categorized based on how important each was to them personally as a parent. Across all groups, two statements consistently emerged as being the most important to parents: *“I want to preserve the wonder and innocence of early childhood for my child,”* and *“I cherish the moments when I can connect with my child in his/her world.”*

It’s from these findings, discovered through research conducted at the ground level of brand and strategy development, that PBS KIDS Sprout was born. In addition, these research findings led to Sprout’s original brand positioning and its first consumer brand campaign: “we share.” “When we listened to moms talk about the importance of sharing special moments with their preschoolers we knew we had struck upon a powerful premise on which to build the Sprout brand,” said network president, Sandy Wax. “Looking at Sprout as an environment that celebrates and encourages these moments helped us not only to define our advertising model but also impacted our programming and marketing strategies.”

### **BACKGROUND**

PBS KIDS Sprout is the first and only 24-hour preschool destination available on TV, on demand, and online for kids ages 2 to 5 and their parents and caregivers.

The network was designed to satisfy a variety of needs for both preschool parents/caregivers and their children:

- Busy parents/caregivers want easy, simple *together* time
- Parenting On Demand: Watching what I want, *when* I want it
- Parents/caregivers want more ways to watch “gold standard” quality kids shows
- Desire for a safe, fun, worry-free destination
- More choice, more control, more interactivity

Sprout launched in April 2005 as a 24/7 Video on Demand (VOD) channel. Soon after, in September 2005, the Sprout linear channel launched. At that time, just 18 million homes had access to it. Sprout offers 50 hours of free VOD programming, plus an additional 15 hours of Spanish language content.

Sprout's programming is designed to foster parent-preschooler interaction through gold-standard, curriculum-based shows and short-form original programs. Sprout is an active television viewing experience; it inspires conversation, activities (e.g., making crafts), exploration/discovery, play, learning, exercise, and healthy eating habits. Sprout's program lineup of children's shows includes: *Sesame Street*<sup>®</sup>, *Bob the Builder*<sup>™</sup>, *Barney & Friends*<sup>™</sup>, *Caillou*<sup>®</sup>, and *Thomas & Friends*<sup>™</sup>.

Sprout linear programming is designed with the short attention span of preschoolers in mind (most content is 10-15 minutes in length), and follows the typical preschooler's day, with daypart blocks for morning, afternoon and bedtime. For example, the 9am to noon block features "The Sunny Side Up Show" with a live host, a puppet sidekick and active programming that encourages parent-child interaction and participation. The 6pm to 9pm daypart block is "The Good Night Show," which features soothing programming designed to help kids wind down after a busy day.

Sprout's advertising model is unique because all linear and VOD advertising is directed to parents only and never interrupts programming. Sprout airs less than three minutes of advertising per hour on its linear channel, well below the FCC's designated limits.

## **BUSINESS SITUATION**

The Sprout marketing team faced three significant challenges upon launching the brand. First, Sprout was (and still is today) considered an "emerging network," relatively small compared to the more established kids networks. As a result, the marketing team had to develop creative ways to reach consumers, as well as cable and satellite TV operators, to communicate Sprout's unique content and format.

The second marketing challenge was that Sprout is essentially a "library channel" whose programming mainly consists of previously aired kid's shows, repackaged and re-presented around short original content and brand identity links. Although the presentation makes the entire package feel new and fresh, there was risk that consumers wouldn't see a reason to watch and cable and satellite providers wouldn't see a reason to launch. Sprout needed to find a way to break through and be heard by both audiences in order to stake a unique and valuable claim of fostering parent/child interaction.

The third marketing challenge was that, because of Sprout's "emerging network" status, the linear service was not Nielsen rated (and still is not today). This meant that the Sprout research team needed to approach all measurement initiatives, including platform usage metrics and media effectiveness, in non-traditional ways.

## **MARKETING**

In early 2007, Sprout began work on its first-ever consumer targeted brand awareness advertising campaign. In conjunction with creative agency Red Tettemer, Sprout developed the "we share" campaign. "Everything about Sprout is designed to provide opportunities for parents and preschoolers to share time together," said Steve Red, president and Chief Creative Officer of Red Tettemer. "The trick for our initial brand campaign was to communicate that message to our audiences in a way that built belief in the brand and encouraged consumers to invite Sprout into their lives, and cable and satellite operators to add it to their lineups."

Together, Sprout and Red Tettemer developed a multi-tactical campaign that showcased the kinds of child/parent interaction that Sprout inspires. From finger-painting to fishing, from pots-and-pans serenades to trips taken through imagination, the TV, print and online elements featured the moments that make preschoolers and parents smile.

Prior to this marketing initiative, the network's brand positioning had been based largely on the initial foundational research. It was obvious that the campaign needed to be significantly grounded in a comprehensive market research program. The primary objective of the research was to objectively assess consumer understanding of and connection to the Sprout brand

message, and to develop strategy and messaging for the advertising campaign. The research questions included:

- Do the advertisements help the brand to **register** with consumers/potential viewers?
- Is the communication **consistent** with the overall strategy? Or are there elements which detract from or are inconsistent with the strategy?
- Does the messaging in the campaign **persuade** potential viewers to actually watch/interact with the Sprout brand?
- Has the messaging improved the **bond** between the Sprout brand and current and potential viewers?

In addition to these diagnostic questions, the Sprout team also sought to uncover new information about its entire brand strategy: Are parents truly seeking meaningful time/moments with their child(ren)? How can Sprout play a role in facilitating this parent child interaction?

## RESEARCH STORY

### **Phase 1: Qualitative Research**

The first phase of research consisted of focus group evaluations of preliminary television creative story boards and print ads, which Sprout conducted in tandem with Maureen Craig Consumer Insights & Brand Strategy. Respondents were shown multiple versions of the ads; all executions presented special and fun moments shared between parents and kids. Some executions included these scenes in tandem with a familiar character from a show seen on Sprout, such as Barney, Elmo, or Caillou.

The most significant learning from this first phase of research was the power of including characters from Sprout's familiar shows. For example, respondents were shown print executions of the "we share creativity" ad with and without the inclusion of the Caillou character. Without the recognizable character, there was an obvious disconnect: Respondents didn't readily understand that the ad was for a multiplatform children's television network; some identified the ad as being for a packaged goods company and others said it was for cleaning products. But when shown the execution that included Caillou, respondents made an instant connection. One respondent said: "It's a television network that has shows my kids love and also has things for us to do together."

Based on this research, the team developed the Sprout "Triple Play":

#### **The Sprout "Triple Play"**

1. *Show images of a parent and child(ren) enjoying simple moments together.*
2. *Include recognizable characters from one of Sprout's familiar programs (Barney, Bert & Ernie, Thomas, Caillou, etc.).*
3. *Communicate the functional benefits of Sprout: 24/7 availability, available via multiple platforms, etc. Icons are used to quickly convey that Sprout is available on TV, online, and on demand.*

Sprout realized that ads must have *all three components* to be effective. The team took these findings back to Red Tettemer, who incorporated the Sprout "Triple Play" into all print and online executions as well as four television spots: *we share joy, we share togetherness, we share imagination, and we share anthem.*

"Uncovering the Sprout 'Triple Play' was like finding research gold for the Sprout brand," said Jim Multari, Director of Research for Sprout. "It was important for the brand launch but even more important to lay a solid groundwork of brand vocabulary in the beginning for all messaging and communications going forward."

### **Phase 2: Online Campaign assessment**

Building on the initial qualitative research, and to guide future consumer communications strategy, Sprout commissioned Harris Interactive to design and conduct online quantitative research to assess the effectiveness of both the television and print ads.

A total of 1,221 US mothers of children between the ages of 2 and 5 participated in the online study. Five different print ads and all four TV spots were tested in a monadic design. Segments included moms who had experience with Sprout vs. those who were inexperienced with the brand. The research answered all four of Sprout's initial research questions:

1. Do the advertisements help the brand to **register** with consumers?

*Yes. 75% of moms correctly identified the brand as PBS KIDS Sprout, PBS Sprout, or Sprout. They easily identified that Sprout is for young children and has programming for children.*

2. Is the communication **consistent** with Sprout's overall brand platform?

*Yes. The ads successfully communicate Sprout's overall strategic campaign messages, particularly among experienced moms: Sprout is something for parents and children to share together, is a brand that supports learning, is welcoming, encourages growth, and celebrates the moments of childhood.*

3. Does the messaging in the campaign **impact** attitude or behavior?

*Yes. Even among moms who had never watched Sprout, 36% to 46% who evaluated a print ad said they would definitely or probably watch Sprout in the near future, and 45% to 68% said the same after seeing a video ad.*

4. Do the messages strengthen the **bond** between the Sprout brand and consumers?

*Yes. The ads scored high on Harris' measures of Consumer Connection. For example, below are the scores given for the Anthem TV spot among moms with no experience watching Sprout:*

- *Aspirational Fit: 59% said Sprout fits how they think about themselves.*
- *Emotional Connection: 77% will have more positive feelings about Sprout in the future.*
- *Cognitive Connection: 77% were more likely to consider watching Sprout.*
- *Behavioral Connection: 77% were more likely to watch Sprout.*

*Also tested were the key elements that make up Sprout's brand platform. Top two box scores (on a five-point agree/disagree descriptive scale) for each of the following attributes were consistently higher than 75% across all segments analyzed:*

- *A welcoming, fresh and trusted place,*
- *An integral part of a preschoolers' day,*
- *Inspires ideas that invite preschoolers and their families to share and play together, and;*
- *Shares entertaining and fun moments from within a child's world.*

The Anthem TV spot emerged as the "best of the best" among those tested. It worked the hardest to achieve the Sprout "Triple Play" by interweaving the show characters with real life images of special sharing moments. In the other three TV spots, the ads are vignettes of parents and children interacting, such as a mother and daughter at a T-ball game or a father and daughter at the ocean, followed by a short ending featuring the Sprout TV set icon. In contrast, the Anthem TV spot features a collage of parents and children interacting, interspersed with short scenes featuring Sprout programs, and ending with a mother and child on a sofa *enjoying watching Sprout together.*

The Anthem TV spot's scores were significantly higher than all other executions in conveying the brand's central message that Sprout creates opportunities for preschoolers to invite their families into their world to share meaningful and playful moments together. Based on these scores, all remaining TV inventory was reprioritized so that the Anthem TV spot was prominently featured.

The ad testing also yielded findings that showed the differences between moms who had watched Sprout vs. those who had not:

- The Sprout experienced moms are “activity” driven and moved by the idea of watching Sprout and enjoying the programs together with their children.
- The Sprout non-experienced moms are driven by “realistic” moments and view Sprout as a motivational element to sharing activities with their children.

### **Phase 3: Follow-up Qualitative Strategy Check**

To further enrich the quantitative findings, Harris Interactive conducted virtual online groups among 23 moms who had previously participated in the online ad assessment study. The session was facilitated by a Harris Interactive moderator, with respondents participating remotely from their homes with the use of a Harris-provided webcam. The online visual format enabled the research team to show both print and TV ads on the screen and gather feedback. The virtual environment allowed for a cost-effective deeper dive into the quantitative findings from a national sample of survey respondents.

This phase of research provided specific executional insights that will be used to refine future marketing campaigns. For example:

- The presence of “real people/real kids” in the ads was very appealing and differentiates Sprout from ads for other children’s stations. *we share a home*, the only ad without real people, was the least effective in reflecting an accurate picture of the brand messages.
- The three icons (and copy in the print executions) at the bottom/end of the ads are clear and informative but there is some confusion relative to the on-demand icon.
- Ads perform best when the parent and child are shown clearly engaged in activity, not just posing together.
- The *Imagination* TV spot is confusing to some and not clearly connected to Sprout. This ad was identified as being most in need of a Sprout character.

These research findings also played an important role in helping to decide the most effective out-of-home (OOH) advertising placement. For example, Sprout placed a significant OOH buy at Philadelphia’s 30<sup>th</sup> Street train station. Two large banner ads were placed in the main station area: “*we share a home*” and “*we share smiles.*” *Home*’s heavy emphasis on characters and *Smiles*’s sweet moment between a parent and child worked in tandem to complete the Sprout “Triple Play.”

“One of the most powerful manifestations of the campaign was a ‘station domination’ in Philadelphia’s commuter train hub, 30<sup>th</sup> Street Station,” said Shannon Vacca, Sprout’s consumer marketing manager. “It allowed travelers from up and down the heavily traveled Northeast Corridor to see the print campaign as a whole, which made an indelible impression on consumers and trade audiences alike.”

## **CAMPAIGN DESCRIPTION**

The “we share” campaign launched in late April 2007. The campaign features the fresh and playful spirit of Sprout’s brand, while reinforcing the network’s core vision of bringing parents and kids together into a child’s world. From the shared laugh to a family adventure, parents and their preschoolers can find it all on Sprout.

The campaign features preschoolers enjoying and sharing everyday moments with moms, dads, and caregivers, and links these moments with the trusted programs seen on Sprout. The campaign consisted of a series of print and online ads, TV spots, and out-of-home creative designed to reach both trade and consumer audiences nationwide.

The print campaign consisted of a dozen different executions, each featuring a colorful image of parents and young children sharing a fun moment together. The headline included a simple fill in the blank, such as “we share creativity.” then at the bottom the phrase was repeated, “we share Sprout.” Print ads appeared in national consumer parenting magazines (*Parents* and *Family Fun*) and entertainment trade press (*Mediaweek*, *Television Week*, etc.), as well as outdoor vehicles including billboards, transit platform posters and train cards, bus shelters, phone kiosks, and coffee cups.



TV spots aired nationally across targeted cable networks and PBS affiliate stations. The TV ads define the consumer experience with Sprout in an engaging, energetic, and entertaining presentation.

The last three months of the campaign, October through December 2007, included online banner advertising and paid search advertising on portal sites (*Yahoo*, *Comcast.net*) and family-oriented websites (*Parents.com*, *Disney.com*, *SeeMommyRun.com*, etc.). Using creative with the theme of “together time” for parents and preschoolers, these ads linked users to *SproutOnline.com*, which includes crafts, activities, games, videos, and more for parents to share with their preschoolers.

## **BUSINESS RESULTS**

The most obvious evidence of the success of Sprout’s advertising campaign has been significant growth in the networks’ subscriber base and distribution carriers as well as increased usage across all of Sprout’s platforms. Since the campaign launched, distribution of Sprout’s linear and VOD services has increased 33%. In November 2009, Sprout passed 700 million total transactions for its Video on Demand format. Unique visits to *SproutOnline.com* increased 200% from the launch of the campaign through the end of 2009.

Secondary data sources also offer a testament to the increased awareness of and satisfaction with the Sprout brand:

- Sprout’s overall brand awareness/total familiarity among mothers with children ages 2-5 has increased 70%. In spring 2006, 42% were aware of Sprout. By spring 2009, nearly 70% were aware of the brand. (Source: Marketing Evaluations Character Q-Score studies; 2006-2009).
- According to Beta Research Corporation’s most recent digital cable subscriber study, Sprout awareness among women 18-49 has increased from 39% aware in 2006 to nearly 50% aware in 2009 (Source: Beta Research Corp., Digital Cable Subscriber Studies, 2006-2009).

In addition, the “we share” campaign has won numerous honors and awards, including:

- Promax/BDA/TV Week “Campaign of Distinction” award, as one of the top ten promotional/branding campaigns in 2007.
- 2007 Davey Awards, honoring creative excellence from smaller agencies. The “we share” campaign won over 10 gold and silver medals for specific executions in different categories.
- Brand Builder award, 2007, given to Eileen Diskin, VP of marketing for her talent and expertise in creating the “we share” brand campaign (Diskin is now the VP of marketing for Comcast Cable Corp.).
- “we share” was a multiple winner in the 2008 CTAM (Cable & Telecommunications Association for Marketing) Mark Awards for Marketing Excellence.

## **SPROUT’S RESEARCH MODEL**

The comprehensive research program used to support “we share” has become a model that Sprout can replicate to inform future campaigns:

1. Initial qualitative research is used to inform campaign strategy, pre-flight.
2. Unlike more traditional advertising testing, communications diagnostic testing is conducted just before or during the media flight.
3. Qualitative follow-up testing is done to uncover additional insights about the quantitative results while also positioning the research team to start the process again to support future marketing campaigns.

This non-traditional approach creates efficiencies while seamlessly integrating research into every step of the marketing and communications process.

## MOVING FORWARD

In 2008 and 2009, armed with confidence in its brand, Sprout began to focus its marketing message specifically on increasing distribution of its linear service. This required a communications campaign that targets those US markets and households that currently do not receive Sprout, as well as the digital cable and satellite companies that could provide it. The goal is to create a groundswell among preschool households, demonstrating why Sprout makes sense and why it's a "must have" for their families.

Thus, the "we share" campaign led to "Sprout Please!" This campaign continues to support Sprout's core promise of inspiring child/parent interaction but goes a step further to literally put the "ask for the order" into Sprout's potential audience's mouths. National targeted ads in markets that have yet to launch Sprout, grassroots stunts, and live events in malls all are designed to encourage Sprout's target audience to ask for "Sprout Please!"

The creative features a mix of popular and recognizable characters (Elmo, Thomas, etc.) to grab moms' attention and evoke trust as well as Sprout original characters (Chica, Star, etc.) to differentiate the network. A strong call to action message is included on all elements encouraging families to call 1-866-9-SPROUT or visit [SproutPlease.com](http://SproutPlease.com) to request Sprout in their area. The campaign runs on various platforms in target markets that do not carry Sprout, as well as some national coverage.

As with "we share," Sprout's unique research design has been replicated to support "Sprout Please!" The Sprout marketing team already knew from the "we share" testing how to best communicate the Sprout brand in ads. This time, the team was interested more in learning about how current Sprout viewers talk about Sprout and how they'd tell someone who doesn't have the channel about it. Leveraging *Sprout's Viewer Circle*, Sprout's proprietary panel of 1,200+ Sprout viewers, the team conducted qualitative interviews to learn exactly how viewers "speak Sprout."

These data were used to craft a detailed quantitative assessment of the "Sprout Please!" campaign. Results of this research continue to guide campaign strategy development today.