

Networking products company 3Com Corporation, with the help of partners including Harris Interactive and Against All Odds Productions, created the world's largest-ever interactive opinion poll of the human race on a variety of topics relevant to people and cultures all over the world. The resulting cross-cultural dialog touched people in all walks of life and demonstrated what can be achieved using 3Com's simple networking technology. With the help of worldwide public relations agency Burson-Marsteller, 3Com created an award-worthy program that was well accepted across cultures and highly publicized everywhere from China to Brazil, gaining recognition for the 3Com brand and developing a relationship with consumers.

## THE GLOBAL CHALLENGE

At the end of 1999, 3Com was in the process of refocusing its business offering from end-to-end networking, targeted mainly to large enterprise, to simple-to-use networking solutions targeted to medium and small businesses and consumers. With the exception of its Palm Computing division's popular Palm devices, 3Com itself had little to no consumer recognition and, with the planned spin-off of Palm in March 2000, needed to establish itself as a key global player in the consumer networking space.

3Com faced the challenge of making its brand and products relevant to consumers who had limited or no experience with the company. To spark a meaningful interaction with consumers worldwide, 3Com embarked upon the creation of the world's largest interactive Internet-based poll, which would highlight its products and illustrate how the use of networking technology can impact people's lives – even those typically without access to technology due to geography, cost or simple indifference. The event would also be another step in 3Com's commitment to help bridge the "digital divide," providing technology to those who are traditionally without access.

Called the Planet Project, the poll would reach people in all corners of the earth and be offered in eight languages via the Internet from Nov. 15 through Dec. 7, 2000. Through thousands of Planet Pollsters, 3Com employees and volunteers dispatched to urban and remote locations all over the world, the poll would also reach people without access to the Internet. This event would give 3Com the opportunity to touch even technologically disenfranchised communities with its technology, and demonstrate how networking products can "turn connectivity into community" and be relevant to people of all kinds.

3Com asked B-M to lead the marketing communications campaign to ensure that the Planet Project would reach its goal of being the largest-ever Internet poll by capturing 500 million media impressions globally and mobilizing millions of people to participate in the event. Together, 3Com and B-M worked to create an integrated plan that would generate a worldwide buzz for the poll beyond the usual scope of business and technology media, while building recognition of 3Com's role and participation from consumers, influential business people and small to medium businesses, such as schools.

## STRATEGY AND IMPLEMENTATION

The Planet Project team faced a number of communications challenges in publicizing the event on a global scale: 1) delivering consistent messages globally, while allowing enough flexibility to localize the plan to ensure the program was relevant everywhere; 2) thwarting potential competitive criticism of the project and its goals; and 3) building momentum and global interest in advance of the poll in order to ensure maximum global participation.

Staging a poll unprecedented in nature and size required a unique team and mix of technologies

never before assembled. In addition to thousands of 3Com employees and hundreds of B-M professionals in 53 countries working on the project, 3Com built a team of partners and contributors including Harris Interactive, Against All Odds Productions, Sun Microsystems, AT&T and Macromedia to execute and analyze the poll. The challenge was to leverage the strengths of the numerous partners, while ensuring that media coverage was balanced, and not overwhelmed by the number of contributing partners involved. To help partners gain coverage without "confusing" the core message, B-M and 3Com created protocols for the development of materials, carefully orchestrated publicity activities, and coordinated partner-generated announcements.

Another major challenge was creating a poll that would be truly global in its scope, significance and relevance – taking into account that the world speaks more than the eight languages in which the poll was available, many questions may not be acceptable in all countries for political or religious reasons, and that only about one percent of the world's population is online. The team identified and addressed opportunities for critics to question 3Com's ability to reach a global audience. For example, a government relations campaign in China ensured that the poll was politically and culturally accepted there. And local poll analysts were identified and secured to serve as locally relevant spokespersons about the content of the poll. The Planet Project team also ensured that the poll questions – and their translations – resonated with people living in countries all over the world. Finally, the team proactively focused publicity on components of the program that could prove the project's global scale.

The activities of Planet Pollsters who traveled to remote areas like the Amazon jungle and Rwandan refugee camps to poll those who use little technology in their daily lives were promoted to signal the global scale of the poll. The team also created a special student version of the poll to engage classrooms and young people everywhere in the dialog. High-profile polling stations in cities across North America, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Asia Pacific and Latin America invited many more to participate. The message to the world was that, using technology from 3Com and its partners, people were now able to communicate and connect with each other in a relevant way, whether they were in New York City or Papua New Guinea.

The Planet Project was a global undertaking that would take place over a limited timeframe, so it was critical to reach people in advance of the poll to prepare them to participate. To overcome this obstacle, the Planet Project team created an aggressive publicity plan with three phases: an October launch to unveil plans for the project, a month-long "interim" period of events and announcements between the launch and the November poll, and media outreach during the event itself.

The project was announced on Oct. 4 using a satellite media tour featuring 3Com executives, a Web cast involving representatives from the Planet Project's technology contributing companies, local-market media events around the world, and aggressive outreach to print, broadcast and Internet media. An online newsroom (<http://news.planetproject.com>) with 35 local country sites offered journalists press materials, photographs and an archive of the launch announcement Web cast.

During the interim period, the global team created localized marketing campaigns, working closely with Internet cafés and non-profit organizations to establish polling centers. Schools all over the world were encouraged to make the Planet Project poll part of classroom curricula. Aggressive media relations efforts also continued with weekly announcements highlighting exotic polling locations and local and international endorsements that were secured from luminaries, ranging from United Nations officials to actor Jackie Chan. Partnerships with large news organizations, such as the BBC, France's Le Figaro, Norway's VG Nett and the Web site of

Korea's Joong-Ang Ilbo, drew further national credibility and attention.

With worldwide buzz around the Planet Project poll and thousands of people pre-registered to vote, the Planet Project team was ready for the event. During the primary days of the poll (Nov. 15-18), the Planet Project Mission Control Center at 3Com headquarters served as the "nerve center" for publicity efforts and was staffed around the clock to service news organizations on site and around the world. A team of international B-M writers, including a number of former journalists, worked with polling analysts to capture and release compelling stories from the poll results. Planet Pollsters e-mailed their polling stories and photographs each day, and these were also disseminated to the global media audience. International and U.S. media who visited Mission Control had access to poll analysts, as well as a number of exciting on-site media events, including a video conference between French students in San Francisco and Issy les Moulineaux, France, and a "How It Works" day where technology media were invited to learn more about the technology required to make this unprecedented event possible.

Poll-taking events were publicized to attract mass attention. In China, where the poll created the first opportunity for the citizens of the PRC to freely share their views, students in under-developed schools in the Western region were linked with "connected" schools in the Eastern region to take the poll, resulting in extensive national attention. In Brazil, journalists and camera crews flocked to watch hundreds of children taking the poll at a central town hall installed with more than 100 PCs. In the U.S., where the presidential election controversy unexpectedly monopolized the attention of media throughout the poll, significant coverage was won with the last-minute addition of poll questions topical to the election.

#### INTERNATIONAL SUCCESS

The poll was a great success for 3Com, generating over 1.2 billion measurable media impressions with 3,480 stories in 53 countries around the globe – far surpassing the original goal of 500 million media impressions. A few of the marquee broadcast media hits included CNN in Hong Kong, Australia, Turkey, and the United States, as well as BBC World News and France 2. U.S. print and wire hits included AP, Bloomberg News, USA Today, The Los Angeles Times, The New York Post, San Jose Mercury News and Investor's Business Daily. In Europe, key papers like Germany's Die Welt, The Times of London and Il Corriere in Italy covered the Planet Project. Asia saw coverage in The Times of India, The South China Morning Post and Far Eastern Economic Review. And in Latin America, major papers including Brazil's O Globo, Mexico's La Reforma, Venezuela's El Universal, El Tiempo in Colombia and Clarin in Argentina carried the story.

The program also achieved the critical goals of generating positive coverage for 3Com in high-profile consumer-oriented news outlets, such as MTV Australia, and of personalizing 3Com's technology to consumer audiences. The media reported on the global scope of the project and 3Com's effort to reach out across the digital divide. Numerous stories appeared about people in places like the Amazon, Rwanda, the Louisiana bayou and South Korea who were thrilled to be "connected", if only for a short while, and who commented on how this technology could change their lives.

In 250 countries around the world, people completed more than 1.4 million polls, making the Planet Project – according to industry experts – the largest Internet poll in history