

NACWA Environmental Achievement Awards

Public Information and Education: e-media

DC Water's Lady Bird as e-Ambassador

Introduction

On April 9, 2013, DC Water christened its giant tunnel boring machine (TBM) in a naming ceremony at the mouth of the 100 foot-deep launch pit where she later began her dig—a 4 ½ mile tunnel below the District of Columbia. The \$30 million machine stretches more than a football field in length and builds a concrete tunnel, placing the tunnel walls as it digs. TBMs are named much like boats are in the nautical world. DC Water's TBM was named "Lady Bird" after Claudia Alta Lady Bird Johnson, First Lady and wife of President Lyndon B. Johnson.

To coincide with the naming, DC Water launched both the webpage and the @LadyBirdTBM account with this Tweet: "What a beautiful day. Of course, that won't matter where I'm going. Not a lot of weather to worry about 100 ft below ground."

Goals: The goals of Lady Bird's e-presence are to 1. educate the public about the important (but hidden) work; 2. garner public acceptance of the work, both its cost and disruption; and 3. create an open channel for communication should a specific, immediate need arise.

Strategies: 1. Reach audiences with different levels of technological sophistication through a Twitter account and a section of the DC Water website (dcwater.com). For those stakeholders not on Twitter, the Lady Bird twitter feed runs through a widget on the webpage, widening the audience. 2. Describe the work underground. 3. Give updates and progress. 4. Get retweeted by

the public, engineering contractors, the media, other TBMs, other wastewater utilities, etc. 5.

Drive viewers to the website with the URL on social media and in publications.

Objectives: Within 24 months, have 1,000 Twitter followers. Within a year, have at least 1,000 page hits.

Twitter Account: Lady Bird Tweets from deep underground with an oversized personality to match her 1,323-ton size. With witty dispatches from the @LadyBirdTBM account, she keeps her followers informed during every step of her progress and educates them about the purpose and environmental benefits of the project she is building on their behalf. This unorthodox strategy of creating a Twitter account for a TBM – how many machines have their own Twitter account? – keeps the project in the public eye, even though it is taking place well out of sight 100 feet below the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers.

The feed also relies heavily on multimedia content – images, graphics and videos – to engage followers and spread interest in the project through viral sharing. This strategy is successful in part because the massive scale of the project and the tunnel boring machine itself are awe inspiring to the public.

Humor also sets the Twitter feed apart, making the project more accessible and interesting for customers who might be less likely to invest time in learning about a complex engineering project. That allows us to reach a larger audience and to educate them about the importance of the work.

Website Content:

The Lady Bird webpage can be found at the vanity URL dcwater.com/ladybird. At top is an interactive map with Lady Bird's up-to-the-minute progress displayed visually with a mini Lady Bird icon moving from her start on DC Water's Blue Plains plant to her current location. The TBM's progress is also shown in a key at bottom, displayed in linear feet and percent of mining completed. The interactive map was developed in partnership with the firm managing the tunneling construction.

An inset box includes a few key stats for Lady Bird, including her length, age and speed. (She's shy about her weight.) A great image gallery and four videos demonstrate the impressive size, scale and complexity of the project. Background information and links to Lady Bird's media coverage (25 media hits and growing) round out the contents of the webpage. There are also links to the larger Clean Rivers Project and other areas of interest on the DC Water website.

The *USA Today* coverage of Lady Bird that is linked to on the webpage gives a great lay explanation of the problem with combined sewer systems and combined sewer overflows.

Conclusion

Lady Bird currently has 642 followers on Twitter –local residents and ratepayers as well as environmentalists, members of the media, government entities, other utilities, and other TBMs and construction contractors. DC Water infused Lady Bird's tweets with personality to make them more interesting and accessible to a wider audience. The fact that a tunnel boring machine has a Twitter account has also generated public and media interest in the project. Lady

Bird was interviewed, along with other TBMs, for an article appearing in Engineering News Record, entitled “TBMs that Tweet.” The extensive use of photos and video content has engaged followers and helped accomplish the goals of the account.

The Lady Bird webpage (in all its URLs) has had 7,093 page views since it was launched in April 2013. Average time spent on the vanity URL(dcwater.com/ladybird) is a whopping seven+ minutes, well above the average for the Internet of less than a minute per page view.

The e-presence has helped DC Water reach a wider audience and has pushed more traffic to media reports, educational videos and publications that help explain the project and its importance.