RE-IMAGINING RENEWABLE ENERGY

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JUMP/SMART MAUI

Launching an international technology project that depends on local volunteer participation is a tall order in any community. And in a tightly knit community such as Maui, Hawaii – where 'innovation' can sometimes be viewed with caution as residents ponder the impact on their environment – that is a task with several degrees of difficulty. But when the Maui Economic Development Board contacted Fern Tiger Associates (FTA) about this project, they embraced the challenge and created an integrated, comprehensive communications plan around one of the most innovative demonstration-level renewable energy projects in the United States.

JUMP/Smart Maui (The Japan U.S. Maui Project) represents a first-of-its kind demonstration program to test a new electrical grid system for the 21st Century. As an island community, Maui relies on importing an enormous amount of increasingly expensive fossil fuel, resulting in some of the highest energy and gasoline prices in the nation. And, there is no neighboring "backup grid" from which to borrow energy.

In a groundbreaking test to improve this energy equation – not only in Maui but across the globe – JUMP/Smart Maui was designed to bring together the latest technology in three distinct fields: Renewable Energy sources (such as wind and sun); Smart Grid technology (including Smart Meters); and Electric Vehicles.

PROJECT DATE:
2012-2013

SECTOR: *Renewable/clean energy, public utilities*

FTA SKILLS AND SERVICES:
Interviews, analysis, comprehensive communication, outreach, and recruitment strategies; messaging; naming/brand development; translation of technical data into user-friendly text and infographics; web development

JUMP/SMART MAUI *is a collaboration between Hitachi, New Energy and Industrial Technology Development Organization of Japan (NEDO), Maui Electric Company, Maui County, State of Hawaii, Maui Economic Development Board, and University of Hawaii.*

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Maui has a long and demonstrable commitment to renewable energy as well as abundant clean energy sources such as wind and sun. However the integration of this renewable and clean energy onto the existing traditional electrical grid has proved prohibitively difficult over the years. In addition, there have been several clean energy and Smart Grid programs in recent years on Maui, which gave rise to a concern over "program fatigue" since the monthly energy bills for many residents remained high despite the growing number of wind farms and other alternative energy sources.

But to launch this particular pilot program, JUMP/Smart Maui needed to enlist households in a specific neighborhood and electric vehicle drivers from across the island. And this is where FTA came in. Having built relationships with key players on Maui, FTA appreciated the fact that information on the island can travel quickly through informal channels — and that community priorities were not always identical to public utility or governmental priorities.

Added to this mix was an intense international component. JUMP/Smart Maui has its roots in the explicit interest of the Obama Administration in expanding renewable and clean energy use in the United States and in building stronger research and business relationships with Japan.

Given Maui's commitment to long-term energy independence and the numerous projects underway on the island, getting support and attention from the community for yet another pilot project would be challenging. One idea FTA promoted was the development of an island-wide traveling exhibit to highlight not just JUMP/Smart Maui, but also projects throughout the world that could provide context and new knowledge for residents, while also positioning Maui as a leader in the clean energy movement.

When FTA was asked to take on this project, it was called "Japan U.S. Island Grid Project," which FTA saw as overly cumbersome and difficult to remember. Thus FTA suggested options. The result was JUMP/Smart Maui, with JUMP representing the Japan US Maui Project.

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Because of the government-to-government framework, Japan's New Energy and Industrial Technology Development Organization (NEDO) — the largest government-sponsored research and development agency in Japan — provided funding for the project which is being developed by Hitachi, in concert with Maui- and Hawaii-based partners. FTA's tasks included an assessment of the community's potential support for the project, development of communications options, and creation of an outreach program to educate and recruit household volunteers necessary to make the project successful, including the translation of highly-technical information into consumer-friendly language and graphics. A 13-month outreach/communications plan set core strategies and actions to target key audiences as well as the broader community.

A new public-facing website, a modular power point presentation, printed educational materials, and a sustained media relations program were conceived in anticipation of the program's launch in mid-2013.

To ensure strong internal understanding among the many collaborators, JUMP/Smart Maui required creativity and patience, as well as the capacity to always know what time (and day) it was around the world. To accomplish this, diverse communication tools and methods were used to bring together people who were oceans apart.

When asked about community engagement and public education efforts that have been effective on Maui, many interviewees recalled Focus Maui Nui, a project developed by FTA with Maui Economic Development Board, in 2004, to create a county-wide vision.