

# Making the Most of an Unexpected Marketing Opportunity



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By: *Michael Cummings*

When an automaker's dilemma resulted in an unexpected marketing opportunity, the National Association of Home Builders was able to take advantage and wound up seeing its logo and message in Times Square.

Some types of advertising are fun to observe from the sidelines but seem out of reach for most association marketers. Gatefold ads in glossy consumer monthlies, Super Bowl TV spots, and Times Square digital billboards come to mind.

But what if you had the opportunity to add one of those to your media buy, at a fraction of its typical cost?

The National Association of Home Builders did just that last November when it saw the NAHB logo and message splashed across New York's Times Square, arguably one of the most highly trafficked area in the world. Even better: It took place during the holiday season, including Thanksgiving and New Year's Eve.

How did such a high-profile outdoor spot come about? Did NAHB blow its entire marketing budget and spend tens of thousands of dollars? Nope. Not at all. As a matter of fact, it all started with a cold call to NAHB.

## Wake-Up Call

In the wake of the emissions cheating scandal, Volkswagen had to pull a lot of its advertising, including a

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scheduled digital campaign in Times Square.

That left an awful lot of "white space" to fill, because just like empty hotel rooms mean lost revenue, blank digital billboards mean lost revenue. In other words, any fee is better than no fee.

Lakisha Woods, CAE, chief marketing officer of NAHB and chair of ASAE's Communication Section Council, was the person who took the call from the media sales rep.

At first she was skeptical. Who wouldn't be? But the media sales rep was convincing and Woods' wheels began to turn. After all, NAHB did have a compelling consumer message and broadcasting it in Times Square would be amazing.

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At first she was quoted a cost that was still too high—about \$30,000 for a 13-week spot. It was simply not feasible to find such a large amount in the budget at the end of the year. Woods was getting ready to move on, but then the sales rep asked what she would be willing to pay. So she immediately began negotiating in earnest, settling on a cost that was a fraction of the original offer.

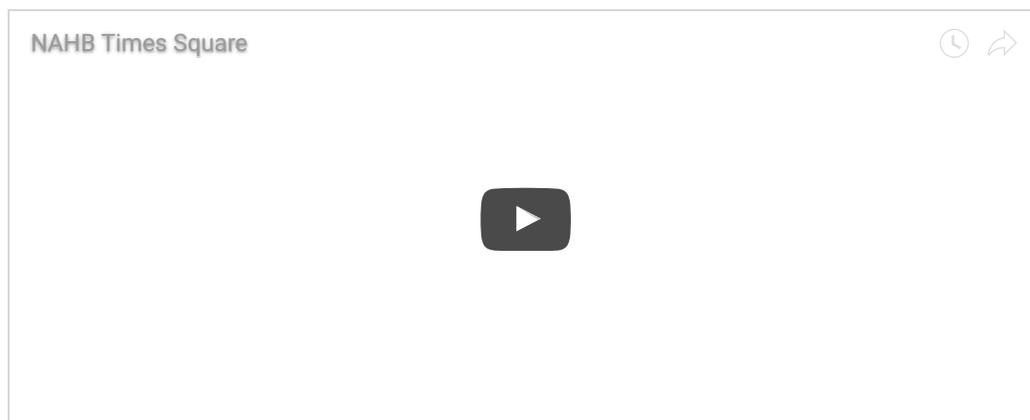
But there was one catch: NAHB had to move quickly. Lakisha had to sell her internal team. Suffice it to say that NAHB is similar to many associations in that it simply does not move quickly, particularly at the start of the holiday season and especially when it has to do with reallocating funds.

Plus, there was another challenge: producing the actual ad. While the company selling the ad space was also selling its production services, the fee for doing a 15-second video would have been approximately \$6,000.

Fortunately, NAHB has an in-house production arm, Structure Productions. But could the association produce a video in a matter of days?

## Added Benefits

As Woods navigated these waters, she discovered something essential: When the thrill of a Times Square digital billboard is at stake, money will be found, legal will move quickly, agreements will be signed, and production calendars will be accelerated. The NAHB leadership team was in full support, and her bright and fast-moving production team was able to create and produce the video in two days.



As fate would have it, Woods was in the Times Square area for business one week after the initial call. The ad was not even supposed to be live yet. But when she opened her hotel blinds and peered out the window, she was delighted to find herself face to face with **NAHB's digital billboard**. She quickly snapped a few shots and sent them around the office.

Those iPhone shots spread around the office like wildfire, and another unexpected benefit was revealed: Nothing builds internal buzz and employee pride quite like a Times Square billboard.

"When you work for an association, it can be hard to explain to your friends and family what you do," says Woods. "But a Times Square ad is tangible. We had staff visiting New York City for the holidays that were shooting and sharing images of the billboard. People were proud!"

## Lessons Learned

Because she was willing to listen to a cold call, Woods was able to negotiate a high-profile outdoor spot that fit in with her marketing plan and had the added benefit of energizing staff. The video ran, on average, every 15 to 20 minutes and was even scheduled to run no fewer than 20 times on Times Square's most visible day, New Year's Eve.

Ultimately, Woods says it is critical to keep your eyes on a crisis. If an advertiser needs to pull ads, someone else needs to fill the blank space. Likewise, as much as associations sometimes shy away from being considered "nonprofits," in the eyes of the reps for media channels, that is exactly how they are classified and what makes them eligible for lower rates.

At the end of the day, however, Woods says no matter the opportunity, it is essential to ensure that the tactic fits in with your marketing objectives and that you don't get caught up in the thrill of it all.

But that certainly wasn't the case for NAHB. "Would we have planned for a Times Square digital billboard a year ago if our budget had been five times larger? Absolutely!" says Woods.

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