

2017 AAPA Communications Award Program
Entry Classification: Community/Educational Outreach
Title: Christmas Ships Event

Summary – Christmas Ships Event

The Port of Vancouver USA is redeveloping 10 acres of waterfront property along the Columbia River in downtown Vancouver. Known as Terminal 1, the property currently includes a non-operational hotel (formerly the Red Lion Vancouver at the Quay), associated banquet rooms and restaurant. The port inked an agreement with a local restaurateur to rebrand and reopen the restaurant space and provide catering and event assistance in the banquet rooms to keep the property activated. Every December a local group of boating enthusiasts organizes a Christmas Ships “parade” on the Columbia River and the ships sail past the former Red Lion site on select evenings. In December 2016, the port organized a free community viewing of the ships at the former hotel and a project open house to update the public on its waterfront redevelopment plans.

1. Communication Challenges or Opportunities

The port looks for authentic opportunities to share progress on plans to redevelop Terminal 1, which is the birthplace of the Port of Vancouver. Sharing the port’s vision for the property and timeline for redevelopment is important to the port’s community engagement efforts as we build public excitement and support for the project. The property is destined to be a hub for residents and visitors alike, with plans for a public marketplace; AC by Marriott Hotel; commercial office, residential and retail space; green space; public art and; high and low docks.

Challenges:

- Communication about the site is challenging because the City of Vancouver is actively redeveloping 33 acres adjacent to the port’s property; distinguishing the two projects has been confusing to the public. The city is working through its developer to build a mix of residential, restaurant, retail and hotel space. We wanted our event to include city staff and their developer so the public could understand the difference between the two projects, as well as see the waterfront improvements in their entirety. We also wanted to show the public that all teams are working well together to transform the waterfront.
- Leading up to the event, we did not know how many would attend and if the weather would cooperate. The port tried a similar event in December 2015, but high wind and rain forced the Christmas Ships to cancel. Only about 50 citizens attended due to the poor weather conditions. We decided the “bones” of the event were good and we hoped for the best in 2016. We ordered cookies and coffee for a crowd of 200.

- We used paid and unpaid socials, electronic invitations, and an e-mail list of neighborhood leaders provided by the City to promote the event.

Opportunities:

- The event included a solicitation of donations of basic needs items to benefit the Fruit Valley Foundation. The port is primarily located within the Fruit Valley Neighborhood and relations have been strained because of the port's proposal to build an oil transfer facility on industrial property near the neighborhood. The neighborhood is primarily low-income; 93 percent of children at Fruit Valley Elementary School qualify for free or reduced lunch, and there are many needs in the community. This event provided an opportunity for the port to partner with the Fruit Valley Foundation on much-needed winter clothing and food gift card donations.

How it Turned Out

In the end the event was a great success. The weather cooperated, our promotion worked and we had 300 to 350 attendees. The City's staff and development team agreed to attend and were set up in the hotel lobby along with port staff. Citizens who entered the lobby were greeted by these staff members, could view a dozen project visuals and ask questions of the staff on hand. The Fruit Valley Foundation was also located in the lobby and they were overwhelmed with donations of clothing, grocery store gift cards and even movie passes. Inside the Grand Ballroom, children could get a temporary nautical tattoo, have their faces painted and sit down with a Port of Vancouver coloring book. The Vancouver Community Band entertained everyone with favorite holiday tunes. Attendees could view the Christmas ships from large windows in the warmth and comfort of the hotel or walk outside and view the ships from the riverside deck. We heard overwhelmingly positive comments from everyone who attended and we plan to make this an annual event. In 2017, we will order more cookies!

2. Complement to Overall Mission

The Port of Vancouver is a leading economic driver in the city of Vancouver and in Clark County. Its mission is to invest in industrial and maritime facilities that attract jobs and economic development to Vancouver. The port views redevelopment of its waterfront property as a unique opportunity to further its mission. The project itself, at buildout, is envisioned to be a 24-hour, active, mixed-use development integrating office, retail, residential and hotel uses organized around a Terminal 1 marketplace and waterfront pier. It will be an amenity for both residents and visitors alike, and is projected to create almost 1,000 new jobs. The Christmas Ships event allowed us to share this vision and excitement with hundreds of local residents. The public's support will be crucial in securing Vancouver

city council approval of the project's Concept Development Plan (CDP), which is necessary for the project to move forward with permitting.



Port of Vancouver Business Development Manager Mike Schiller (with name tag) talks with open house attendees about the port's waterfront redevelopment project

3. Planning and Programming Components

Our goals and desired results for this event were:

- Attract a large crowd of community members who wanted a dry, warm and fun place to view the annual Christmas Ships parade. This in turns helps the port activate the empty hotel site and keep it safe.
- Educate and update our community on the port's plans for the redevelopment of its waterfront property.
- Build trust and partnership with City staff and the City's developer by inviting them to participate in the event and share their waterfront project progress.
- Build trust and partnership with the Fruit Valley Foundation by inviting them to participate in the event.
- Execute a smooth, enjoyable event so the public would leave with a positive view of the port.

Primary audiences in order of importance were:

- 1) The Vancouver public at-large
- 2) Key port partners and stakeholders who were invited to attend, such as the Vancouver Downtown Association, Chamber of Commerce, Columbia River Economic Development Council and local political leaders
- 3) City of Vancouver development staff and their waterfront project developer
- 4) Fruit Valley Foundation members

Our main measurements of success were:

- **The numbers attending the event:** Turnout was a pleasant surprise, and we estimated the crowd at 300-350, based on capacity of the Grand Ballroom.
- **Attendance by city staff and their development team:** We were very happy to have full attendance by city staff and members of their project development team.
- **Participation by the Fruit Valley Foundation:** The Fruit Valley Foundation attended our event and used it to launch a community-wide clothing and food gift-card donation drive that ran through March 2017.
- **Generate a positive view of the Port of Vancouver:** The evening was truly wonderful, with fun for kids, live holiday music, available project staff, refreshments and the real stars of the evening – the Christmas Ships!
- **Activation of the Red Lion site:** The event proved to be a very effective way to have “eyes on the property” to keep the site active and occupied.



The Vancouver Community Band entertains attendees with holiday favorites

4. Actions Taken and Communication Outputs

There were communication outputs needed for multiple audiences, including port staff and volunteers, outside participants (i.e. city staff, band, Fruit Valley Foundation volunteers), catering staff at the venue and news media.

We covered all staffing needs at the event with port volunteers plus a few friends and family.

Actions/Tactics/Timeline

Six weeks out:

- Meeting was held with the restaurant owner who is running catering and event services at the former Red Lion banquet rooms. The group reviewed the Christmas Ships sailing schedule and landed on a date (Dec. 6) when the grand ballroom was available.
- Hired Vancouver Community Band and face-painter.
- Ordered temporary tattoos for kids.
- First outreach to City development staff to see if they would consider attending the event.
- Met with Chair and Director of the Fruit Valley Foundation to brainstorm how to get them involved in the event.
- Alerted Christmas Ships organizer that we would have a crowd on hand at the Red Lion for their cruise-by on Dec. 6.

Four weeks out:

- Organized meeting with port team responsible for the event. This included Facilities, Security, Safety, External Affairs, and waterfront project team.
- Met with catering manager at the Red Lion to plan room set up, including beverage stations; tables for kids' activities; band performance area and music case storage; tables and chairs; sound system, and; plan for garbage and restroom maintenance.
- Outreach to port staff, asking for volunteers for the evening
- Met with waterfront project staff to determine any additional visual boards they would need for the evening and ordered these with port marketing manager.
- Communicated set-up details with City waterfront development team and Fruit Valley Foundation staff.

Two weeks out:

- Mailed event invitation to 880 residents in the Fruit Valley Neighborhood.
- Electronic invitation developed and sent to port e-blast lists, including executive stakeholders, all neighborhood leaders and individuals who have asked to receive port news. Approximately 600 emails total.
- Met with band representative to review room set-up.
- Finalized catering numbers and final room set-up with banquet manager.
- Created social media campaign across Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn.
- Pitched event to select reporters who frequently cover port stories.

One week out:

- Sent news release to local media.
- Assigned volunteer jobs.
- Printed event signage.
- Final communication with port security, safety and facilities staff.

5. Outcomes and Evaluation Methods

As a first-time event, we were not sure what to expect and did not plan any formal forms of evaluation. However, judging from the smiling faces and fun people were having at the event -we consider it a great success. In relation to our goals, here are some measurements we found helpful:

- **Attract a large crowd** - Given stated capacity of the grand ballroom at the Red Lion, we estimate 300-350 attended the event. This exceeded our expectations and provided a wonderful way to activate the Red Lion property on a December evening.
- **Educate the public about port waterfront plans** – Hundreds of people viewed project drawings and boards in the Red Lion lobby and spoke to port project staff about our waterfront development plans.
- **Have the City’s staff and developer attend to build cooperation between port/city development efforts** – We were very pleased to have city development staff and their developer on hand for the event. Afterward they told us they were so glad they had participated given the crowd size and they appreciated the opportunity very much.
- **Build trust and partnership with the Fruit Valley Foundation** – The Fruit Valley Foundation staffed a table at the event and they were overwhelmed with donations of clothing, good gift cards, and warm hats and gloves. They extended the drive to other port tenants and businesses in the Fruit Valley neighborhood. They very much appreciated the port including them and were pleased with the visibility achieved through the event.
- **Pull off a smooth event that everyone enjoyed** – There is no question the event was a lot of fun given the smiles and upbeat atmosphere at the event. The port considered it such a success we are already putting plans in place for Christmas Ships 2017!

Several social media platforms were used to promote the event and get community members interested in the port’s waterfront development. We struggled to get earned media



and had a small marketing budget, and so took advantage of our social media platforms to push the event via staff and partner shares, and low-cost but effective social advertising.

- **LinkedIn:** These types of events don't typically see the highest rate of engagement on our LinkedIn page. The audience for this platform is more business-focused, so community-centered campaigns or information are usually on the lower end of engagement. We were pleasantly surprised to see this wasn't the case for the Christmas Ships event. We received 2,895 impressions, with 19 clicks and 19 separate interactions, giving us an engagement rate of 1.31 percent, one of our highest recorded for a community post on this platform.
- **Twitter:** We paid \$50 for promotion of the event on Twitter and saw great results from that investment. We received a total of 9,371 impressions, with 120 engagements, giving us a click-through rate of 1.28 percent.
- **Facebook:** This event was perfect for Facebook; our account sees some of the highest engagement when it comes to community-centered content. This Facebook event was the highest performing post across all our social platforms, reaching more than 13,000 people and resulting in 1,560 engagements, which gives us a total engagement rate of 12 percent.
- **MailChimp E-mail Invitation:** We used MailChimp to send an email invitation directly to 683 subscribers. This resulted in 1,414 email opens (see below).

Port Event

Happenings at  Port of Vancouver USA



YOU'RE INVITED

*Please join us to watch the Christmas Ships on the Columbia River
and get an update on the port's waterfront project*

The Christmas Ships are a beloved local tradition. On the evening of Dec. 5 they'll be sailing past Terminal 1 and we'll have the Grand Ballroom at the former Red Lion hotel open to the public for viewing.

Our waterfront project team will also be on hand to share the latest information on the port's plans to revitalize Terminal 1. Come celebrate tradition as well as the future at this family-friendly event!

What: Christmas ships viewing and Terminal 1 open house

When: Monday, Dec. 5, 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. (ships are expected about 8 p.m.)

Where: Terminal 1, 100 Columbia Street, Vancouver (former Red Lion hotel)

WareHouse '23 will provide coffee, hot chocolate, cookies and a cash bar for those 21 and older. Festive music provided by **Vancouver Community Concert Band**, directed by Erin Hanson.

We will be collecting basic needs items at the event to benefit families and children served by the **Fruit Valley Foundation**. This includes new or gently used coats, shoes, socks, undies, toiletries and food gift cards (WinCo preferred).

Parking is available at Terminal 1 as well as along Columbia Way. Outdoor ship viewing will also be available at the high dock above the amphitheater; dress for the weather!

For more information, contact Julie Rawls at jrawls@portvanusa.com or call 360-693-3611.

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