

**CAMPAIGN Special Event – Impression 5 *SMASH: A Nuclear Adventure***  
**Submitted by Piper & Gold Public Relations**

**Research/background**

Impression 5 Science Center is a dynamic, interactive space for families to play, create and challenge their understanding of science together. In August 2019, Impression 5 opened a new interactive exhibit inspired by the Facility for Rare Isotope Beams at Michigan State University. *SMASH: A Nuclear Adventure* was designed to encourage hands-on exploration by children and families of the wonders of nuclear science, allowing them to discover the building blocks of the universe in meaningful, relevant ways and break down barriers that exist in access to STEM education. Piper & Gold was hired to produce the grand opening media event to increase the visibility of Impression 5 with key donors and stakeholders, as well as Michigan education markets.

The event showcased the 1,500-square-foot interactive exhibit that provided a dynamic space for children and families to explore nuclear science. The hands-on exhibit, set to open in August of 2019, was inspired by the positive, life-changing nuclear science research happening currently at Michigan State University's National Superconducting Cyclotron Laboratory and on the horizon at the Facility for Rare Isotope Beams. The project was a culmination of investments from multiple organizations in greater Lansing and served as an example of what the community can accomplish when it comes together. We wanted to leverage the multiple organizations involved with the exhibit to accomplish our goal of building stronger relationships with the exhibit sponsors and increasing attendance at the science center.

But we wanted to do more than that . . . we wanted to create an experience as unique and exciting as the exhibit itself.

**Planning**

**Budget:** With a total budget of \$3,000, we had the tools necessary to make—forgive us— a smash with this grand opening. This tight budget included event coordination and management, development of strategic messages, media and blogger relations support, pre- and post-event tactics, day-of support and follow-up event analysis.

Objective one: Garner significant media coverage at the event, including traditional media networks, online publications and digital platforms to reach a variety of audiences and increase I5 attendance.

Objective two: Secure onsite interviews and tours with local influencers to share the space as well as the exhibit, and increase significant digital engagement through blogger coverage and social media sharing.

Objective three: Engage exhibit sponsors to create meaningful connections with Impression 5 Science Center.

**Target audience:** Our primary target audiences for *SMASH* were local media to reach potential visitors and grow attendance, as well as major donors to strengthen relationships and show gratitude to the event's sponsors: TechSmith, Michigan State University's NSCL (funded by the U.S. National Science Foundation), FRIB (funded by the U.S. Department of Energy's Office of Science), MSU Federal Credit Union's Desk Drawer Fund, and the Michigan Council for Arts and Cultural Affairs.

We began by visiting the space to get a feel for what could be accomplished in and around the exhibit. At the time, it was little more than concrete floors, gray walls and various pieces of equipment waiting to come to life. Although the space was bound to be impressive . . . eventually . . . we had to use our imaginations to envision what the finished product would be. The entire exhibit was completed mere hours before the big launch! Just as the name of the exhibit signifies the smashing of atoms, we wanted the feel of the environment and schedule of events to be exciting, lively and interactive. Once we knew what the space looked like, our team reconvened for an ideation session to determine the look of the physical space, the unveiling of the exhibit and ways to highlight sponsors. Out of this session came the decision to use fun elements such as balloons to resemble atoms, including a wall of balloons that would be "smashed" when the exhibit was revealed to the public. Once our plan was in place, we got to work on the logistics of pulling together the many elements that made this event such a success.

**Execution/creative quality**

To build anticipation of the big reveal at the media event, we began with a meaningful program of speakers including Impression 5 board members, exhibit sponsors and our honored guest and speaker, Michigan State University President Samuel L. Stanley Jr. This was President Stanley's first community speaking engagement since becoming MSU's 21<sup>st</sup> president earlier that month, which we leveraged extensively to secure media attendance at the event. Following the presentation and a photo-op with the speakers, the balloons were dropped and *SMASH: A Nuclear Adventure* was revealed to the public, featuring the stars of a local children's PBS show, the Curious Crew, playing inside and interactive videos of nuclear scientists.

To garner significant media coverage at the event, including traditional media networks, online publications and digital platforms to reach a variety of audiences, we made pitches to multiple media outlets in the Lansing area. Outlets were targeted to increase

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visibility for the science center with potential visitors as well as gain positive media attention for sponsors. They received invitations, a pre-event release, a media advisory and a post-event release with photos.

We researched and reached out to Michigan-based bloggers with a full media kit including personal invitations to the event to provide a different avenue for visibility with Impression 5's target audiences, as well as supplement the decrease in media outlets in our market. We also invited sponsors, local community stakeholders such as the chamber of commerce and convention and visitors bureau and MSU media sources to attend and share information.

**To create meaningful and memorable connections between I5 and its donors, we worked to create a sense of childlike wonder (and appreciation) throughout the media event.** We catered a delicious spread of galaxy-inspired doughnuts and coffee from Strange Matter Coffee Co., a local chemistry-themed coffee shop. Instead of doing a traditional ribbon cutting, we did a "balloon smash" at the entrance to the exhibit (complete with balloon boutonnieres shaped like atoms for donors). This creative approach provided a great photo opportunity, as well as a fun environment for all in attendance. To assist with this, we enlisted the help of the Curious Crew, a group of kids who appear on a local television program that takes a hands-on approach to scientific exploration. We placed the Curious Crew kids throughout the exhibit, already playing with the many interactive components that SMASH offers when the balloons dropped for the reveal. Not only did this gain us coverage on WKAR, the station that produces and airs Curious Crew, but it activated the space and gave people a glimpse of the fun their kids would have when visiting Impression 5. We even created a special gift basket of Science Store goodies for President Stanley's granddaughter to welcome their family to the community.

**Evaluation**

**Objective one: Garner significant media coverage at the event, including traditional media networks, online publications and digital platforms to reach a variety of audiences and increase I5 attendance.** In all, 28 pieces of coverage were published reaching and online readership of a whopping 15.8 million people according to Coverage Book. Immediately following the SMASH opening, Impression 5 had record attendance for the months of August and September.

**Objective two: Secure onsite interviews and tours with local influencers to share the space as well as the exhibit, and increase significant digital engagement through blogger coverage and social media sharing.** Ten local organizations ranging from news to a state representative's office broadcast and shared live from the event, and seven bloggers covered SMASH to reach more than 3,000 people. There were 133 social shares and 62 YouTube shares. Through Facebook Live, 1,900 people watched the SMASH opening online.

**Objective three: Engage exhibit sponsors to create meaningful connections with Impression 5 Science Center.** The event was standing room only, with nearly 100 media, influencers, bloggers, donors and sponsors, board members, staff and other excited stakeholders in attendance. All exhibit sponsors were represented at the event and leadership from Michigan State University, MSU's National Superconducting Cyclotron Laboratory and Facility for Rare Isotope Beams, MSU Federal Credit Union's Desk Drawer Fund and TechSmith all spoke at the event.

After an exciting program of presentations from partners and stakeholders, it was finally time for the big reveal. After a countdown from the audience, the balloon-atom-wall was smashed to reveal the culmination of dreaming, planning and hard work of all involved. Clearly exceeding expectations, the unveiling was met with a loud cheer and applause from attendees. Faces lit up as people made their way into the exhibit and began to participate in the activities. The space was buzzing with excitement as media representatives and attendees were snapping photos and video of the much-anticipated addition to our community.

Samuel L. Stanley Jr., president of Michigan State University shared, "This is a fun way to kindle families' and students' interest, and we are thrilled to be a part of the collaboration."

Erik Larson, executive director of Impression 5, shared, "Piper & Gold did a masterful job of handling event logistics. But, most importantly, their work to create storytelling opportunities for community partners involved in the project was truly amazing. The process allowed for a very deep connection for our funders. They came away with clarity about why they were participating in the project, and an eagerness to continue working with Impression 5. Well done, P&G!"