

## **Capturing Media Attention for SRTS in a Small Town- Mahomet, IL**

Last spring, Mahomet's Safe Routes To School captured the attention of local news station WCIA/3 with a unique media stunt. Using tips from a Coaching Action Network Webinar (hosted by America Walks and the National Center for Safe Routes to School) Mahomet's Safe Routes To School movement spun into motion generating what marketing experts call a "buzz."

Twenty minutes before school began, traffic ground to a near-halt in the peak of morning congestion. Gapers-Block. Two people, one in a chicken costume and the other in baby chick outfit, crossed some of Mahomet's most challenging intersections along the main route to school. The taller chicken held a sign stating Mahomet's SRTS web address. The shorter chick carried a backpack.

Cars honked. Some waved. Others, unhappy with the additional congestion, shook their fists. Almost EVERYONE shot a picture of the spectacle on their cell phone. At the intersection with Mahomet's only crossing guard, the Village Administrator, the Chief of Police, parents and kids on bicycles, and the two in the chicken outfits stood before Champaign News 3 cameras to comment on Mahomet's Safe Routes To School needs. Cell phone cameras filled the windows of passing school busses as the news interview rolled.

Following the tips from <http://www.americawalks.org/advocates/safe-routes-action/webinars/2008-01> the purpose of the event was clear: Mahomet needed the community to attend informational meetings on Safe Routes To School issues. The media coverage drove traffic to Mahomet's Safe Routes to School website where information and meeting details could be accessed.

Student Council members were clued into the "surprise" media event in a general meeting held the previous day. Council members brainstormed on answers they would give to their classmates on "why the chicken crossed the road" as everyone anticipated the stunt would create chatter. Village officials were consulted before the event to assure stepped up traffic enforcement for the additional congestion, and also consulted to use this event as an opportunity to display their support for SRTS. While the crossing guard at the school had been given a day's notice in needing an additional person to help cross the children that morning, our school district administrators should have been better informed. While many parents were supportive of this unique media opportunity because it raised more awareness for Mahomet's SRTS needs, a few people called to complain and the school district could have better equipped with more information beforehand.

How did the media manage to show up on the intersection in front of Lincoln Trail Elementary school? Well, reporters usually follow news that is timely, relevant, and interesting. After approaching their local costume rental shop with a pitch for donating the chicken costume (they did a two-for one deal on the baby chick and chicken costume but couldn't swing an outright gift), Mahomet's SRTS coordinator drove to the

local news station. Standing at the reception desk with the baby-chick-costume-head in hand, all those passing-by couldn't help but chuckle. The appropriate entities took one look at the head, heard the enthusiastic pitch for covering the story, and gave the "expect the cameras to show up, unless there's more pressing news to cover." Lucky for Mahomet, little exciting live news goes on at 8 in the morning, so the reporter and cameraman covered the chickens. By the end of the day, Mahomet SRTS really hit the media jackpot and WCIA3 replayed the story at both 6pm and 10pm.

Mahomet SRTS saw an increase in their website traffic (the original goal) due to the Television News Media coverage. Those camera/phone pictures were shared with others throughout the community which continued the momentum of Mahomet's Safe Routes To School Movement, bringing even more community participants. And finally, it gave the students a fun way to talk about the safety of walking to and from school each day. One of Mahomet's Elementary Schools even recapped the end-of-the-school-year-pictorial with a few of the camera/phone pictures. The chickens got the biggest laugh at that assembly.

For additional information on this great event, please contact:

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