



## ***The Local Angle: Simulation-based online PR training for the retailer network of Volvo Cars of North America***

### **Summary**

Volvo Cars of North America commissioned the Gronstedt Group to custom develop an online learning simulation to teach its network of automotive retailers across the U.S. and Canada how to develop effective local media and community relations. The program was conceived as a hands-on learning application that retailers could immediately begin using to engage key reporters, editors and community stakeholders in the cultivation of both the Volvo and local retailer brands. Almost 400 managers at Volvo's 350 retailers have taken the course to date. In a survey, 90% of them thought this form of online training was "effective" to "very effective" compared with other training methods. The program has helped make "Volvo Drive for Life Days" the largest-ever community relations event in the company's U.S. history, generating more than 100 million media impressions.

### **The Challenge**

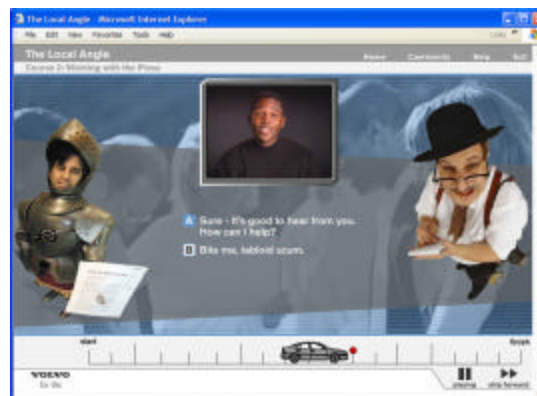
The broader context for Volvo's local retailer PR training centers on Volvo Car's extraordinary campaign to better connect with local communities, communicating the company's brand values via an innovative suite of non-traditional channels and strategies. Since Volvo lacks the extensive regional PR network and media development resources enjoyed by many of its competitors, the company's PR leadership team and Gronstedt Group began exploring ways of transforming the Volvo retail network into an extended Volvo media relations corps. This first-of-its-kind online PR training program for retailers significantly expands Volvo's reach by leveraging the established momentum of the local community campaign and more fully tapping the innate creativity of the Volvo PR group.

Rationale for the expanded localization of PR efforts was suggested by Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) research indicating that local media relations activities are more credible in the eyes of the community. PRSA's "National Credibility Index" concludes that:

Proximity makes a difference. Local sources of information earn higher credibility scores than many national counterparts. Local reporters rank higher than writers from national news magazines, a local chief executive officer or business owner is more credible to the person-in-the-street than the CEO running a large corporation.

This is especially salient for an organization such as Volvo, a brand that's inextricably bound up with localized values like *family* and *security*. The proposed online training solution represented a powerful opportunity to leverage these brand values by helping retailers integrate Volvo into the life and character of their communities in ways a national program could never dream of.

The benefits to local retailers are substantial as well. This program provides them with the tools and expertise they need to significantly build awareness, credibility, and sales through increased media visibility and the goodwill generated by aggressive community outreach efforts.



### The Solution: *The Local Angle* Online Learning Program

*The Local Angle*, which is 100% customized to the unique demands of the Volvo product, brand, corporate culture, retail network structure and dynamic, and technical infrastructure, generated an unparalleled return on investment by providing retail managers with an effective, on-point learning experience they could immediately put into play with local media.

*The Local Angle* is essentially a PR “flight simulator,” and its pedagogical model (which integrates the expertise of both seasoned industry practitioners and accomplished doctoral-level academics) incorporates some of the engaging characteristics of popular problem-solving video franchises. By playing these applied learning games, retailer executives and managers quickly and effectively learn how to better accomplish a broad range of company-defined PR objectives.



For example, *The Local Angle* teaches Volvo retail managers strategies for stretching their publicity budgets, boosting public awareness and sales, and enhancing their positions in the communities they serve through productive relationships with print and broadcast outlets. The application provides ample motivation, background resources, step-by-step guides, and practice exercises for the company’s approximately 350 North American retailers to create and maintain

lucrative relationships with local media outlets, governments, and civic leaders.

The first of three learning modules introduces the benefits of proactive media and community relations – essentially selling the retailer on the value of a local PR program. The second module trains retailer executives how to take advantage of media relations opportunities in their communities, explaining what makes a good story, how to generate newsworthy events and ideas, and how to cultivate strong relationships with editors and reporters. The third module addresses sponsorships and events – a critical component of any successful PR program for an automotive retailer.

*The Local Angle* affords retailers an opportunity to learn about a broad range of PR activities. In the course of the application, trainees:

- engage in simulated interviews with reporters and practice crafting headlines, developing leads and composing the body of a press release;
- learn the differences between broadcast and print, including important lessons in understanding what broadcast news outlets need that print journalists don’t and vice versa;
- explore possible local uses for Volvo’s innovative, industry-leading online press room;
- study the basics of crisis management, including what journalists need to know in the event of a crisis and the proper procedures for handling things when the wheels fall off; importantly, they learn in what situations a question should be passed up the chain to the Volvo Cars PR organization;

- review on-point case studies from both automotive and non-automotive businesses illustrating how *PR moves product* – a top-of-mind concern for even the media-savviest of retailers.

They even get to use an ROI calculator to explore how varying levels of PR and advertising investment impact sales. This is an important exercise that's expressly designed to help retailers reflect on how they might best allocate their precious marketing dollars.

*The Local Angle* also integrates compelling video testimonials from the GM of Borton Volvo in Minneapolis, a company that has dramatically improved its fortunes as a result of its own winning PR program. The GM describes the value Borton has derived from its sponsorships of youth and college hockey and arts festivals, for instance, and he provides a step-by-step walk-through detailing how the store organizes and executes its own highly successful annual block party.

Retailers sit up and take notice when they hear from their peers about real-world promotions successes and parties that draw thousands of people to their stores, resulting in steadily increasing sales and improved relationships with customers, neighbors, and even city government.



## Results

Each module concludes with a quiz testing retailers on the material they've just learned. All retail managers are required to take the first of three modules, and they receive credit for doing so in the company's continuing education program. Six months after the launch, 400 managers at Volvo's 350 retailers had taken the course. In a survey, 87% of retailers who took the program thought it was "useful" to "very useful" and over 90% thought this form of online training was "effective" to "very effective" compared with other training methods. The open-ended survey responses suggested that the program has been hugely successful in providing ideas and expertise in local PR. Retailers recount how the program has helped them recognize the value of building awareness, credibility, and sales through increased media visibility and the goodwill generated by aggressive community outreach efforts.

Volvo Cars credits *The Local Angle* with helping make "Volvo Drive for Life Days" one of the nation's largest ever one-time fundraisers for local charity. This three-day event reached people in hundreds of local communities across the nation and generated more than 100 million media impressions. Volvo retailer efforts surpassed the million-dollar fund-raising goal envisioned by Alexandra Scott, the now-deceased seven year-old whose courageous struggle against cancer inspired the fundraiser, making it the largest-ever community relations event in Volvo's almost 50-year U.S. history.

*The Local Angle* represents a new paradigm in integrated communications, a cutting edge approach to leveraging, via next-generation simulation-based learning methodologies, the expansive reach of and inherent community knowledge embedded in the field organization. And as important as stronger media relationships and community relations are in their own right, there is simply no overstating the tipping effect associated with the corresponding boost to the company's goal of ever-increasing brand ambassadorship.