

MARYLAND PORT ADMINISTRATION
PORT OF BALTIMORE
KEY BRIDGE
RECOVERY CAMPAIGN

2025 AAPA LIGHTHOUSE AWARDS



PR/COMMUNICATIONS AWARD: EXCELLENCE IN PR CAMPAIGN

INTRODUCTION:

The Helen Delich Port of Baltimore is one of the largest, busiest, and most cargo-diverse ports in the U.S. In 2024, it finished first among the nation's ports in handling roll on/roll off farm and construction machinery and ranked second nationally for cars, road salt, and coal. Overall, Baltimore handled 46 million tons of cargo, which ranked 11th nationally and that cargo was worth \$62 billion, which ranked 10th among U.S. ports.

The Port of Baltimore is one of Maryland's leading economic engines. It generates about 20,000 direct jobs, with about 273,000 jobs overall in Maryland linked to Port activities. The Port of Baltimore is responsible for nearly \$3.3 billion in personal wages and salaries, \$2.6 billion in business revenue and nearly \$400 million in state and local tax revenue annually.

Baltimore is also one of the leading cruise ports in the Mid Atlantic. It is home to two of the world's leading cruise lines and offers year-round cruises to the Bahamas, Bermuda, Caribbean, and New England/Canada. In 2024, Carnival Cruise Line signed a new five-year contract to continue serving Baltimore.

The collision of the Dali and the subsequent collapse of the Francis Scott Key Bridge had a significant impact on the Port of Baltimore. It resulted in the blockage of the Port's main shipping channel for 11 weeks, essentially shutting down Port operations, preventing the arrivals of cargo and cruise ships, and causing temporary unemployment for thousands of longshoremen. It also had a large negative impact on local businesses, distribution centers, truckers, rail, tug operators and pilots, and other supply chain partners. It was a momentous event for the city of Baltimore, the state of Maryland, and the nation.

The Maryland Port Administration was faced with a challenge it had never previously experienced. In the highly competitive international maritime shipping industry, the Port of Baltimore needed to rebound from this devastating incident and begin rebuilding its business. As a result, it embarked on a campaign to inform the shipping industry, cargo owners, and supply chain partners that the crumpled Key Bridge had been removed from the shipping channel, the channel was now fully reopened, and ships could once again travel to and from the Port of Baltimore.

BACKGROUND:

The collapse of the Key Bridge into the Patapsco River was a devastating incident for the Port of Baltimore. It resulted in the Port of Baltimore's 700-foot-wide, 50-foot-deep federal channel being blocked for nearly three months. The Port was closed to vessel traffic, business was lost, and thousands of good-paying, family-supporting jobs were affected. The estimated economic impact loss per day was \$171 million. The devastating impacts to the Port of Baltimore from the Key Bridge collapse placed it in a position never experienced before by any major port.

Prior to the incident, the Port of Baltimore had established a very strong reputation around the world for handling many different types of cargo. Some U.S. ports such as the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach concentrate heavily on a specific cargo, and for both of those ports that's containers. Baltimore developed a strategic business plan several years ago to utilize its built-in geographic advantages to specialize in handling many different cargos.

Baltimore is the furthest inland East Coast port to the Midwest because of the Chesapeake Bay. Ships reach Baltimore from the Atlantic Ocean by traveling up the Chesapeake Bay and this puts the Port of Baltimore closer to the U.S. heartland than its other competing eastern seaboard ports. The Port of Baltimore is also located immediately off busy Interstate 95, also known as the Main Street of the U.S. East Coast. These unique geographic advantages were key factors in helping to shape our strategic business plan.

The business plan included concentrating our efforts on five main commodities: containers, autos/light trucks, roll on/roll off and construction machinery, forest products, and breakbulk. Being the closest East Coast port to the Midwest means cargo can reach Midwestern population markets more efficiently than from other ports. It also means that cargo manufactured in the Midwest, such as John Deere or Caterpillar farm equipment, can arrive at the Port of Baltimore for export faster and at a lower cost than from other ports.

This strategy has worked out very well over the years for the Port. It has contributed to the Port of Baltimore handling more cars and farm and construction machinery than any other U.S. port, Baltimore becoming the top port in the nation for handling forest products, and Baltimore becoming a top 15 port nationally for handling containers.

Additionally, before the Key Bridge incident, the Port of Baltimore was coming off a record year in 2023. It had established new marks for total cargo tonnage, total dollar value of cargo, containers, and cars. Through the first two months of 2024, right before the March 26, 2024 Key Bridge incident, the Port of Baltimore was tracking towards another record year.

All of that changed with the incident. Immediately, all vessel traffic into and out of the Port was suspended indefinitely as Coast Guard and emergency response personnel converged on the site to recover what would be six souls and begin the long process of clearing thousands of tons of debris from the Port's main channel.

Beginning on that fateful day, the eyes of the world were upon us. The first media inquiry was from the New York Times at approximately 4:30 am, three hours after the incident. We knew then this was going to be a huge story.

From a communications perspective, we knew what we had to do. We had to begin a campaign that would first provide consistent updates on this incredibly evolving situation. Knowing that there were bodies in the water, we knew we had to do this with respectful sensitivity.

We also knew that with the Port of Baltimore closed for an indefinite period of time, this would cause our shipping customers to bypass Baltimore and go to other East Coast ports, at least temporarily. We knew that another key component of our campaign would be to announce to the shipping world that the Port of Baltimore was open again, whenever that would eventually be.

Finally, with all of the worldwide media attention, we knew we would need to host a major, significant reopening event. This would help further support our efforts to announce to the world that the Port of Baltimore was now fully open.

The recovery campaign was initiated to promote that the channel was cleared, full vessel traffic was resumed, people were back to work, and the Port of Baltimore was again open. The focus of the campaign was to include as wide a swath of various media as possible with a particular focus on social media, videos, speaking opportunities, and media interviews. This was such an unprecedented event that the Port of Baltimore – Maryland Port Administration did not have the benefit of looking to another port that had gone through a similar incident and seeing how they handled their recovery. The recovery plan was developed and conducted with no prior path.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The goals of this campaign were to:

Provide consistent updates to the public on the operational status of the Port of Baltimore, while remaining empathetic of the situation around lives lost.

Produce a large-scale reopening event aimed at informing the international maritime shipping world that the Port of Baltimore had reopened and was again handling ships;

Begin a prolonged digital and print advertising campaign to complement the reopening event in informing the maritime world that Baltimore was again open to ships.

Key objectives:

The Coast Guard was the lead federal agency on the entire Key Bridge incident. It was important that we did not get ahead of them in providing any information that was not yet ready to go public. We worked closely with the Coast Guard to publish information when they were comfortable with us announcing something and it was worthwhile information to distribute. With that, our first objective was to publish an update every time there was a change in operational status. For instance, the Coast Guard would open temporary, shallow access channels for workboats, then smaller commercial vessels, then larger commercial vessels to come in and out of the Port. Each time there was an operational change, we wanted to issue an update. We wanted the public, and maritime world, to rely on these and trust them. It was important as a result to be as consistent with these as the Coast Guard would allow us to be.

The objective of the reopening event was to involve a wide-range of elected and industry officials. We were successful in having a White House cabinet secretary (Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg), Maryland Governor Wes Moore, Maryland congressional representatives, the vice president of the International Longshoremen's Association, as well as critical supply chain professionals representing truckers, rail, terminal operators, pilots, and tug operators. It was vitally important to present the depth and breadth of the Port of Baltimore and the key constituent groups that represented thousands of jobs that were impacted by this incident.

The objective of the digital and print advertising campaign was to get the word out as frequently as possible that the Port of Baltimore was again open. Working within tight budget constraints, we removed all of our previously scheduled digital and print ads and replaced them with a campaign centered around two tag lines: Baltimore Is Back and The Port For Our Nation. We would strategically target shipping/maritime trades such as the Journal of Commerce, American Journal of Transportation, and Maritime Executive. We knew that these media sites were commonly read and viewed by CEO's and key decision makers in our industry.

IMPLEMENTATION AND RESOURCES

As a state government entity, the Maryland Port Administration conducted this campaign with a limited budget and resources.

When the incident occurred, we immediately knew social media was going to be a key tool to utilize. Beginning with the first media call we received at 4:30 am from the New York Times, we knew this was going to be a huge story internationally. Although details initially were scarce, we wanted to begin posting as soon as possible. Our first post went up approximately 6 am and detailed that the incident had occurred, ship traffic into the Port was suspended, and to keep those impacted in your thoughts.

We knew that producing this early post, even without a lot of details, was necessary and would buy us time until further details were made apparent. We then made a decision that we wanted to be a consistent and reliable source for people to get the latest operational information from. It only seemed like the right approach since this incident occurred within our Port.

As details began to emerge that the six individuals that fell with the bridge into the water were unlikely to have survived, we knew that our updates had to be structured a certain way, with a respectful tone. People had died, and we had to keep that as a primary focus throughout the campaign. We decided these updates would be straight and factual. We decided to call it 'Port Update' and they would be used strictly as the most current operational status updates for our Port.

Over the course of the 11-week incident, we would post our 'Port Update' nine times. We drafted these posts in cooperation with language approved by the Coast Guard, which was the lead agency in clearing the channel. The updates would occur whenever there was a change in operational status. For instance, the Coast Guard would open a 11-foot deep temporary channel, a 14-foot deep channel, a 20-foot deep channel, and a 35-foot deep channel before the full reopening of the 50-foot deep channel on June 11. We would include all of the Coast Guard-approved reminders for commercial vessels as well as recreational boaters.

Our operational updates were a big success. Thanks in large part to them, our social media platforms saw remarkable increases in followers, likes, and reposts. On our X account alone, whenever we posted an update, it was not uncommon to have up to 20,000 people like it.

The next part of our campaign was our reopening event. Due to the magnitude of coverage that this ordeal had generated, we knew we had to make this a bigtime event. We began planning the event in concert with Governor Wes Moore's office. We established a perfect backdrop right at the Port of Baltimore that included our supersized container cranes, containers, and ships.

Due to the high media interest, we were able to attract U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, White House Senior Advisor Tom Perez, as well numerous federal, state, and local dignitaries. We also had high-ranking officials with the International Longshoremen's Association and key supply chain partners.

We planned an event that would allow for remarks from many of the above-mentioned individuals. Our media turnout was as strong as we anticipated. We had coverage from the BBC, CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, Wall Street Journal, Financial Times, and the Washington Post among mainstream media outlets. We also hosted many maritime

trade media, including the Journal of Commerce and American Journal of Transportation. Some of these outlets streamed the event live.

In all, nearly 300 guests and media attended the event and played a large role in getting the message out that the Port of Baltimore was once again open to ships.

The final key component of our reopening campaign was digital and print ads. The maritime shipping industry is a highly competitive one. Baltimore competes with East Coast ports for cargo tonnage as well as cruise passengers. During the time of the Key Bridge incident, our full shipping channel was closed which meant no ships could access the Port.

During this time, ships that were scheduled to come to the Port of Baltimore were being diverted to other ports. While we were appreciative of those ports handling our cargo during this difficult time, we did not want to lose that cargo permanently to those ports. We knew that we had to develop an aggressive ad campaign that would announce to the maritime world that the Port of Baltimore was once again open, and remind them why Baltimore was the best choice for handling their cargo.

Two tags were developed: Baltimore Is Back and The Port For Our Nation. Baltimore Is Back was done to clearly state that the Port of Baltimore was reopened for business and ships could again bring their cargo here.

The Port For Our Nation was developed to remind the international maritime shipping world that Baltimore was a port critically important to our country. Containers that came through the Port of Baltimore would head into one of the largest consumer markets in the country, the Baltimore-Washington DC-Northern Virginia market. The autos and light trucks that came through the Port of Baltimore went to car dealers in 30 U.S. states. Farmers in the Midwest depended on the Port of Baltimore for machinery necessary to do their jobs, such as harvesters, combines, and others.

Both of these tags were produced into digital and print ads that we would place in multiple maritime trade media outlets including the Journal of Commerce, American Journal of Transportation, Maritime Executive, and many European and Asian trade outlets.

AWARD CRITERIA

The PR campaign that we initiated on the Port of Baltimore's recovery from the Key Bridge incident strongly meets the criteria for this award. We have detailed our planning, execution, tactics, strategies, and target audiences. We also detailed our goals, objectives, and implementation. We are submitting this campaign based on how we updated the public on the recovery and how we messaged that the Port of Baltimore was reopen and open again for business.

CONCLUSION

This entire campaign was executed by a team of just three dedicated Maryland Port Administration staff members. This was an extremely difficult challenge for the Port of Baltimore on many levels. It was important to provide consistent operational updates for our customers, public, and media throughout the incident. As the incident was winding down, our focus turned towards a major reopening event that would showcase elected officials, our key incident partners, and our supply chain team. Then, we developed an advertising campaign based on the Port of Baltimore reopening and how important the Port was to not only Maryland and the Mid Atlantic, but also the entire nation.

Our operational updates on our social media platforms resulted in engagement numbers that we had never seen before. Our reopening event was covered around the world in both mainstream media platforms and maritime trade platforms. Our advertising campaign was featured in all the key shipping trade journals and websites and provided a great boost to regaining our business.

When you go through an event of this magnitude, you always think about things you could have done better. However, we are proud of the messaging of our content and the frequency of how often we put that messaging out.

If other ports ever have to go through a similar incident, we would be very happy to discuss our best practices and lessons learned with them. We feel that our efforts made a huge difference in the overall recovery of the Port of Baltimore.