

SANIBEL SHELL SHOCKED

Harry the Heron

By Art Stevens

Lee County is spending mucho bucks on promoting travel and tourism. It's got a very aggressive outreach program that positions the county as an alternative to other hot spots in Florida. As good as the program is I believe there's a way to promote Lee County even more effectively. And that is to add Harry the Heron to the mix.

For those of you who turn off the advertising spots on your TV's let me remind you of the lovable duck from Aflac and the clinging gecko from Geico. There's a trend nowadays to create animated creatures to reflect favorably on a company's products and services. We should do the same for Lee County.

What better species to reflect the charms and allure of Lee County than a heron? So we create Harry the Heron who would be this lovable bird who would sing the praises of Lee County in commercials. But in keeping with reality programming on TV these days we would need to identify a real life heron and train it to be the symbol of Lee County.

So one day we find ourselves traipsing through Ding Darling in search of a model heron. As we approach with a camera crew we notice that as soon as any of the resident birds see us they quickly flap their wings and fly as far away from us as they can get. We wonder if they somehow learned in advance what our mission in Ding Darling is. I guess we don't look like typical bird watchers. We probably look more like the crew that captured King Kong.

We trudge further into the world famous wild life preserve and search for the perfect heron. The heron we seek needs to be at one with a camera and feel at home on the set. The last thing we want is a shy, reticent, wallflower type heron. A heron that represents Lee County at its best must be talented and appealing.

We pass a flock of egrets and as soon as one of them sees we're holding a TV camera it ambles toward us and strikes a model pose. It begins to walk gracefully in the line of the camera and cranes its neck as only egrets can. We look at each other. Could it be? This egret has all of the star qualities we're looking for but it's an egret, not a heron.

Could we change our plans and go with an egret rather than a heron? After all, an egret is just as symbolic of Lee County as a heron. Of course, we're looking for an impossible choice – a heron that can sing on cue just like the Aflac duck. Is that asking too much?

Suddenly appearing next to the stage struck egret is an even larger egret. We determined that the larger egret was the mother of the smaller one. Well, whaddaya know? A stage mother egret pushing for the selection of its offspring. We almost expected the mother egret to shout out “Sing out, Louise.” And the moment we shared this insight with each other the mother egret began to warble. It really did sound like “Sing out, Louise.”

Louise, the egret, began doing a series of dance steps and warbling sounds that we immediately caught on camera. Louise was electrifying. She had enormous talent and was really making a case for herself.

We gave the mother egret our business card and told her that we would get back to her in a couple of days. We then went back to the office and did some editing on the raw footage we had taken. We created some artwork, added a voice over and arranged to meet with the Lee County marketing people the next day.

At 11 a.m. the next day, in a hushed and full conference room we told the Lee County team that we had created a commercial with one significant change. Instead of Harry the Heron we had come across a very talented egret and had changed our initial concept to Louise the Egret instead.

There was skepticism, of course, as is always the case when great art is being seen for the first time. But then we rolled the camera. And there she was, Louise the Egret, the very symbol of all that is fine and great in Lee County.

We showed the commercial we had created. There was Louise the Egret greeting passengers getting off a flight at the Fort Myers Airport and carrying a little sign around her huge neck that said “Welcome to Lee County. Enjoy the vacation of a lifetime”. And then the camera pans the smiling, appreciative faces of the new arrivals and you just know that these folks will indeed have the vacation of a lifetime.

The commercial ends, the lights go on and we wait for the reaction. And then the Lee County marketing team stands up and applauds for five full minutes. And that’s how the Louise the Egret campaign was born. The full campaign will air on national television right after Thanksgiving in time for the Christmas holidays. Louise will be doing an in person tour to cold spots throughout the country. In fact, we had to find some warm clothes for Louise because she’s clearly not used to cold weather.

Louise will hit some twenty markets and appear on local talk shows to plug Lee County. Forget the Aflac duck. Forget the Geico gecko. A new star is born. And Lee County will become a tourist hot spot. Thank you, Louise. And sing out.