

Strategic Communications Report 2024

Date: February 13, 2025

To: Board of Management of the Toronto Zoo

From: Senior Director, Strategic Communications & Guest Experience

Wards: All

SUMMARY

The Strategic Communications team manages public-facing communications to engage with multiple audiences with the Toronto Zoo's mission: connecting people, animals, and conservation science to fight extinction. Through strategic messaging and outreach, the team drives Zoo attendance and promotes revenue-generating activities, programs, and events. This report provides a summary of key activities, statistics, and achievements from the past year that contributed to strong attendance and celebrated your Toronto Zoo's milestone 50th anniversary that helped contribute to exceeding attendance targets in 2024.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Senior Director, Strategic Communications & Guest Experience recommends that:

1. The Board of Management of the Toronto Zoo receives this report for information.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

There is no financial impact resulting from the adoption of the recommendations in this report.

DECISION HISTORY

There is no decision history available for this item.

COMMENTS

As we celebrated the Toronto Zoo's milestone 50th anniversary, we reflected on five decades of leadership in wildlife conservation, education, and community engagement. This landmark year not only honours our past achievements but also sets the stage for an exciting future with the introduction of the *Guardians of the Wild* brand platform. This initiative reinforces our commitment to protecting wildlife and their habitats while deepening connections with our guests, partners, and the broader conservation community. Through *Guardians of the Wild*, we are evolving our mission, inspiring action, and ensuring the Toronto Zoo remains a global leader in conservation for generations to come. The Strategic Communications branch is embracing new tools, big data, and more sophisticated approaches to engage audiences like never before. With the rapid evolution of digital media, we are leveraging analytics-driven insights to better understand our guests, tailor our messaging, and amplify our conservation mission. We are using data to craft more impactful storytelling that supports our mission and vision in more meaningful ways.

One of the most exciting advancements is our expansion into more engaging science content across social media and digital platforms. By incorporating behind-the-scenes conservation science stories, and expert insights, we are making complex scientific topics more accessible and compelling for diverse audiences. Whether through immersive video experiences, live sessions with our researchers, or dynamic infographics showcasing conservation efforts, we are finding new ways to spark curiosity and inspire action. This modernized approach to communication strengthens our role as a leader in conservation education and ensures that our message reaches and resonates with a global audience.

We began the year with the opening of the newly renovated Zoo Greenhouse, a chance to connect guests to the equally important and impactful world of plants and how they are essential to our planet's health. Followed by a solar eclipse event that provided an opportunity to promote our welfare science-based messaging, and encouraging our guests to join in gathering animal data, creating citizen scientists, inspiring future scientists, and partnering with teams from the Ontario Science Centre in collaborative messaging. Then we proudly launched our new brand campaign "Guardians of Wild," a powerful new identity for our Zoo and those who engage with us, inviting all to join our cause in saving and protecting wildlife and wild spaces. This campaign engaged our staff, volunteers, guests, members, partners, sponsors, political friends, and the media.

Moving into the summer months, we officially announced the plans for our new Community Conservation Centre at the front entrance of our Zoo with our valued partner University of Toronto Scarborough. This coincided with the official kick-off to our 50th celebrations and a 50-day countdown of events and programs leading up to the milestone day on August 15th. After 50 busy days of anticipation and excitement, we enjoyed an amazing 50th anniversary celebration with old and new friends, staff, volunteers, media, VIPs, and of course, the animals were able to join in the celebrations with great themed enrichment throughout the day. On this day we reflected on our past and focused on the future as we embrace the critical role in front of us as we continue our important work as Guardians of Wild.

In the fall, we celebrated the life and legacy of the iconic silverback Charles, the lowland gorilla that called the Zoo home since it opened in 1974. We received messages from

around the globe which was a true testament to the wide-reach and impact he had on our guests over his lifetime. The year ended with gratitude for a year spent remembering how we got here, treasuring what we have, and ready to move forward and ensure our wild space and wild friends will thrive for the next 50 years, and beyond.

Some key strategic communications accomplishments for 2024 are listed below and in the attachments. It is our commitment to continue growing our audiences and engaging them as Guardians of Wild with us.

Advertising Agency

Diamond Marketing Group is our current Agency of Record that developed the concept and execution for the 50th branding and the new Guardians of Wild campaign. The goal was first to develop a 50th logo and brand that would be used throughout the year to identify this as a milestone year. The result was a 50th themed modification to the existing Zoo logo that was used throughout the year on all on all communications and graphics. The *Guardians of Wild* campaign was created to define not only our organizational contribution and role as protectors and guardians of our natural world, but to engage all our audiences including our team, guests, members, stakeholders, partners and friends in this mission and work.

The launch of this new brand campaign took place on May 16, 2024, to coincide with Endangered Species Day. A toolkit was created and shared by the social media team to encourage people to become guardians, along with a powerful [video](#) to establish this new call to action campaign. Full toolkit and Guardians campaign elements can be found in Appendix 1

Results for the Guardians of Wild campaign was strong when launched, with an extensive network of partners and audiences sharing and engaging with the content (as reported in each of the areas above) but the greatest value of this campaign launch is that it sets our Zoo up moving forward to embed this new branding concept as a foundation of our identity moving forward, and also was instrumental in informing much of our new Strategic Plan for the next three years at least. Guardians of Wild is more than a campaign, it is who we are, and who we want everyone to be. It also enables us to interchange the word “Wild” with a specific species of plant or animal. For example, Guardians of Orangutans when promoting sustainable palm oil, Guardians of Gorillas when encouraging cell phone recycling or Guardians of Plants when encouraging guests to visit the newly renovated Greenhouse.

Media Buy – Digital and OOH (out-of-home)

Paid digital and Out-of-home (OOH) advertising campaigns were executed to support the Guardians of Wild and 50th messaging, launched in May to align with the Guardians of Wild launch, and running through the summer to capture most of peak season into the 50th birthday. The primary campaign objective was to communicate the launch of our new brand (Guardians of Wild) that reinforces 50 years of conservation excellence on Toronto Zoo’s 50th Anniversary year to a wide audience, and including a reach into cultural markets based on recommendations from the media agency for high visibility and alignment with target market.

Digital Campaign:

The Meta campaign targeted Facebook and Instagram with a flight running from May 6 – September 2. Target market was Adults 25+, Geo: Markham, Toronto, Pickering, Ajax and Whitby & Interest Market (*Interest Market includes: Grandparent, Retirement age, Animal, Zoo or Family, Parents: Parents (All), Parents with preteens (09-12 years), Parents with preschoolers (03-05 years) or Parents with early school-age children (06-08 years)*). The social campaign delivered **35% more** impressions than was planned, with **43,958,783 digital impressions** through Facebook and Instagram.

Display Digital Campaign – the Weather Network app:

This year we tested a new campaign to promote the Splash Island experience when the weather network was predicting temps of >27 degrees and sunny to target audiences with a strongly aligned offering. The planned and delivered impressions were on target, with 1.2 million+ impressions reached for the reactive ad campaign, and then another 1.3M+ impressions on the weather network splash screen for general awareness.

Out of Home (OOH) Campaign

The OOH campaign tactic targeted transit shelter ad placement in the City of Toronto, and transit posters in Markham and Durham regions as a key geographic demographic. Delivered impressions for these again over-delivered by 19% at 58 million against a proposed 49 million.

Multilingual Media Campaign

For the 50th we wanted to extend our media campaign into different multilingual markets, leveraging the media agency's diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) performance marketing team recommendations for optimized targeting strategies. We saw strong engagement with our ads with South Asian and Chinese audiences, as those were the recommended audiences by the agency driven by strategic placements, right audience, and contextual targeting.

A 4-week campaign was executed leading up to the 50th anniversary with digital, display, and social channel marketing tactics utilized. Performance was strong, exceeding expected deliverables on all executions, with a reach of 3.5 million across all tactics. (Attachment 1 - Promotional and Advertising Examples)

NEW – Toronto Zoo Experience App

In July 2024 we launched our first official Toronto Zoo Guest Experience App, a fantastic addition to our guest experience and communications in our 50th year. A long time coming, we were extremely pleased with the success of uptake and feedback we received almost immediately upon release. By the end of 2024, our Zoo app had 48,121 downloads which according to our development partners at Attractions i.o. was extremely high for our attractions/zoo industry. A few key stats are as follows:

- Retention rate stood at 84% at end of year (EOY), which again is strong for the industry.
- User Engagement Clicks: 903,000 clicks (the number of times users have triggered an action within the app), which is important because they are not just downloading it, they are engaging with it.

One of the greatest values to the app in this first phase of development is the wayfinding application. Data shows that each user is visiting at least 4 locations using the wayfinding technology on the app per visit. Over 13,000 total users have used a wayfinding action, with a total of 54,000 total wayfinding routes explored. Guests using the app expressed a 93% satisfaction rate with their overall Zoo visit, highlighting this as a valuable tool for an increased positive guest experience.

Social Media

Through our social media channels, the Zoo began rolling out archival storytelling content highlighting key attractions and memories of our past in February 2024. In combination with postings on the Zoo's birthday on August 15, posts garnered over 880,000 impressions. Guests enjoyed sharing their memories in the comments, with over 50,000 engagements. We concluded the celebration sharing a [50th Celebration Video](#) that gave a 50 year overview of the Zoo's history, achievements and conservation wins that had over 50,000 views.

We partnered with an amazing line-up of organizations to offer some incredible giveaways, launching one major contest/giveaway weekly throughout our 50 Day Countdown to the big 50th anniversary in August. Some key partners for the giveaways included: Toronto FC, CN Tower, Arcadia Earth, Little Canada, Schleich, Coca-Cola, Legoland, zoolife, and the grand prize contest was coordinated in partnership with Toronto Star giving away a Magical Trip to Florida for four people with tickets to Disney. These contests leading up to August 15th saw over 500,000 impressions and 20,000+ engagements that helped drive users to enter each giveaway.

Where possible, onsite events and activities were partnered with and promoted along with these giveaways. For example, the Coca-Cola and zoolife giveaway engaged guests to enter to win a large screen TV, subscription to zoolife with a full set of the video series Zoo Diaries, which then also promoted our Zoo Diaries live screenings onsite. The Legoland giveaway was attached to a promotion to come to the Zoo and participate in a giant 50th themed animal Lego mural in partnership with LEGO.

The Guardians of Wild campaign that launched on May 16th also produced some impressive results in engaging our audiences and stakeholders with this bold new brand identity and campaign. Notable participants that shared content and participated in this campaign launch were Mayor Olivia Chow, Deputy Mayor Councillor Jennifer McKelvie, Councillor Paul Ainslie, Councillor Jamaal Myers, Scarborough Health Network, CN Tower, Ontario Science Centre, zoolife, Planet Madagascar, Little Canada, Earth Rangers, along with strong support from our Zoo members, community, and our Zoo staff and volunteers.

High level online audience and engagement growth statistics include:

- Social media platforms now total 1,245,801 fans/followers, an 8% increase from 2023 garnering over 114,962,264 impressions and engaging over 5,389,000 people.
- Over 46,703,296 total video views in 2024 across all platforms.

(Attachment 2 - 2024 Social Media Report)

E-Marketing Program

In 2024, we sent out a total of 249 email campaigns, averaging approximately 20 campaigns per month which included newsletters, promotional offers, event invitations, and transactional emails to attract new guests or member acquisition. They also included emails to various databases including Zoo Members, media, educators, pre and post emails to guests for tickets sales and paid programs. We have successfully implemented new strategies and maintained supporter engagement including:

- Added subscriber buttons throughout the website: i.e. Media List
- **Unique Open Rates:** Our average email unique open rate increased to over 60%, (industry standard is 20-30%).
- Implemented and evolved our automations to include the guest automation series, which has a unique **open rate of 62%, and click rate of 5.8%**.
- General Admission List (also non-members) increased to 191,590 contacts. In 2024 we targeted this list for specific campaigns (through expressed consent), for Black Friday deals (acquired 915 new Members), and 50th campaigns.

As we move into 2025 our goal is to evolve this e-marketing program to support further segmentation and targeted consumer experience through integrated marketing campaigns with e-marketing, SMS and app promotions, supporting enhanced revenue opportunities. (Attachment 3 - 2024 E-Marketing Report)

Media Activity

Your Toronto Zoo's 50th anniversary generated a high number of earned media stories. Many related to this milestone year specifically, but as usual there were a lot of stories that we supported that connected to animal updates and events and openings (solar eclipse event, Taylor Swift activities, opening of the renovated Greenhouse, boardwalks and launch of the new Community Conservation Centre). Some key media statistics:

Audience reach: (Global): 14+ billion

Advertising equivalency: \$407 million

Total mentions: Toronto Zoo related items covered more than 9,000 times throughout the year in the media (*as captured by reporting agency Cision*)

Website

For our 50th year, the website continued to be a key tool for our audiences on guest experience information and Zoo events and programs. Some key website statistics and information include:

- **Website Traffic and User Engagement:** our website served an impressive **9 million page views to over 2 million users exceeding 2023 numbers**. This showcases the website's popularity and its effectiveness in attracting and retaining guests and interest.

- **Integration of AI and Productivity Tools:** by leveraging Artificial Intelligence (AI) and innovative productivity tools, the website has significantly boosted productivity and efficiency in the development process. These technologies have empowered the team to automate repetitive tasks and optimize the website for an enhanced user experience.
- **Key Pages and Guest Engagement:** the top three visited pages on the website are *Tickets*, *Animals*, and *Plan Your Visit*. The goal remains to make the guest journey throughout the website easy to navigate while providing maximum value in content development and updating.
- **Optimized Usage of Google Tools:** Google Maps and Analytics account controls has enabled the Branch to gain valuable insights into user behaviors and preferences to support optimal website and web page development.

(Attachment 4 – 2024 Media Performance Report)

Promotional/Advertising Partnerships

We continue to leverage strong partnerships and in-kind promotional opportunities to supplement our advertising. A few significant partnerships in 2024 include the following:

- **Toronto Star:** This year, for our 50th Anniversary our Toronto Star partners supported us with extensive additional marketing and promotional support. We continue to maintain a strong partnership with the Toronto Star securing in-kind advertising to support a number of our activities and events. We received fourteen ad placements in the paper, executed a digital campaign with a dedicated eblast and an exclusive Zoo ad in the daily Torstar Newsletter which had 272,443 subscribers who opened and read the email – an unprecedented open rate (over 87%) for their campaigns.
- **TTC – Guardians of Wild -** Our partners at the TTC really embraced and supported our 50th anniversary and Guardians of Wild advertising campaigns providing 8 bus murals, 2 two-panel streetcars, 1000 bus interior posters and 600 subway interior posters.
- **Cityscape Flags –** We enhanced our placement of the 50th/Guardians of Wild Toronto Zoo flags around the city for more presence and awareness. We had 250 banner flags/pole locations targeting both local spots (Meadowvale Road), and throughout the city, trying to capture a variety of neighbourhoods including Bay Street (Dundas area), Dufferin (at Bridgeland), King St east and west, Lakeshore Blvd east and west (Colborne to Ellis), Yonge St (Wilson to Franklin) and many more.
- **City Parent Magazine:** City Parent continues to be Canada's largest free family publication reaching 125,000 readers in the GTA. Our ongoing partnership includes full page ads in monthly issues (value of ~\$3k per issue). Value of \$36k/year.
- **Minicards:** continued promotional opportunity with Minicards Canada that provides high visibility within hotels and attractions throughout the city and provide an incentive offer for people who use it. In 2024 over 3,000 guests used this promotion to visit the Zoo.

- **Attractions Ontario** – continued supporting various promotional opportunities with Attractions Ontario through online contesting and exchange of passes for digital promotions.
- **Destination Toronto** – participated in various campaigns and initiatives to promote the Zoo to larger tourism markets through.
- **NFL Canada** - Superbowl Partnership – once again, we proudly partnered to develop and share content with the “superb-owl” making predictions, along with other animal predictions, leveraging cross-channel content tagging NFL Canada/Toronto Zoo. This partnership strongly supports our efforts in reaching out to new audiences.
- **CP24**: Coordinated TV advertising with CP24 to leverage promotional breakfast television value to support content for live remotes and banner ad placements.

To finish off the year, Partnerships and Events coordinated a new event called Noon Year’s Eve on December 31. This family friendly event that was supported by Coca-Cola exceeded our expectations with attendance and was a wonderful way to end our 50th anniversary year. We look forward to building on this event to make it even bigger in 2025.

CONTACT

Katie Gray
 Manager, Strategic Communication
kgray@torontozoo.ca
 (416) 938-5283

SIGNATURE

Jennifer Tracey
 Senior Director, Strategic Communications & Guest Experience

ATTACHMENT

Attachment 1 – Promotional and Advertising Examples
 Attachment 2 - 2024 Social Media Report
 Attachment 3 - 2024 E-Marketing Report
 Attachment 4 – 2024 Media Performance Report