



Falck Ambulance Unseats 23-Year Emergency Medical Service Incumbent –Twice

INSIGHTS & ANALYSIS

Many would have thought Falck's ambitious dreams to overturn a 23-year government contract and become San Diego's next emergency ambulance provider would be impossible. However, when presented with this daring task, Falck and Southwest Strategies (SWS) were ready for the challenge. Understanding the uphill battle Falck was facing, **SWS instinctively knew that its approach would have to be more than just a public relations campaign, but a fight for the future health and safety of San Diego.** And only months into the COVID-19 pandemic, the need for improved emergency healthcare was more important than ever before.

In August 2019, the City of San Diego released a request for proposal (RFP) for emergency ambulance services – the first such request in more than two decades. At the time, the incumbent provider, American Medical Response (AMR), had operated in the city since 2015 after purchasing its contract from a former provider, Rural/Metro, which had served the city for over **20** years. While overturning a government contract is difficult, Falck believed it could tackle the challenge and enlisted SWS to initiate a multifaceted public affairs campaign to secure the ambulance contract.

In December 2019, the city awarded Falck the emergency ambulance services contract, however, the next month the RFP was unexpectedly re-issued, forcing Falck and SWS to prepare a new response. Through SWS' approach, Falck maintained its renowned reputation despite a severe misinformation campaign that included the recruitment of Reverend Al Sharpton to make false accusations about Falck. Despite a two-year delay, a contentious opponent and COVID-19 challenges, **SWS navigated Falck to victory after a unanimous (9-0) San Diego City Council vote in April 2021.**

PRIMARY RESEARCH

The primary research conducted for this campaign included the identification of key organizations and leaders in San Diego that had expressed dissatisfaction with AMR. Research also included a review of the City's RFP submittal, approval and protest processes including a review of the municipal code, City Charter and previous City Attorney's opinions that could have impacted the process. Prior to the release of the RFP, SWS held virtual meetings with key community stakeholders to better understand the community's emergency medical service (EMS) needs, AMR's reputation among those groups and existing challenges. The information gathered identified Falck's community-based partnerships/coalition and served as the foundation for SWS' public affairs strategies.

PLANNING

SWS used its research to develop a comprehensive public affairs plan to build a strong base of support for Falck. Targeting City Council and the San Diego community, SWS developed a message platform that highlighted Falck's value as an EMS provider and a dedicated community partner. Strategies included asking supporters to engage through direct advocacy, highlighting Falck's reputation via traditional/social media outreach and consistently engaging with elected officials. The cornerstone of the plan leveraged opportunities to build deep and mutually beneficial relationships with key partners that would live beyond the awarding of the contract. Understanding that Falck's opponent would use any means necessary to win the contract, the strategic plan was created with the flexibility to address any needed crisis.

EXECUTION

Contributing to the success of Falck's RFP effort were SWS' community-based coalition, earned media and digital media strategies and public affairs plan. SWS used the tactics below to illustrate the value Falck could bring to San Diego by building a coalition of people who wanted to improve health and safety in their communities.

- **Community-based Coalition:** The cornerstone of the plan established a coalition comprised of **40** of San Diego's most influential community organizations and key stakeholders who publicly supported Falck regardless of the incumbent's misinformative tactics.



- **Earned Media:** A community-coalition-authored op-ed in the San Diego Union Tribune highlighting the benefits of Falck and in opposition of a paid op-ed by Reverend Al Sharpton.
- **Digital Media:** Dedicated website, paid/organic social media content, partner organization video series that amplified their messages/communities and highlighted Falck's engagement.
- **Public Affairs Plan:** Facilitated dozens of briefings with City staff and elected officials

Despite the challenges resulting from COVID-19, SWS and Falck used virtual meetings and digital technologies to build meaningful relationships and a community presence. By partnering with the community, **Falck developed trust and support among groups that had been traditionally ignored in conversations about emergency services.** These groups provided the foundation of a strong community-driven coalition whose voice carried weight with key elected officials. **Over the course of two years, SWS helped Falck foster deep relationships with community leaders and organizations, which ultimately proved to be the key to overturning the 23-year contract.** Falck's community engagement strategy went far beyond sponsorships but focused on **building lasting partnerships to help it gain a deep understanding of the communities it would eventually serve.**

SWS navigated Falck through various unforeseen obstacles, which at times forced the **implementation of several crisis communications plans.** AMR's misinformation campaign was so severe it forced the city to extend the RFP in April 2020, meaning SWS and Falck had to start the process from the beginning. The incumbent aimed to hurt Falck's reputation with what seemed to be endless financial resources. AMR attempted to manipulate the public and City Council's perception of Falck through divisive social media ads, fliers, editorials and planted public comment participants and social media trolls. In total, AMR made more than **20 baseless allegations** that were all refuted by SWS and Falck. **The success of SWS' campaign was that it never deviated from Falck's reputation as a professional and positive ambulance company.**

The apex of AMR's misinformation campaign came in February 2021, when San Diego City Council was only days away from the first round of votes to approve Falck's bid for the contract. Attempting to usurp the national dialogue on race to influence the selection process, AMR recruited Reverend Al Sharpton to publish an opinion editorial in the San Diego Union Tribune and launch a virtual press conference to make false accusations about Falck's service in communities of color. In response to the false allegations, SWS coordinated with members from Falck's community-based coalition, such as the NAACP-San Diego Chapter, Asian Business Association and Chicano Federation, to publish their own statements and opinion editorials condemning the claims made by Sharpton and AMR. Lastly, SWS pushed back with media statements, social media and meetings with elected officials.

RESULTS

The success of this campaign was illustrated through the strong partnerships SWS and Falck built with community groups and leaders. Having organizations such as the local NAACP chapter stand up against outside interests, including the Reverend Al Sharpton, was invaluable. Along with mobilizing dozens of EMS workers to speak in favor of Falck and against their current employer, the campaign also amassed thousands of paid/organic social media impressions and engagement that galvanized public support during a time when political advertising was banned from Facebook and Google due to the 2021 presidential election. Lastly, SWS briefed city staff and elected officials. These meetings allowed Falck to build open pathways of communication with key decision-makers, which were vital to refuting misinformation from the incumbent ambulance provider.

- **Earned Media:** San Diego Union Tribune endorsement, Op-ed from community partners
- **Advocacy Efforts:** 200+ support letters secured from residents and stakeholders
- **Public Engagement:** 50 speakers in support of Falck
- **Paid/Organic Social Media:** 344,000+ accounts reached (25% of all voting age user accounts in San Diego city limits), 600,000+ impressions, 10,000 unique click throughs

After a virtual six-hour public hearing, San Diego City Council voted unanimously (9-0) to award the emergency ambulance services contract to Falck. This major victory was driven by SWS' public affairs strategy and extensive efforts to build a coalition of community-based organizations and organic supporters in the City of San Diego.