

## Building Buzz for Halo 3

**A low-key, low budget campaign does more with less, whetting the appetite of the blockbuster video game's fanatical followers.**

By Aaron Halabe

This year, Christmas Day will come exactly three months early for millions of gamers who await Halo 3, Microsoft's wildly popular first-person shooter game.

The growing anticipation of the September 25 release was deftly nurtured by a unique [viral marketing campaign](#), dubbed "Iris," which engaged gamers in a high-tech scavenger hunt that aimed to broaden the audience for the Xbox 360 title along the way.

More than 50 people from 20 Microsoft teams contributed time, coding expertise, and industry contacts to bring the online campaign to fruition.

The project launched in June and wrapped up August 16, unfolding as a virtual treasure hunt in five episodes. A mysterious voice guided thousands of participants as they uncovered clues and puzzles at various server locations. Each location revealed previously untold details about the Halo game trilogy, which tracks Master Chief's epic battle to save Earth from conquering aliens.

The campaign generated the buzz organizers hoped for. "Getting mentioned on gaming [blogs](#) was good, but when we got interview requests from "The Wall Street Journal," that's when we knew we achieved critical mass," said Aaron Elliott, online marketing manager for Xbox Global Marketing. "It's about breaking out of the hardcore and getting into the mainstream."

Microsoft predicts that Halo will become a \$1 billion franchise by year's end, helped along by one million pre-orders for Halo 3. Customers purchased 14.8 million copies of two previous versions of the game, and Halo Nation fanatics worldwide snap up licensed merchandise, best-selling books, music soundtracks, a new Marvel comic, even a Halo-inspired Zune player.

Marketers hope to extend the game's appeal beyond its hardcore fan base and to drive sales of the Xbox 360 console.



Clues like this led engaged gamers in a



"It's about breaking out of the hardcore and getting into the mainstream," said Aaron Elliott in reference to Halo 3's viral marketing campaign.

"Halo 3 competes with the largest entertainment IP in the world," said Jerret West, Xbox senior global product manager. When Halo 2 debuted in November 2004, it generated \$125 million in opening-day revenues, "which was bigger than any movie opening at the time," West added. "We've since been passed by a couple of movies, but on September 25<sup>th</sup>, we're looking to take back that top spot."

### Companywide Contributions

Some similar viral projects have cost millions of dollars. But Iris campaign organizers relied heavily on in-house talent "... to produce something of high caliber without spending that kind of money,"

Elliott said.

high-tech scavenger hunt as part of a unique viral marketing campaign, dubbed "Iris."

Staffers from Xbox.com and Xbox Live offered their time and talents, as did other groups, including Windows Live Maps and Microsoft Game Studios. The Windows Live Agents team alone donated thousands of dollars worth of development work for one episode, Elliott said.

"All of these groups contributed, because they were excited about the idea and convinced that it could work," he added. Sales goals for the game are "incredibly aggressive, but we're spending less on marketing than we did for Halo 2. Trying to do more with less was our challenge."

Many contributions yielded unique online experiences. The campaign's third episode featured a cell phone ring tone that unlocked a 3-D animation on Halo3.com when played into a microphone-equipped PC.

"I've never seen anything like that," said Elliott, of the innovative ring-tone concept, which MSN and Samsung hosted pro bono, working as a promotional partner for Halo's European launch. "When the agency pitched it to us, they had to put together a prototype because none of us believed it would work, but it did."

Microsoft's Retail team convinced Best Buy and Circuit City in North America to donate \$100,000 worth of advertising circular space. The ad showed a cryptic Halo message and pointed readers to an online comic. The effort yielded more than 80 million impressions.

For another episode, participants received a clue when they entered their street address in a Windows Live Maps API to locate nearby retailers. The stores hosted Xbox 360 kiosks that contained a clue. When combined, the clues revealed the IP address of the next server.

### Setbacks and Challenges

Collaborating with many different groups offered significant benefits, but it also meant "we were beholden to timelines outside of our control," Elliott said. Content from an external publisher caused technical problems with the Xbox 360 kiosk demo disc, delaying delivery and pushing the second episode back. "That really shook up our timeline, cascading everything behind it," Elliott said.

Keeping a lid on campaign details proved equally challenging. During episode one, an executive e-mail sent to employees leaked to game bloggers, and parts of an internal Q&A document were inadvertently distributed with a press release.

Halo fans themselves further complicated matters. A paperboy with a user account on Bungie.net leaked the content of the Best Buy ad circular before the papers hit the newsstands. "We didn't even have the site up yet, we were still testing. We had to post a countdown clock to slow people down," Elliott noted.

Despite the setbacks, marketers say the campaign created the awareness Microsoft hoped for, and sustained marketing momentum in advance of an upcoming advertising blitz.



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"The campaign offered content that engaged Halo Nation fanatics, but it also demonstrated the richness of the Halo story in a way that will attract many new gamers to the platform," West said.