



# STRAIGHT FROM IRAQ

Soldiers field your questions about deployment in this exclusive webcast.

## INTRODUCTION

How should a brand facilitate a natural and open dialogue with its target audience? What about when that conversation involves the threat of relocation to a war zone and the risk of being wounded or killed in combat?

These are questions that the U.S. Army and MRM Worldwide were left asking themselves in early 2008. The unpopularity of the Iraq War had reached all-time highs and the trust factor between prospective recruits and Army recruiters was at a low. The Army needed a fresh approach to bridge this gap and re-establish a trusted dialogue with its target audience.

Over the course of three months, the Army and MRM solicited feedback from prospective recruits. The research insights were surprising and enabled a fresh approach to recruiting paired with creative that was designed to convey new digital content in a genuine manner preferred by the target audience.

The "Straight From Iraq" program is an example of the perfect storm that occurs when a simple, powerful strategic idea is paired with world-class digital creative. Prospective recruits couldn't get enough of the new content stream and the program permanently changed the face of how military organizations interact with their recruiting target audiences.

## INITIATING THE CONVERSATION

For every U.S. Army Soldier, the possibility of deployment has always existed.

But since the beginning of the Iraq war in 2003, this issue has become the single most important barrier facing 17- to 24-year-olds who are considering the Army. Combine this fear with the fact that young people no longer believe what the establishment tells them but prefer to seek out the opinions of peers who have experienced things firsthand, and you have the makings of an incredible business challenge.

The Army needed a new approach that enabled prospective recruits to solicit opinions and feedback directly from real Soldiers rather than from recruiters and marketing collateral.

**THE U.S. ARMY HAS NEEDED TO RECRUIT ANNUALLY MORE THAN 80,000 NEW SOLDIERS INTO ITS ALL-VOLUNTEER FORCE.**

**Visit the Site**

<http://www.goarmy.com/home/iraq/index.jsp#/?section=voices>

## THE CHALLENGE

For the past several years, the U.S. Army has needed to recruit annually more than 80,000 new Soldiers into its all-volunteer force. Specific needs range from infantry specialists and mechanics to thoracic surgeons and chaplains, meaning that the Army Strong® brand must represent many different things to a diverse target audience.

During the same time frame, the Army has seen its brand position come under greater pressure from other life, career and educational options available to today's youth. The iconic military branch needed help positioning itself as the best route to obtaining the leadership and technical skills that today's youth desire.

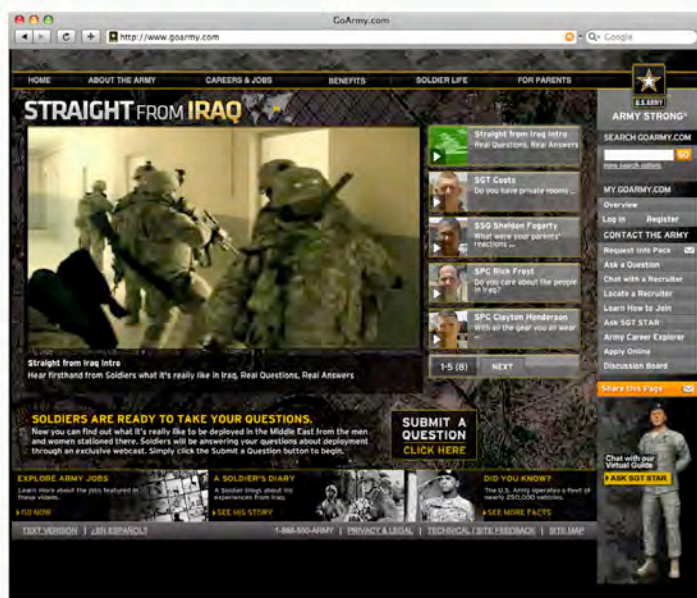
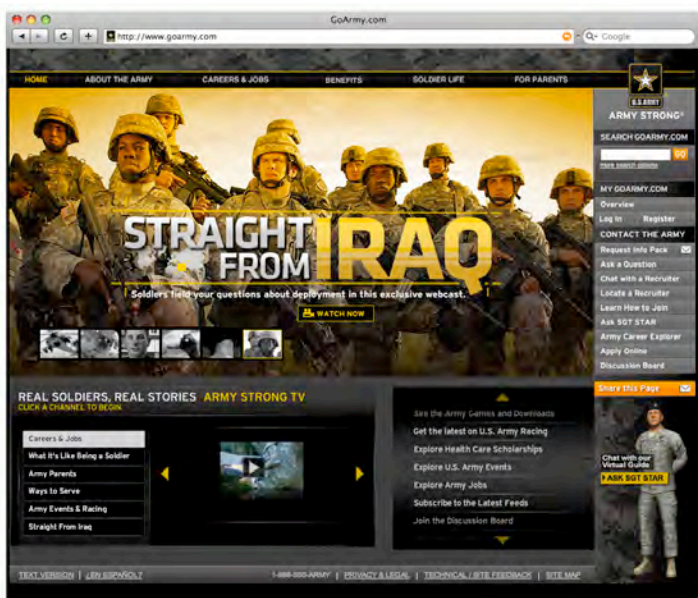
To further complicate the situation, the Iraq war had become hugely unpopular among the American public. In fact, overall propensity toward military service was at its lowest level in more than two decades. While the Army Strong® campaign has generated a tremendous amount of awareness among prospective recruits, the Army was having problems converting that awareness into recruiter meetings and contracts. One major reason discovered through research was the fact that marketing messages coming from the government and military were seen as less than genuine, and prospective recruits were reluctant to believe what military recruiters told them. This trend resulted in prospective recruits wanting to evaluate military service options anonymously – a big problem for a lead-based recruiting effort.

## THE INSIGHTS

Over the course of a few months, the Army and its agency discovered several key insights about the 18- to 24-year-old target audience:

- The issue of deployment was indeed the biggest obstacle in the recruiting process. Prospective recruits knew they would ship abroad but did not feel they had an accurate information source about the experience.
- Prospective recruits were distrustful of messages coming from marketers, in general, and preferred to solicit input from third-party, neutral sources. Even anonymous Internet sources and product reviews were seen as more credible than brand communications.
- Less-produced content was also found to be more “real” and believable when providing a firsthand experience.
- Prospective recruits were closely guarded and unwilling to open up to recruiters and the Army through traditional marketing programs.
- Prospective recruits wanted to do more than just read about deployment. They wanted a firsthand experience of what it was like to be on a military base in an area of conflict.

## THE SOLUTION



THE ISSUE OF DEPLOYMENT WAS INDEED THE BIGGEST OBSTACLE IN THE RECRUITING PROCESS.

Our conversations with prospective recruits all pointed in one direction: Demystify deployment by putting the target in direct communication with Soldiers in the field.

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The program idea was simple. "Straight from Iraq" was positioned as a Web video series that enables prospects to learn what it's really like to be deployed in the Middle East by facilitating an open dialogue between potential recruits in the United States and the men and women who are stationed overseas.

No topic would be off limits. Prospective recruits could ask what it was like to take cover while an M1 Abrams tank fired on an insurgent hideout or inquire about the overall quality of food served in the mess hall. The resulting unfiltered exchanges provided a balance of lighthearted personal reflections and serious issue-driven dialogue (when Soldiers addressed issues such as being wounded in combat or being away from loved ones).

The experience is accessible from the [www.goarmy.com](http://www.goarmy.com) home page and requires prospective recruits to provide their email address when submitting a question. The questions are then sent to Iraq where a team of Soldiers selects troops to provide frank answers on camera. The open, honest and often humorous responses have contributed credibility and approachability to the Army's digital recruiting efforts.

"Straight from Iraq" also represents the first time visitors have been able to ask questions directly of Soldiers deployed overseas in a public context and the first time an ongoing conflict has been directly addressed on a military Web site.

## THE RESULTS

The response has been overwhelming.

Submitted questions have exceeded projections, which were based on historic digital programs, by 250%. Average user sessions on [www.goarmy.com](http://www.goarmy.com) have increased by 45% with a corresponding lift in live leads who have opted to engage a recruiter in a discussion about enlistment.

The blogs hailed the Army's effort to "start a dialogue between the public and our troops," applauded "the honest and direct approach" and called it an important "evolution in Army marketing" and "extremely progressive." Stuart Elliott of *The New York Times* found it "refreshing and extremely compelling."

Submitted questions have also provided additional insight around the key issues on the minds of prospective recruits. The Army now is able to empower its recruiter force with a list of issues that enable proactive dialogue during the recruiting process.

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Stuart Elliott of *The New York Times*

### The New York Times Article

[nytimes.com/2008/11/11/business/media/11adco.html?\\_r=1](http://nytimes.com/2008/11/11/business/media/11adco.html?_r=1)



**PFC MOONEY** | [Watch Video](#)

Question: **How were you and your family affected when you left for deployment?**



**SPC FROST** | [Watch Video](#)

Question: **Do you care about the people in Iraq?**



**SGT COOTS** | [Watch Video](#)

Question: **Do you have private rooms or do you have to share them?**



**SSG FOGARTY** | [Watch Video](#)

Question: **What was your parents' reaction when you told them you were joining the Army, and were they proud of you?**