

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS OF MEDIA RELATIONS

The following tips for pro-lifers on dealing with the media are offered by TC Public Relations, a PR firm that has worked closely with the Pro-Life Action League and the Thomas More Society Pro-Life Law Center of Chicago. Contact: TC Public Relations, 333 N. Michigan Avenue Suite 1810, Chicago, IL 60601; phone: 312-422-1333; e-mail: tc@tcpr.net.

The Purpose of Media Relations

Many, particularly in the pro-life community, have misconceptions about the media and the use of media relations as a strategy for getting the pro-life message out to the masses. Some believe the media is biased and won't report all the facts or will fail to represent the pro-life message accurately.

Predominantly, the media is just looking for a good story. A solid media relations plan will help you develop those stories more effectively. This can bring a wealth of benefits to your organization by:

1. Raising awareness and gaining exposure for your organization
2. Increasing your donor base and participation at organized events
3. Presenting "your side of the story" to the masses in a clear, concise way

Here are ten "commandments" to more effectively build a media relations plan for your organization:

Commandment 1: Cast a Vision

Large corporations hire multi-million dollar public relations agencies to help them "cast a vision" for their company. A vision is a clear and compelling image of the desired end results in sufficient detail that it can be recognized as complete once accomplished.

When you begin to formulate a media relations plan, the first step is bringing all of your leaders and organizers together to formulate a succinct vision. What do you want to accomplish through your media plan? Define your goals. Brainstorm effective ways to communicate your vision in order to get people involved.

One example of casting a vision for a media relations plan was the recent effort to stop the nation's largest Planned Parenthood facility in Aurora, Illinois. The vision was clear: to mobilize the community and use all the resources available to prevent the facility from being able to open.

Commandment 2: Define Your Message

After you cast your vision, the next commandment comes down to one thing: *defining a message*. When you think of McDonalds or Nike, their slogans and messages immediately pop

into your head. Sadly, in the abortion debate, the pro-abortion side has historically done a better job at defining their message.

However, this doesn't have to continue. What created an effective media campaign during the controversy at Planned Parenthood in Aurora was a clearly defined message from the very outset: *Planned Parenthood is bad for Aurora.*

This simple message became the slogan for the pro-life cause in Aurora and has been highly effective at motivating the community, seeing unprecedented numbers of supporters picketing the facility. Why was it so effective? It was a sharp focused message that got people asking the question, "Why is Planned Parenthood Bad for Aurora?"

This message was repeated over and over until it became part of the DNA of the community movement itself. The generic term "bad" became synonymous with Planned Parenthood's deception, indoctrination of children and unsafe health practices.

Commandment 3: Tone Down the Rhetoric

Unfortunately, many times the pro-life activist is his own worst enemy. Though some in the media and in the pro-abortion movement falsely portray pro-lifers as "clinic-bombing extremists," sometimes the pro-life rhetoric and dialogue can serve to reinforce those falsehoods. When you are putting together your media relations plan, think about how your statements will be portrayed in the media. The goal is to be "wise as serpents, harmless as doves."

Would the media campaign in Aurora been as effective if the message had been "Planned Parenthood and its Doctors are Murderous Butchers"? The message might be true, but not effective in reaching out to the community or the media. This simply reinforces their stereotypes.

Work to take the high-road with your message. In fact, one strategy that struck a chord in the Aurora controversy was turning pro-abortion slogans back on themselves. After a positive court hearing Eric Scheidler of the Pro-Life Action League declared, "Today was a victory for choice: the choice of Aurora residents to decide whether they want Planned Parenthood in their community."

Get creative. You may be surprised at the response you receive.

Commandment 4: Know What's "Newsworthy"

One of the biggest errors organizations make in media relations is not knowing when to contact the media and when to hold off. Nothing turns off the media faster than receiving hundreds of press releases on issues that are not newsworthy. News must be "breaking" or new and it's got to have something unusual or important that effects more than just your organization. This "hook" is something that every news release needs to have.

Even things that may seem very important to your organization may not be news. If you have two rallies a month scheduled for the next six months, don't send out a press release on every one. Pick two or three scattered over those months and work to make them larger rallies where bigger turnouts are expected.

Then find a good “hook” to associate with that rally. In Aurora, protestors marched around Planned Parenthood eight times, a biblical illusion to the march around Jericho. That got the media’s attention!

Commandment 5: Build a Solid Media List

In the media, different reporters cover different topics or “beats.” Spend some time finding out who covers the topic you are pitching. If you are planning a major protest or rally, you probably won’t contact the sports writer. Find out who covers the hot-button social issues. This could be a health reporter or political writer.

This is where a good public relations firm can come in very handy. They typically have extensive media databases and contacts from which to build their lists. However, if you’re doing it on your own, start with the news desk. The news desk is the main hub of any newspaper or television station, ask them who to send the release to. Typically they will point you in the right direction.

Doing a little homework can pay off big when it comes time for you to pitch your story.

Commandment 6: Sharpen Your Press Releases

A press release is a vital tool to getting the media’s attention. The release tells your story in an objective “journalistic” tone. One reporter at a newspaper or television station can get hundreds of press releases a day. Most of these press releases get briefly skimmed and thrown out. This is why it is imperative to keep your press releases short and to the point.

Typically, you should try to keep a press release to no more than a page to a page and a half. Include all of the important information in the first three to four sentences. The reporter should be able to identify the who, what, when, where and why of your release in those first few lines.

Also, remember to keep it objective. Any “opinions” should be presented as quotes not as statements of fact. Make sure to give it a catchy headline that grabs the reporter’s attention right off the bat.

One headline in a press release sent out regarding the Aurora controversy read, “Planned Parenthood in Aurora Becomes ‘Ground Zero’ in National Abortion Battle.” The media ran with it, leading *TIME Magazine* to declare Aurora as the epicenter of the national controversy.

Commandment 7: Choose Spokesmen Wisely

Every good media relations campaign requires a spokesperson to drive the message home. Not everybody in your organization should be talking to the media.

Make sure the person you pick is articulate and good at thinking on his or her feet. Try a mock interview, literally going through a normal interview process where questions are thrown out at random. Pick the appropriate person for the occasion as well. For example, at a teen rally don’t wheel out the 80 year old; rather find the teen or twenty-something who can articulately present the message.

Finding the right spokesperson is imperative for a successful media relations campaign. If done properly, that person becomes synonymous with the cause itself. Again, using the Aurora controversy as an example, Eric Scheidler became the mouthpiece for the cause leading to a front page article in the *Chicago Tribune* identifying him as the “Next Generation” pro-life leader.

Commandment 8: Plan Press Conferences Strategically

Press conferences can be a very valuable tool to get a lot of media out for a single event. However, they must be well planned and used sparingly. If the media take the time out to come to your press conference, make sure you have something important to say. Also, there is nothing worse than organizing a press conference and having nobody show up. Conferences work best if your issue is hot, if there is controversy, and if you have important people speaking.

Make sure you cater the press conference to the needs of the media. Pick a location where there are good visuals, that is, something catchy for television cameras to film. Try to hold your press conference in the morning before noon and not late in the day or at night. This maximizes the amount of media that can be present.

Also, consider the speakers at the press conference. The media are attracted to “celebrity.” If you have a high-profile speaker or activist in town or perhaps a local congressman or city official, they would be good to include in your press conference.

In Aurora, one press conference at the site of the Planned Parenthood attracted nearly every major local and some national television networks, local and national papers and prominent news radio stations. The key was 120 local pastors who signed a petition to stop the clinic, with six of the more prominent speaking at the press conference. Get creative and the media will come.

Commandment 9: Maintain Contact with the Media

As an organization you may have contact with dozens of reporters and journalists throughout the course of a campaign. Collect these names in some sort of database or organizers. Typically media that have covered an issue once, will want to continue to receive follow-ups on the story.

It is your responsibility to make sure they know what is going on with your organization. Again, you want to make sure what you are giving them is “newsworthy,” but you will find they are very appreciative of FYI’s on the latest developments in your campaign.

Keeping a short list of your top media contacts is an essential tool in your media relations tool belt. This way when “breaking news” occurs, you have that list ready to get the information out to the media before your opponents can.

During the Aurora controversy, some days had two or three breaking news items. A list of top media who had been covering the issue allowed for quick emails that resulted in virtually instant news coverage.

Commandment 10: Build Media Friendships

With issues that receive extensive media coverage, over long periods of time, you will find that you begin to form friendships with reporters and journalists. This is a good thing. Believe it or not, the media is not all left-wing radicals. In fact, you might even find many that sympathize

with the pro-life message. Even if they don't, if you're respectful and articulate, you'll find many are curious to learn more.

These friendships are vital and can open doors to greater media exposure such as feature stories on your organization or larger pieces on the personalities involved. They also may end up being advisors to your own media relations activities, being a sort of media "go to" person. In turn, they will appreciate being the first to get news from your camp. Work to foster these friendships and it will definitely benefit your organization.