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Nonprofits: Capitalizing on crisis

Craig McGuire - 10 Jan 2005 00:00

Smart nonprofits are using news events to further their causes.

The recent shortage in flu vaccines sparked a national outcry and resulted in endless lines of potential flu sufferers snaking outside pharmacies and doctors' offices, hoping the supply wouldn't run out before they reached the front. But for the American Lung Association (ALA), the shortage provided a strong opportunity to push its message. For years the ALA has promoted a "Find a Flu Shot Locator," garnering limited coverage by publicizing that flu shots are not only safe, even for asthma sufferers, but they greatly reduce hospitalizations during flu season. While planning for last year's flu season nearly a year in advance, the ALA saw its corporate funding dwindle, though it did secure a key partnership with Maxim Healthcare Services. The 2004 campaign brought together several ALA divisions (national policy and advocacy, program, scientific affairs, and marketing and communications). The program was staffed by more than 50 Flu Shot Locator local administrators, powered by Maxim Health (the Flu Shot Locator hosts, including a searchable database), Donordigital (online marketing consultants), Fenton Communications (PR component), and a list of online partners - key among them the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). "However, we couldn't have planned for the flu vaccine shortage," says Michelle Sawatka, director of media relations for the ALA. "We quickly scrapped our messaging and developed new messages and engaged our spokesdoctors for an intense month of interviews. Our goal was to create perspective around the events and provide health messages that would hopefully calm the flu shot frenzy." This revised strategy included media outreach to newspapers, online publications, and radio and TV stations, positioning the Flu Shot Locator as the best and most convenient resource for consumers to find where to get the flu shot, with Fenton positioning the ALA as an expert on the shortage crisis. As a result, the Find a Flu Shot Locator was by far ALA's most successful online promotion ever. From September 15 through October 31, there were 1.85 million searches or requests for clinic locations. In addition, the locator's homepage received more than 1 million page requests, in excess of 755,000 users on the site, with approximately one in five users returning. And the organization added at least 16,000 new subscribers to its flu e-newsletter in October alone. "The Lung Association has found that when we provide 'news you can use' that is relevant to a developing story, the media is very interested in including it," Sawatka says. "We now live in a world with a 24-hour news cycle. Reporters need to make fast decisions about the quality of information they are putting in the paper or on TV or radio. The most credible news organizations use the most credible sources." Consider, for example, three seemingly unrelated stories - Janet Jackson's "wardrobe malfunction," Mary-Kate Olsen's spell in rehab, and Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. What they have in common is that they were all major news stories of 2004 that Focus on the Family piggybacked on to promote its own agenda, which the Colorado Springs, CO-based nonprofit Christian ministry espouses as preserving and sustaining families worldwide. Tapping into the media's appetite to flesh out stories with

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sources having some tangible link to the subject, Focus on the Family commands a phalanx of spokespeople (psychologists, bio-ethicists, entertainment experts, marriage counselors, apologists, broadcasters, etc.) ready to respond at a moment's notice. For Jackson's wardrobe malfunction, the group commented on its appropriateness for an event that boasts family viewership. Olsen's eating disorder prompted advice to parents on talking to their teens and preteens about eating disorders. And when *Passion* hit theaters, it weighed in on whether or not parents should let kids see the movie. "My team pitches regularly to national and regional media on topics that affect the family, and we've found that interest is high, especially if it pertains to breaking news," says Lisa Anderson, Focus on the Family's director of publicity. "Interest is also high if we're willing to provide one side of a debate." **Winning coverage** Nonprofits clearly have an edge when it comes to manipulating the media, as reporters often view pitches about issues as more newsworthy than pitches about for-profit products and services. Reporters and news producers are particularly receptive to hearing from reputable nonprofits that can offer a new angle to a developing or breaking story. Experts from nonprofits also come with built-in credibility, saving reporters the time it takes to vet sources. For the nonprofit limber enough to get itself into position to be sourced for a breaking story, the more compelling the news, the sharper the spotlight. Still, though you might not generate national coverage in every major market, adopting a strategy of integrating your cause with breaking news or other like-minded programs can pay substantial dividends. As account manager at Graham & Associates, Kate Rapson coordinated a campaign for the Institute on Aging, a large nonprofit offering services to the elderly and their families. Rapson was not afforded the luxury of breaking news, but did successfully link her campaign to another national event. "To raise awareness of the institute and its suicide awareness and prevention program, we timed our major outreach around the National Suicide Awareness Week," Rapson says. "We wrote a news alert notifying TV and radio stations of the upcoming Suicide Awareness Week, as well as the institute's experts on the topic and the fact that the elderly are one of the highest risk groups." The results were respectable, generating some national coverage, but mostly hits in the institute's home base of the San Francisco Bay Area. For example, the director of the program, plus a client and a volunteer, were interviewed on many Bay Area TV and radio stations, including KNBR-FM, NBC 3, and ABC 7. Hitching your wagon to another event might often not even require much additional effort. While handling PR for the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, Andrew Hayes, then a freelance PR consultant, now director of communications for real-estate brokerage firm Baird & Warner, was staging an exhibit of sections of the quilt's panels of Chicagoans who had died from complications associated with AIDS. As the exhibit's launch neared, the CDC issued a report about the staggering numbers of HIV and AIDS cases in the African-American community. "I immediately spun all my PR to include the CDC report," Hayes says. "Within days, we had all the TV stations and both major dailies coming out to do a story on the quilt exhibit." However, not every nonprofit is a fan of this approach, as the speed with which you need to act to capitalize on breaking news can often be an issue. "Most of the nonprofits that I have worked for are cautious and reticent to quickly change focus and jump aboard a hot topic for a variety of reasons," Hayes explains. "Many have boards that have to approve communications vehicles and, as a result, can't act as fast as is necessary to approve this change. And, in this day of reduced funding and support, many nonprofits are concerned about offending or alienating a funder and tend to not want to rock the boat." But for those still not sold on the idea of leveraging compelling news to power their campaigns, consider that in its 2004 State of the Nonprofit Industry survey, Charleston, SC-based researcher Blackburn reported that 59% of the 1,300 nonprofit professionals polled indicated their organizations' overall budgets increased in 2003. At the same time, 83% of funding from individual donations either increased or stayed the same, and 96% expect executive/management staffing levels to either increase or stay the same this year. With organizations expanding operations and recruiting heavily, nonprofits will have to work hard to stand out. ----- **Case studies** For some organizations, capitalizing on current events has proven a viable strategy for generating media coverage. Here are some success stories: **The MindOH! Foundation Mission:** *To provide character education programs and resources to the community* **News events:** 9/11, Columbia Space Shuttle crash, the US invasion of Iraq **Tactics:** Created activity worksheets, family discussion activities, and classroom lesson plans. Materials are posted to a website in conjunction with a media campaign to get the word out to schools and the community. Experts are on call throughout campaigns. **The MansGland Campaign Mission:** *To promote prostate cancer awareness* **News event:** In fall 2004, there was a widely published story about the PSA blood test that screens for prostate cancer. The first doctor to identify this marker for cancer nearly 20 years ago proclaimed the test nearly useless. When the story first came out, there were no opposing views. **Tactics:** This nonprofit responded by launching an 800-PSA-Test call-in service, promoting it to women, who more often than not are the impetus to get men to the doctor for prostate screening. **The Polly Klaas Foundation Mission:** *To encourage California and other states to issue Amber Alerts when children are abducted* **News event:** After a 5-year-old child was kidnapped and murdered in California, Mike Smith of Fenton Communications urged The Polly Klaas Foundation to use the unfortunate episode to generate publicity to help force the issuance of Amber Alerts. **Tactics:** An op-ed was secured in *The Sacramento Bee*, calling for the governor to issue an executive order for Amber Alerts. He did, and six days later, the alerts saved two teens from a convicted rapist. With that nationwide attention, a national campaign was launched, including Amber Alert Now (www.amberalertnow.org) that called for statewide plans in all 50 states and a national bill to coordinate them all. An op-ed was placed in *USA Today*, and the effort received national hits

like *Nightline* and *CNN Headline News*. In April 2003, Bush signed the national bill, and now only Hawaii remains without them. ----- **Tips** Rules to get coverage for your nonprofit during national news events:

There must be a genuine cause or connection between your nonprofit and the news event

Don't just restate what's happening and your opinion on the matter. Discuss what you are doing about it or provide a new angle that isn't already being covered
Don't wander to pet issues. Stay focused on the issue at hand

Don't engage reporters in a long policy discussion about the issue

Don't offer spokespeople who are not readily available to drop everything for a media interview

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