

Getting the message out: the role of the media

Round Table

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Summary

The Coalition for Gun Control is composed of 350 organizations including police, women's groups, municipalities, unions, and health care.

Media publicity has helped legitimize the Coalition's position, particularly for government officials who see the media as a reflection of public opinion. Organizations advocating for gun control must know how to best work with the media so as to take advantage of its ability to shape public opinion.

A lot of publicity is given to incidents of gun violence, which also provide organizations the opportunity to attract attention. It is critical that organizations can react quickly and in a way that best markets their cause. Given the high competition for media attention, information must be factual and complete yet clear and in a proper layout for journalists.

The Coalition's strategy in working with the media is to adapt to the context. The Coalition's message will be contextualized by a domestic violence expert following a domestic gun homicide and by a police officer following an illicit trafficking incident. A broader context for the issue can be created by having several organizations issue press releases at different intervals.

Follow-ups are important and the Coalition make sure letters to the Editor are published when information has been reported incorrectly. The Coalition also asks journalists to follow up

on specific issues. Work invested is never lost but contributes to a quicker response when an issue re-emerges.

Two tools are recommended:

- Periodically updated media contact lists distributed to organizations
- Background facts on women's safety available to journalists and public on the Internet.

Discussion

The participants noted a wide range of challenges-- sometimes regional-specific, other times issue-specific or culturally-specific -- their organisations face when dealing with the media. For example, a participant from Cameroon explained that in her country, reporters must be paid to cover a story by the organisations who themselves have little financial resources.

Participants quickly showed their outrage to the media's attitude to twist stories to catch the reader's attention. Media often focus on their 'commercial intention' rather than on their 'social intention'. Then, even real, down-to-earth stories tend to be reported with a sensational angle. Among the methods frequently used by journalists are changes in quotations and editing of interviews to sensationalise them. Participants raised the importance of closely monitoring journalists and their stories. When a story is not reported fairly, organisations could demand that a follow-up story be published and to facilitate that demand they could provide background facts. When possible, keeping a copy of the interview or the transcript of the press conference would allow the organisation to highlight misquoted information. Providing facts through letters to the Editor allows organisations an opportunity to have their message heard.

Another suggestion by the participants was to "blacklist" journalists whose coverage appears unfair and to disseminate their names among networks of organisations. Participants from countries where there are few journalists, newspapers or radio stations have limited flexibility to raise this option. For example, a participant from Chile mentioned that in her

country, there were only 2 newspapers and 10 radio stations. In this context, it was proposed to thank journalists for opening the debate on the issue, offer them the organisation's perspective on the issue and ask if a follow-up story is possible.

Several participants mentioned having difficulties communicating with journalists, who are not always co-operative, do not respond to phone calls or are not looking for new stories or a different perspective to existing stories. Taking the time to establish and maintain good contact with journalists was raised as a key part of all media-relation strategies. Providing journalists with hard copies of all the background information (organisations' intentions, statistics, etc.), in a clear and concise format may also help attracting their attention to the issue.

Key Findings and Recommendations for Media Strategies

- Highlighting what is working well. The group suggested focusing on success stories or presenting the information from a positive perspective.
- Using creative strategies to get the message out -- for example, putting a new spin on old problems by using a medical practitioner to discuss housing problems.
- Finding a well-known spokesperson in the community -- even if their involvement is peripheral -- to present the issue to the media. It was recommended to identify potential partners from all walks of life to represent organisations -- for example soccer players in Chile, hunters and police officers to speak on behalf of gun control. Choosing them and knowing how to use them to their fullest potential is key, noting their character and their background. Providing a media kit to spokesperson is also suggested.
- Being aware of regional, cultural, linguistic, gender or community diversity. Targeting the population to reach and/or specific media -- Intellectual news vs. working class news vs. middle class news; community-oriented media; women's magazines, etc.

- At a press conference or on a press release, presenting more than one perspective (ex. women, police, victims, municipalities, etc...) as it expands the issue and gives it more credibility.
- Asking for the journalist's perspective on the story he/she is working on before giving the interview, keeping in mind that no publicity is better than bad publicity.
- Being cautious with live media as it requires spokespeople to be thoroughly briefed.
- Following-up with journalists when you are satisfied with their work – for example sending a letter to thank and congratulate them.

Recommendations to the Media

- Recognizing that everyday experiences are important. Women's issues should be more at the forefront of coverage, regardless of what might be popular to discuss. For example, through a 'community groups' or 'women's' section in the newspaper;
- Moving away from sensationalism. The media must be sensitive to the information they are giving to the public and must recognize their role as an important voice in the community;
- Recognizing that women's issues are not only specific to women but rather to the community as a whole;
- Recognizing the lack of resources in community groups.