

DON'T FORGET RURAL MEDIA

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Access to the media is critical when looking at affordable and effective ways to reach a broad number of people. Rural media markets are often ignored in the effort to speak to many people through a larger urban media. Including rural media in a respectful way will maximize your communication to more people, especially those who may want to help on your issue.

Know the media reality of the community you want to reach. This is an important rule no matter where you live or who you are trying to target. A smaller rural media culture may exist separate from or in conjunction with a larger media market. In other rural communities, there will be no large media market, just a sequence of small markets.

KNOW YOUR SMALL TOWN MARKET

The first step is to assess how local folks and their neighbors get their global news and their community news. How do they know when the Kiwanis will meet? Who won the last little league game? When the city will sponsor the fall clean-up day? Often the most genuine media market of the community – the one people listen to – is the one with this local information. Include print, cable, radio and television in your analysis of how information is distributed in a community. Do not focus only on circulation figures of newspapers. The media market of my home county serves a total of 37,000 people located in five different population seats. The print market includes five local papers plus a statewide paper. Of the five locals, one is monthly, two are weekly, one is biweekly, one daily, and none covers the entire population base. To reach the maximum number of people in the community, we need to access all of these sources.

Scrutinize the actual content of the media sources that cover a community. What stories are generally on the front page? Are they national political stories made local, for example, the effect of Clinton's tax plan on area businesses? Are they all human interest stories, such as "Family moves and lost dog tracks them down?" Do they have a local political/economic focus? Or maybe the paper is 95 per cent sports.

Most local papers have a consistent bias toward certain stories. Once you know the angle that has appeal, you can better predict how to market your stories for local media value. Similarly, you can quickly get a sense of the political inclination of the paper. This is helpful information as you select and prepare a team of activists to approach the local editor. In a paper which only covers sports events as news, an approach to media coverage as well as communicating to the community might be to take your message to a sporting event – respectfully, of course.

THE SCALE OF RURAL MEDIA

The actual mechanisms of effective press work do not vary much with the media source, rural or urban: The scale does. Talk to your local press contacts about the

scale on which their operation functions. Do not be surprised if it is much smaller than urban media.

For example, my first press effort with a rural media market included a press conference. The only reason any press attended was to laugh at the absurdity: Local media does not have teams of reporters to cover media events all over the county. Had I first developed press contacts, I would have known that our media market did not include staffing to cover non-sporting events. Most smaller media sources operate with a few staff covering everything.

WHAT TO SEND SMALL TOWN MEDIA

Your media submissions should be prepared to become the actual story. If the quality is good, it may be reprinted verbatim – namely because the paper does not have the staff to cover the story. Photographs and captions accompanying your release will be welcome for those media outlets which run pictures.

The press release should prove the who, what, where, when, and why with quotes and background information which communicate a self-contained news story. Always include local contacts with numbers that work both day and night. If a representative from the media is not able to cover the actual event, follow up with a friendly update to confirm how newsworthy the event was.

MEDIA BRIEFINGS AT THE GROCERY STORE

The wonder of local media is access. Probably everyone in town knows the editor of the local paper and can easily schedule a meeting or plan an informal caucus in the aisle of the grocery store.

In one small community, the local editor was overtly homophobic and conservative – as was the paper content week after week. The local activist selected to work with the editor to turn around the coverage – in preparation for an upcoming vote on a local anti-gay initiative – started three months in advance. The activist launched a slow, methodical personal campaign focused on maintaining a relationship with the editor while providing access to new and accurate information on homosexuality, oppression, and the impact of both on the local community. The campaign started in front of the local grocery store, escalated several days later at the post office, included mini briefings at church, and concluded months later with a dense three-column editorial asking the community to vote no on the anti-gay initiative.

While informal briefings may be easier to access, do not give up on efforts to schedule regular meetings with the staff of the paper. You might want to try and market the idea as a casual but scheduled lunch date. (In the best case scenario, such lunches could become routine.) If there is an issue you care about but suspect the staff may be unfamiliar with, offer a lunch date to share some interesting information. Prior to the meeting, practice framing the issue for how it impacts your local community. Make sure the initial emissaries to your media are well chosen – it might be a team with criteria, including being articulate, being respected, and being committed to your local group's mission.

IF YOU LIVE IN A SMALL TOWN

Many of us who live in rural areas under-use the press. Either we turn to them only when we need to communicate something major, or we limit ourselves to the letters-to-the-editor page. The media can be a major tool to communicate to our rural communities. Press releases which are published equal free media attention.

Try to think about media whenever your group does something. For example, one rural human dignity group just adopted its long-term mission statement and designated a new steering committee comprised of local residents. This seemed worthy of a press release. It actually became the front page story in one of the local papers! Two weeks later, the same group submitted another press release featuring the sale of bumper stickers, which also got coverage.

Another human dignity group that was not having strong community participation considered the creation of an event just to get out their name. They decided to clean up the garden of the local battered women's center. Their efforts scored positive media coverage. Another group proposed quarterly "Dignity Advocate" awards – a great way to honor a local community member and get on-going press.

It is critical to create a system which supports rural media. Some systems that have worked well for rural-based, all-volunteer, human dignity groups include the establishment of a media team. The media team is assigned responsibility to integrate media work – writing press releases, prepping spokespeople, establishing reporter contacts, visiting the editor – into every component of the group's work.

IT'S ABOUT HOPE

Rural and small-town media are restricted by tiny budgets, compared to the media conglomerate-owned, big city papers, and a focus on local news. They need support in reporting how the agenda of the Religious Right and exploitative corporations threaten the local community, and how the achievement of a participatory democracy –nurtured by the media – offers hope to the community.