

The Best Kept Secret: Strategic Communications Workshop

Debra Nakatomi, president of Nakatomi Associates, and senior vice president, Joni Byun, led a workshop designed to assist participants to better understand how to tell the stories of their work and organizations to maintain visibility and support within their communities. The main goals of the workshop were to remind participants that communications are an essential part of the work of shelter providers, and to inspire creative thinking and learn how to improve approaches to strategic communications. Nakatomi Associates works with nonprofit and public agencies to foster and focus communication initiatives in advocacy, community engagement and philanthropy.

Strategic communications are an integrated process that is an essential part of the strategic plan of an organization and shares the same three- to five-year time frame to accomplish strategic results. Strategic communication is guided by the mission, vision and values of the organization. In developing important messages, it is important to learn how to be a great storyteller and how to keep things fresh. The story must engage the stakeholders and be relevant to the broad audience and must be results driven. It is now recognized that communication deserves more focused attention with methods to measure and analyze what we are trying to accomplish.

Target Audiences

Effective communication is audience-focused. The audience must be specifically identified. A good starting point is to identify which target audiences your communications strategy addresses. Potential targets for domestic violence service organizations include funders, media, clients/victims, first responders, policy makers, etc. These targets must be identified and prioritized.

Creating Opportunities

Every challenge presents an opportunity to convey a message and increase public awareness of issues related to ending domestic violence. Using the creative energy of staff, board and volunteers, domestic violence service providers can reach the public, shape its understanding of how it can best help solve domestic violence and change conditions for women and their families.

Message Development

The workshop participants were divided into small groups for a brief creative exercise. The first step was to select a target audience then decide exactly what we would like them to do, feel, or remember. This is a cognitive, not moral, exercise. It is essential that we tell the audience what they ought to do. And finally, the small groups had the opportunity to identify the single most motivating message to communicate.

One group focused on the message, "You can and you should help." During his keynote address, Dr. Gilliam had criticized an ad showing the face of a battered woman and exhorting batterers' best friends to say something. He emphasized that the ad did nothing to counter common frames such as "It is her fault," and "What happens in their home is their private business."

The group focused on countering the "what happens in their home ... " frame, visualizing a picture of the same battered woman holding hands with neighbors, co-workers, a cleric and a police officer to illustrate that it is the responsibility of everyone in the community, as a team, to help stamp out the tragedy that is domestic violence.

After the exercise, it was emphasized that selection of targets depends on the longer term strategy of the organization as well as the organization's resources. Also emphasized was the importance of understanding the target audience – going much deeper than we could at the workshop – to learn how to reach and communicate with the target audience.

Media Outreach

In dealing with the media, participants were encouraged to become a content expert and a resource for reporters and invest time in educating the media. Although it has gotten much more difficult to establish long-term media relationships (given the cost-cutting at newspapers everywhere) participants were urged to be a student of media and do your homework. The presenters suggested sending emails to local media to help focus their attention on your newsworthy issues.

Media Tools

The list of media tools available to domestic service providers is more extensive than many realize. These include media advisories or alerts (quick, short messages), press releases (more in-depth), printable calendar lists, print and broadcast editorials (write these!), radio and TV talk show appearances, and public service announcements (PSAs). It is also important to monitor and follow up with the media.

Social Networking

Digital social networking has become one of the most popular and widely utilized media tools. Social networking could provide the ultimate opportunity to share information on any topic to mass audiences. It is rapidly becoming an important tool to build social movements. Popular social networks include YouTube, MySpace, LinkedIn and FaceBook. Seventy-five to eighty percent of the participants in the workshop had used YouTube, a prominent resource in getting a message out to large audiences on the Internet. Blogging was also described as a potentially effective tool, a way to put ideas out to share with a wider community including, perhaps, mainstream media. Blogging potentially reaches a whole new generation.

In addition to offering a place to post comments and videos to publicize your organization and its issues, social networking may also be an excellent way to gather data, find useful videos, and contact potential allies or partners (for fundraising, for example).

One important caveat about using the Internet was issued. Participants were advised that instead of rushing into these new media, it is critical that each organization revisit and update its own website. In reviewing the organization websites of conference participants, the presenter found links to news that directed the viewer to a 2004 press release, an events link promoting a 2006 event, and many links to other sites that generated error messages.

The presenters provided a few final rules for stakeholder and influencer outreach. (See attached PowerPoint slides)

Finally, the goal of strategic communications is to change attitudes. Tell the target audience about what they can do to solve the problem of domestic violence in their communities. A unified message and brand can generate broad changes, even a movement.