

THE PR ADVANCE!

How Public Relations Can Extend Your Ministry's Reach for the Sake of the Gospel

By Mark DeMoss



Mention public relations and nearly everyone immediately conjures up images of either a celebrity profile on *Larry King Live* or a nervous man in a suit holding a press conference to answer “allegations of wrongdoing.” However, most of us will probably never appear on *Larry King Live* or, hopefully, never face the cameras of *60 Minutes* as part of a “special two-part exposé.” Most of us will only occasionally deal with even local media.

On the other hand, every one of us is engaged in public relations daily. So what do we mean by public relations?

Public relations is the communication of who we are. It involves our message, our image, our reputation, our credibility. It includes how we treat our employees and our neighbors, how we answer the phones, and how efficiently we return phone calls. It encompasses our printed materials, broadcasts, websites, direct mail and ministry newsletters, and yes, our dealings with and presence in the media.

Where Have All the Ministries Been?

For decades, Christian ministries have invested countless millions of dollars to communicate with various audiences—through direct mail packages, newsletters, videos, radio and television airtime, advertising, websites and conferences of every imaginable kind. Yet, it's only been in recent years that many ministries have discovered what their secular nonprofit and for-profit counterparts have long known—that an investment in public relations can pay big dividends, and not just financially.

Corporate America has seen a trend of reallocating resources away from advertising and investing them in public relations—corporate identity, employee relations, community relations, internal communications, crisis communications,

advocacy, media relations and publicity, all with the goal of influencing audiences important to their corporate missions.

Many of the most successful brands in America—Starbucks, Wal-Mart, Oracle, Cisco, Yahoo!, Amazon.com—were built with public relations, not advertising. The same can be said of some of the largest nonprofit organizations, like Habitat for Humanity and The Salvation Army.

Then why have so many in the Christian ministry world been slow—or even loathe—to take a more aggressive, strategic approach to public relations? Some, operating under an incomplete understanding of the term, question the appropriateness of a Christian organization engaging in it. Others fear the media and perceive its purposes to be precisely at odds with ours as proclaimers of the Good News.

Let's look at six simple public relations principles that can help any ministry.

We're All in the PR Business

First, for those who think the job of public relations falls to some department, staff member or consultant, I've got news for you. We're all in the public relations business, whether we realize it or not. Either you're practicing it well, or you're practicing it poorly. Some are being strategic about public relations, while others approach it haphazardly, but you *are* in PR if you're involved in presenting the Gospel of Christ.

Consider how much of what we do depends on effective communication: raising funds; recruiting and retaining staff and volunteers; opening doors to radio and TV stations, prisons and country borders; encouraging people to come to meetings, conferences, crusades, and so on.

Of course, public relations alone can't raise all the money you need; it can't salvage poor registration numbers, or revive

sagging book sales. But it *can* help, if it's part of a coordinated communications program. For example, one ministry has grown 20-fold in the past decade, without a radio or television broadcast or any fundraising consultants.

All Media Are Not Your Enemy

Ministries tend to have a general aversion to secular media, though this need not be the case. The media can be, and has been, a tremendous vehicle for projecting our message to millions of people in a cost-effective way. How does *free* sound?—just ask Billy Graham.

Speaking to the American Society of Newspaper Editors in 1994, he said, "I owe a great deal to the print media. Over more than 50 years of working together with you and your electronic colleagues, you've always been generous and fair in your reporting of me. My ministry would never have developed as it has without the coverage you have given us and I want to thank you."

Indeed, many ministries have learned the value of courting and using "earned"—as opposed to bought—media and have consequently presented the Gospel and a Christian worldview to audiences they could never afford to reach otherwise.

News Makes News

We're often asked, "How can we get on *Larry King Live* or the *TODAY* Show? What's the secret?" Well here's the secret—*news makes news!* That's it. You must have something newsworthy if you want to make news; ministries have too often believed the positive nature of their work *entitles* them to media coverage.

That said, we must also accept that media decide what's newsworthy. In other words, they write the rules. (How else can you explain the *Wall Street Journal* placing a story about President Bush's pick to head the CIA on page four, while the front page carried a story about the organist at Dodger Stadium getting reduced playing time?)

We must learn to play by media's rules; those who have learned how to do so have benefited immensely. Learn what makes news and figure out how to contribute to the dissemination and analysis of news, whether in your com-

Recommended Reading on Public Relations, Branding and Communications

1. *Thinking for a Living* by Joey Reiman (Longstreet Press)
2. *The Fall of Advertising and the Rise of PR* by Al & Laura Ries (Harper Business)
3. *New Brand World* by Scott Bedbury (Penguin Books)
4. *The Most Effective Organization in the U.S.: Leadership Secrets of the Salvation Army* by Robert Watson and Ben Brown (Crown Business)
5. *The Invisible Touch* by Harry Beckwith (Warner Books)

munity or nationally.

Under-Promise, Over-Deliver

You'll *never* go wrong practicing this philosophy of public relations. When you under-promise and over-deliver, it's impossible to fail and you'll only enhance your credibility. Exaggeration and embellishment have no rightful place in ministry. If you had 4,000 people in attendance at your meeting, just say so; resist the temptation to "round up" to 5,000.

I once observed several ministry leaders huddled backstage at a large rally in Washington, D.C., challenging an attendance figure given by CNN and rather randomly suggesting an alternate number to announce to the crowd. Unfortunately, one of the leaders was wearing a live network microphone.

Promise Keepers represents a more positive example, refusing to even offer a number for what was reportedly one of the largest gatherings ever in the nation's capital—*Stand in the Gap* (1997). This garnered tremendous goodwill and credibility with many of the world's leading media organizations.

Coordinate, Don't Compartmentalize

If those of us in the "business of ministry" are really in the communications business, we can't afford to isolate communications as a department unto itself. More often than not, ministries compart-

mentalize functions like fund development, marketing, publications, broadcasting, correspondence, human relations and media relations. All too often, one department doesn't know what another is doing.

The problem here is that all these departments are ultimately public relations functions. They all impact your brand, image, reputation, and loyalty of your constituents and supporters. More importantly, they influence what people think about the message and the Christ we represent. Unfortunately, the ministry that successfully coordinates all these functions is the exception today.

Don't Forget Your Employees

Many ministries would argue that they simply don't have the resources for an adequate—or *any*—public relations staff. However, I submit that your public relations staff is as big as your payroll. Every employee is in fact an important part of your public relations staff. I applaud Christian Management Association, Best Christian Workplaces Institute and *Christianity Today* for their efforts to recognize the "Best Christian Places to Work," because it places deserved importance on employees and valuing them above all else.

Think about the reach and impact—positively and negatively—of employees on your organization's image. They know the organization best and either like or don't like working there. They have

spouses and families they talk to, and they talk to your constituents. A communications director or vice president of PR can't possibly cover that many bases.

For the Sake of the Gospel

Understanding the role of public relations in ministry may be a relatively new concept, but it should *not* be overlooked. A transition to a well-thought-

out public relations strategy will take time and effort, but the results will be well worth the investment.

By developing and implementing a strategic approach to public relations, ministries can become more effective in extending their reach and, ultimately, the reach of the Gospel.

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