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How to Receive Positive Representation in the Media: An Advisory for a Local Charity Caring for the Elderly

Executive Summary

The way the media present persons, organizations, places, and events should never be seen as truly objective reflections of reality—it should rather be perceived as constructs, acts of volition, never neutral, always more or less biased, ever influenced by a range of variables.

Media representations of groups or categories of people sometimes tend to be overly simplistic, or stereotypic. Fortunately, the old problem of stereotyping of the elderly is seen to be somewhat on retreat in the media. However, recent shock advertising campaigns by charities involved in caring for the elderly, attempting to command the attention of potential donors, could cast an unfavorable light on the whole sector and might threaten to refuel ageism in the media.

Faced with such a scenario, the charity for which this report has been prepared needs to strengthen its capacity to deal effectively with the media, which will necessitate the establishment of a permanent media relations program. Based on values that will counter the negative effects of recent shock advertising, such a program will include:

- A clear definition of organizational values—e.g. service, dignity, high ethical standards;
- Perpetual training of all employees for motivation and to build organizational culture;
- The appointment of one or more media spokespersons;
- The development of a core message to convey core values; and
- Proper media coaching of those who will be charged with a spokesperson role.

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1.0 Introduction

This report aims to outline the ways in which representation works in the media—particularly with regard to how elderly people are represented—and to offer strategic advice on how to interact effectively with the media, with the purpose of ensuring sustainable success: generating a strong public image largely through good media coverage.

The context is that of a local voluntary organization specializing in caring for the elderly. The organization has lately been subjected to what's perceived as a potential threat to its vital funding in result of the advertising activities of other organizations involved within the same area of activity; those organizations have started using so-called shock tactics to attract public attention. While such campaigns may put people off, they could also jeopardize the good reputation of all charities involved in caring for elderly. Worse, the backlash could, arguably, fuel renewed growth in ageism, the practice of stereotyping elderly people.

Literature dealing with media representation—the way in which the media re-present or construct their own versions of reality—and problems related to such representation, including stereotyping, has been researched for the purpose of this report. Research has also been conducted into literature dealing with media relations—the public relations specialism concerned with building strong relationships with the media—as well as media management, which emphasizes a more direct and technical approach to dealing with the media.

The research is used as a basis for a strategic plan included in the report—offering indications of appropriate and practical objectives while discussing plausible ways by which to receive positive media representation.

2.0 Media Representation

Any attempt to reflect the reality of persons, processes, or situations is inherently bound by a range of physical and human limitations: in spite of conveying the idea of merely reflecting aspects of reality, what is presented through the media is, by selection of subject as well as by the process of production, a constructed version of reality—a representation (Branston and Stafford 2006; Haase-Reed et al. 2007).

Media representation in arts, entertainment, literature, news, and advertising is exemplified in the use of so-called 'code' i.e. imagery and phrases consisting of repeated elements and 'signs' to signify categorization, meaning or intended interpretation—for instance, shaved head for *the unemployed*, luxury car for *the wealthy*, an old and sick person for *the elderly*, or children playing for a *thriving community* (Branston and Stafford 2006).

Such simplistic representations of reality create or reinforce 'stereotypes' which group people, or 'scripts' which frame processes and situations (Landman and Manis 1983, p. 88). Exaggerating single perceived characteristics to make them defining and emblematic, a stereotype is, according to Branston and Stafford, a "widely circulated idea or assumption about particular groups." (2006, p. 91)

Media representation, then, is problematic by and in itself: even with the highest of editorial standards and the most ethical and professional approach to media production, there will always be room for improvement.

2.1 Research and Debate

What seems to have given rise to a considerable body of research and debate devoted to media representation over the past few decades refers to the fact that large proportions of populations arguably presupposed to be fairly represented in the media have, nonetheless, been represented in overly simplistic ways or only very infrequently or not at all. In a number of countries including the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, this debate has highlighted the problem of stereotyping along e.g. racial and gender lines—and, as research related to gerontology clearly confirms, elderly people are no exception to the rule (Ramasubramanian and Oliver 2007; Dittmann 2003; Kears 2008; Woolf 1998).

2.2 Stereotyping by Consent?

A number of issues complicate the problem of representation and stereotyping: whether pertaining to business, art or literature, factors such as profession and tradition, history, genre, and the constraints of time and money, do justify and necessitate simplifications and classifications of stories and characters. Indeed, individuals and societies need short-hand references in order for their daily life to function (Branston and Stafford 2006).

The problem varies according to culture and genre—e.g. in fictional works such as crime series and thriller movies there are long-established stereotypes of black criminals, arguably reinforced in recent years with the rise of gangsta rap or other elements of hip-hop culture; likewise, comedy and satire shows often use ethnic stereotypes in jokes and as part of their main content, to the amusement of their audiences including such who belong to the groups stereotyped. In news and current affairs, on the other hand, stereotyping is generally not openly accepted in developed countries.

2.3 An Overlooked Group

In advertising, the problem of stereotyping is well-known. Warning against myths and stereotypes of women and the elderly, Lahlé Wolfe (2003), points out a significant fact: senior citizens are the fastest-growing population in the United States yet, strangely, marketers have tended to target younger age groups while ignoring seniors. “Several pioneers in the senior marketing industry note that age alone has little to do with the interests of senior consumers. Those who have attempted to cash in on the senior population, simply lumping retirees together by age, have failed, and miserably so.” (Wolfe 2008)

2.4 Representation of the Elderly

Calling for increased funding and legal intervention, Dittmann (2003) relates how geriatric psychologists seek to counteract negative age stereotypes found virtually everywhere in society, citing a report from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission with indications of sharply rising numbers of age-discrimination complaints.

2.5 Ageism

Compared to other forms of discrimination like sexism or racism, *ageism* is not a highly publicized form of discrimination although, arguably, most people will readily recognize its existence. The phenomenon can be defined as “the stereotyping of, prejudice against or discrimination against an individual due to his or her age.” (About Equal Opportunities 2008)

Webster University psychology professor Linda M. Woolf posits that “Ageism consists of a negative bias or stereotypic attitude toward aging and the aged. It is maintained in the form of primarily negative stereotypes and myths concerning the older adult.” (Woolf 1998) In Woolf’s assessment, ageism is a reflection of widespread prejudices against the elderly, characterized by two distinctive features: the continual nature of ageing, and the fact that every person is a potential victim inasmuch as no one can escape the process of ageing. “First, the individual may be ageist with respect to others. That is s/he may stereotype other people on the basis of age. Second, the individual may be ageist with respect to self. Thus, ageist attitudes may affect the self concept.” (Woolf 1998)

2.6 Progress?

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, publications such as *Time* magazine, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *New York Daily News* were accused of stereotyping old people (Hess 1991). But while references to age stereotyping abound, a quick glance at recent news headlines containing the phrase “old people” produces little visible proof of explicit ageism (Google 2008a); nonetheless, the phrase “elderly people” seems to offer fewer yet different replies with more stories about poverty and misery among the elderly (Google 2008b). Another, more subtle kind of stereotyping could still be thriving, as seen in the disproportionate distribution of age represented in the media relative to the population at large (Fish 2008). The overall impression, however, is that age stereotyping could be more or less on retreat, possibly in result of the dramatic growth of the elderly population in the United States and elsewhere.

3.0 Media Relations

Effective media relations is concerned with building strong relationships with the media, and includes managing the flow of information from an organization to its publics. Listing communication instinct and communication skills, conviction, quality of story, and preparedness as key success factors, Doorley and Garcia (2007) recommend a centralized media relations function, with specifically appointed spokespersons—news media are prone to look for bad news with journalists using persuasive techniques to extract information or quotes from their subjects; the risks associated with allowing every employee to discuss organizational matters with outsiders, particularly journalists, outweigh other considerations.

Without a clear message and a sense of conviction of the validity of that message, however, a spokesperson would be perceived as not very believable, which would reflect negatively in media coverage of the organization (Doorley and Garcia 2007).

3.1 Media Training

One of the fundamental elements of effective media management is clarity and having a well-defined core message (Stevens 2005; Stewart 2004). Above all when it comes to television, a core message is essential: people will only remember very little from a TV interview but by frequently rephrasing a core message, a spokesperson will make it easier for audiences to remember what was said (Stevens 2005). Additionally, there are a number of issues to bear in mind for those interviewed, such as displaying good demeanor, appearing professional and trustworthy, dressing appropriately, mindful of body language and tone of voice. Being well prepared implies being sufficiently knowledgeable on subjects of basic relevance for the organization as well as having rehearsed its story and core message, being mentally and physically fit, and also being acquainted with the medium in question and knowing about its audiences. Understanding journalists, what they want and why, is another vital requirement (Stewart 2004).

4.0 Strategic Plan

Strategies and tactics used by media relations and media coaching professionals can be appropriate to employ, not only for those on the receiving end of misrepresentation in the media but for every organization, particularly those financially dependent on the good will of constituencies primarily communicated with through the media.

4.1 Shunning Shock Tactics

Shock advertising campaigns for charities have tended to put people off as essentially distasteful and unethical rather than making them feel urged to donate and are, therefore, a source of potential danger inasmuch as strategic publics may generically associate all charities caring for the elderly with such tactics including any range of implications. Engaging in anything that could reinforce such effects should therefore be strictly avoided.

4.2 Definition of Values

As an antidote to likely impressions of e.g. intrusiveness, disrespect, or irresponsibility generated from shock advertising, discreet but decisive ways of dissociating the organization from such tactics should be pursued, placing emphasis on dignity, respect, appreciation, high ethical standards, and values that can serve to counter age stereotypes. This should be part of a communication strategy that aims for positioning this charity as an organization that honors and serves those in its care and, by extension, shows consideration for all other human beings, not least its employees and those who help fund it.

4.3 Training and Internal Communication

To make sure all employees understand and appreciate the values the organization wishes to be associated with, a training program should be developed with regular recurrences and updates. Internal training and communication should be managed according to employee relations best practices, aiming to build organizational culture, ethics,

quality of service, and workforce motivation, and to help employees develop their professional and interpersonal skills on an ongoing basis (Cutlip et al. 2006).

4.4 Spokespersons

For the purpose of consistency and clarity, as well as security, only specifically appointed spokesperson/s should be allowed to discuss the organization's policies and decisions with outsiders, especially journalists (Doorley and Garcia, 2007). Top management and any other personnel taking the role of spokesperson should complete a media training course, which should be seen as a part of the organization's permanent media relations program (Stevens 2005, Stewart 2004).

4.5 Core Message

The media relations program should include the immediate and perpetual development of a core message that clearly sets the charity apart from other similar organizations (Doorley and Garcia 2007, Stevens 2005, Stewart 2004). The core message identifies the charity's "single most important idea" (Stevens 2005, p. 12); it should be simple, memorable, relevant, easy to understand, and convenient for the spokesperson to convey in spoken and written language. Importantly, it should induce a neutralizing effect against ageism.

4.6 Press Kit

An attractive, simple and informative press kit should be produced to make sure basic information, in line with defined values and core message, is readily available both online and on paper; it's important, however, to avoid filling it with lengthy and tiresome information (Stevens 2005, Stewart 2004).

4.7 News

The outcome of spokesperson training should include an understanding of how journalists think and how to take their deadlines into consideration, how to handle media inquiries and how to assess what constitutes newsworthy information for the various media outlets—for instance, a local newspaper will typically emphasize community aspects whereas a special-interest magazine will align to the interests of its specific readership profile. Planning newsworthy events as well as identifying newsworthy information should be an integral part of the media relations program. However, one pitfall to avoid is the temptation to pitch the media with stories that will not qualify as newsworthy, easily undermining vital relationships if carried to excess—those in charge of media relations need to have a good grasp of the nature of news (Doorley and Garcia, Stevens 2005, Stewart 2004).

4.8 Advertising

In some cases, e.g. when there is important yet non-newsworthy information that needs to be communicated, advertising will be a preferable way of delivering the message. Advertising is costly and so has to be carefully budgeted but has the advantage of giving the advertiser full control of what is being said, when, and how.

5.0 Conclusions

Media representation is about the way people, processes, and situations are depicted and framed in the media. On the whole, the importance of being aware of conditions that influence the production and presentation of such constructs, which seek to give the illusion of reflecting uncontested reality through communication, can hardly be overestimated. Without that awareness—and the ability to respond appropriately to related challenges—an organization will be exposed to otherwise avoidable dangers to reputation.

The study of media representation, in particular how elderly people are represented, reveals that organizations caring for the elderly, such as the present charity, should make every effort to be well prepared to engage with the news media at any time. Potentially harmful situations can easily occur at any point, requiring full capability of dealing professionally with journalists—which effectively also means having a dedicated media relations program in place for long-term management of media contacts.

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