

To Hand on the Message : The Role of Medias

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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.

Coalition context

Founded in the aftermath of the Montréal Massacre on December 6, 1989 where 14 young women were shot, the Coalition for Gun Control is the only national organization aimed at reducing firearm injuries, death and crimes in Canada. The Coalition is composed of 350 member organizations, representing several fields, including police, victims, woman's groups, municipalities, unions, health care, etc.

We are recognized for the adoption of two federal laws, Bill C-17 (1991) which was the first step in the right direction, and the Firearms Act (1995). The key elements of the Coalition's position were then adopted. We are currently working at implementing the new law, researching and educating, finding measures to reduce the illicit traffic of firearms as well as protecting the laws against the attacks of the gun lobby.

One of the characteristics of our Coalition is the broad diversity of its members, as much as their fields of expertise, their regional and linguistic realities. Often our cause is one of the few elements that bring these diverse groups together. While this diversity brings many challenges, it is at the root of our communication strategies. Since the beginning, we use the strategy "one message, many voices".

One key aspect of the Coalition is our well-defined position that is used as a reference point on our public venues, particularly in the media.

The persistence of myths and prejudices/sexual stereotypes

Since the beginning, the Coalition's president and director (both women) faced the challenge that gun control experts were someone who used guns. During the public hearings on Bill C-80 (1990) 7 of the 9 members of Parliament sitting on the Committee were gun owners and the Liberal M.P., Robert Nault, had objected to the participation of the Status of Woman critic, Dawn Black, (NDP) "because she didn't know anything about guns." We have come a long way to sensitize elected officials and the population that gun control was actually a question of public safety.

Nonetheless, the point of view of the front line that sees the daily consequences of firearms misuse is often put aside by journalists for the point of view of so called "gun experts". Moreover, too often women working toward better gun control are categorized as gun foes or/and man haters.

Media and public opinion

Unfortunately, public opinion does not transform a cause into a reality on its own. Media may help to shape and reflect the opinion of the public. The publicity given by the media has helped considerably to legitimize our position, particularly for Members of Parliament who tend to see the media as a reflection of citizen's opinion.

What Makes the News?

We have learned over time that facts have a minor importance in comparison to the way the message is presented. A lot of publicity is given to incidents. This provides an opportunity to attract media's attention.

It is therefore critical to react quickly to events and to have ready:

- 1) Pertinent information that is accurate, complete and available;
- 2) Spokesperson well-informed and ready to react;
- 3) Updated media list or contact journalists.

The timing and the packaging are critical. By packaging we mean marketing the issue, i.e., the factual tone, the clarity of the discourse, simplicity and proper layout, etc. We must start from the premise that journalists do not know anything about our position therefore we must provide them all of the background information in one clear, concise and easy to read document where he or she may find all the relevant information. The same premise is valid for spokespeople. The reality of partnership is that spokespeople are not always well aware of recent developments and must be able to acquaint themselves quickly on important issues.

Once again, the Coalition's strategy to respond to journalist's request is to adapt to the context. For example, following a domestic gun homicide, the Coalition's voice will be contextualized through the voice of a domestic violence expert; following an illicit trafficking incident, the Coalition's voice will be a police officer.

We also opt for a rational approach in our media relations. While emotion may make the news, it may also diminish the strength of our message. Often being able to laugh at a situation is more efficient than to be angry.

Methods used to create a context and make the news

- 1) Issuing a Coalition press release (balance of spokespeople: representing woman's groups, police officers, public health, victims; regional and linguistic diversity).
- 2) Coordinating a strategy where several Coalition member organizations issue press releases at different intervals to create a context,
- 3) Passing information to some journalists (for your information, contact us if you would like to discuss this further).
- 4) Press conferences/media briefing.

If we do not attract the attention of the media in the first attempt, it is always possible to make our voice heard at a later time, generally through letters to the Editors or by convincing journalists to follow up on an issue. The Coalition excels at recycling and reusing the same information until it is published.

A lesson well learned is that issues are never over and they frequently come back. Therefore all the preparation work of background information and sensitization contributes to a prompt response when an issue reemerges.

The media infrastructure also brings its own challenges and understanding it helps to adapt your focus. We have realized that the media monopoly affects the way the facts are brought to the public's attention. For example, we can rarely hope that a good outcome will come from newspapers purported to offer a "right wing" perspective. We have also noticed that journalists have somewhat lost interest for our cause given that after twelve years it is perceived as a "done deal". Finally, journalists receive numerous press releases and the competition is high to attract the appropriate attention.

The case for partnership or how to excel at the art of making everything possible

At the base, the terms of engagement of partnerships requires clear and precise goals and well-defined strategic directions, long and short-term.

Partnership, particularly in media relations, brings its own challenges:

- 1) Running out of breath and motivating your supporters. Among partners (for example Municipalities and Women's Groups) running out of breath can be explained by
 - the fact that they have worked on the cause for 12 years;
 - that gun control is one issue among many others in their workload;
 - that there are many staff movements, retirements, etc.

This running out of breath may also be felt in the population. If I were to address a room full of gun owners, and were to ask them how many have written letters to the Editors with regard to the Firearms Act, I would expect to see the majority of hands in the air. Nonetheless, they are a minority but vocal group. To mobilize the majority to react in the media to the gun lobby claims is a lot more difficult. Most people agree with the cause but do not take the time to respond or react.

- 2) To disseminate information to partners is an ongoing challenge. *E-mail* makes it somewhat easier but it remains highly difficult to update all supporters on all issues that they may have an interest.
- 3) The homogeneity of the discourse: even though we want to have diverse views and ways of perceiving issues among the partners we must ensure that there are no contradictions among them, particularly in the media.
- 4) As for the decisional process, a structure must be elaborated so that communication strategies are clear and based on facts. Last year, for example, we had the legislative

amendments. No partners were interested in reading the 130 pages of legislative text. It was therefore important to have designated people in charge of elaborating the Coalition's position and that they had the confidence of the partners.

Recommendations

It is recommended:

- 1) To segment the market:
 - knowing the hot spot among partners, journalists, public and partners;
 - taking into consideration everyone's values;
 - tracking.
- 2) To define the limits between the extent of your action and loss of control.
- 3) To remember that tactics help but relationships are key.
- 4) To understand the competition in order to predict their strategies.
- 5) To align to "less likely allies" – in our case hunters, target shooters, sport journalists.

In the broader context of partner's working to increase woman's safety, in order to facilitate our work, I would like to see the development of two tools:

- 1) Media contact list periodically updated, available to organizations working to increase women's safety.
- 2) The accessibility via website of background facts on women's safety that would be updated and available for journalists' consultation. It would be critical that the journalists are aware of the existence of this tool.