



NGOs Manage the Informational Ecosystem

Tell Your Story Through Smart PR

By Lydia Graham

The desire to change the world has never been the most practical of ambitions. Most activists - even the most driven and idealistic - have at some point wondered how they can ever compete with the resources or influence available to such seemingly immovable objects as big business, government or so-called "intergovernmental bodies" like the United Nations. Fortunately, the enormity of the task has never prevented citizen action from taking place. From the Red Cross in the nineteenth century, through the protest movements of the sixties, all the way to the formation of tax-paying non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) today, people continue to commit themselves to causes they don't feel are being adequately addressed. Indeed, the number of non-governmental organizations has only increased over the years. According to the Yearbook of National Organizations, the number of international NGOs in 1909 was 176. By 1996 the United States alone had two million.

What caused this surge in NGOs? In his article, "Action on the Front Lines," Curtis Runyon, of *World Watch*, a non-profit public policy research organization, posits that the reasons are emotional, political and technological. First, many people have, over time, learned to distrust their politicians and businessmen to precipitate change. Whether witnessing governmental failure to stop clear-cutting or corporate apathy toward safety measures on pollutants, people worldwide have concluded that they will accomplish more by taking matters into their own hands. A second reason for the proliferation of NGOs has been the spread of democracy, which came out of the end of the Cold War. With fewer repressive regimes, more people have found themselves freer to try to improve their quality of life without fear of recrimination. Finally, advances in technology, particularly, the Internet, have made it easier than ever to communicate with large groups of people and rally support for a cause.

While this surge in the numbers of NGO's bodes well for the planet as a whole, it also poses problems for individual groups. More groups mean more competition: for resources, attention, and support. So what can these organizations do? The answer is that they must modernize their outreach efforts. In a sense, they have been doing so all along. Compare the relatively scatter-shot protests of the sixties with its marches, consumer boycotts and sit-ins to the more personalized strategies of the eighties, with door-to-door solicitations, letter-writing campaigns, and sophisticated recruiting techniques. Today, activism enjoys a considerably more mainstream existence, with budgets, paid staff, and advertising. Still, many NGO's struggle to stay solvent and vital while often overlooking a strategy not usually associated with activism: public relations.

PR 101

It's not that NGO's aren't aware of the power of the media. Most activists understand perfectly that a newspaper article or TV or radio broadcast reaches a wider audience than even their email newsletters can. But few NGO's devote more than cursory attention to PR. This seems like an oversight, because getting media attention – the ultimate goal of PR – offers more advantages than many NGO's may have considered.

The most fundamental way the media can help is through raising awareness. Getting your cause or group in the news generates interest in, and understanding of, an NGO and its activities. Even when the media choose not to cover one's group, solid public relations can keep reporters up-to-date on an NGO's most recent activities. That way, when a story breaks that might involve an NGO, the media already have the information and contacts they need. This type of 'time-release' exposure worked well recently for Save The Children, a children's relief and development organization located in Connecticut. While the organization had been involved with helping refugee children in Afghanistan since 1985, and dutifully alerting the media of its activities, only sporadic "hits" – mentions in the media – were notched. "And those weren't full-fledged stories," notes Colleen Barton, Senior Manager of Media and Communication for Save the Children. "We were told that people just didn't care. Many didn't even know where Afghanistan was." But the organization kept at it, not only setting up relief efforts for drought victims and being the first group to provide Afghan children with a playground, but, just as importantly, keeping reporters in the loop. After September 11, of course, things changed. Suddenly the group garnered a tremendous amount of press, including mentions on MSNBC, in *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Los Angeles Times*, all of whom wanted reaction from a group already known to be deeply involved in Afghanistan. Cumulatively and over time, "we had gained some credibility," notes Barton, and the media remembered.

Occasionally PR can help bring about even more dramatic effects, as when it affects a change in public policy. A coalition led by San-Francisco-based Rain Forest Action Network's campaign to stop Home Depot's sale of old-growth wood offers a startling case in point. In October of 1998, the coalition began a series of protests at Home Depot stores across the United States in order to draw attention to the fact that the home improvement giant refused to stop selling wood taken from the planet's last remaining old growth forests. Home Depot's products included Amazon mahogany, lauan plywood from Southeast Asia and 2,000-year-old California redwoods. Protesters demonstrated, participated in non-violent civil disobediences, and even performed street theatre. The RAN-led coalition also timed its press releases carefully: enough time for the media to cover the events, but not enough for Home Depot to counter them effectively. And the media took notice. "Hits" included mentions in the Associated Press, CNN, and *Time* magazine, all of which eventually pushed Home Depot to change its policy on wood sourcing. "With Home Depot taking the lead in phasing out old growth wood products, we expect other do-it-yourself retailers will follow suit," said Michael Brune, RAN's Old Growth Campaign director. Indeed such stores as Payless and 84 Lumber are beginning to follow Home Depot's example.

A third, unexpected way media attention can help is in protection. Earlier this year, one of our environmental clients decided to intervene against the illegal poaching of marine life in the Galapagos National Park. It was a dangerous mission. Poachers stand to make nearly as much money from sharks and spiny lobsters as drug traffickers do from cocaine and marijuana. The possibility of violence was real. At one point, the activists caught several poachers red-handed with sharks they had just pulled in and "fined" for shark fin soup, a delicacy in China. (Finning involves the particularly cruel practice of cutting off a shark's fins and throwing it back into the

water in order to save space on the boat). Upon seeing the activists, the poachers pulled out knives. The activists pulled out cameras. Violence was averted.

If a Tree is Felled in the Forest and No-one Hears it, Does it Make a Sound?

In the real world, this age-old philosophical question - slightly updated – has a very definite answer: no. Until people actually *care* they often do not *hear*. Activists, then, must find effective ways to make people “hear.” Like it or not, in this age, acting nobly is not enough. One must also call attention to one’s actions.

A story remains one of the most powerful ways to accomplish this goal. A great story, whether in a movie, newspaper article, or even a press release, engages the reader or viewer on an emotional level, putting them in the thick of the events, making them feel what the people in the story feel. Right or wrong, stories trump other forms of communication. A film like “The Thin Blue Line,” about a death-row inmate’s dubious conviction for murder or “The Insider,” about the tobacco industry’s manipulation of facts about cigarettes simply pack a far bigger punch than an NGO involved in Human Rights or anti-smoking. As a species, we are simply hardwired to respond to story on a deeper level.

It is this opportunity for powerful, memorable storytelling that public relations can maximize. Certainly storytellers can work alone, but not as effectively as with the help of an editor, an agent, or a publisher. A good public relations effort can act as editor by providing an impartial set of eyes to look at a press release or other materials; as agent by providing access to the media; and even as publisher by actually delivering the message to an audience.

Informational Ecosystem

The special wisdom of activists, it seems to me, has always been their understanding of “the bigger picture,” of how living organisms do not live in a vacuum, but work in concert to form a unitary whole. It seems ironic, then that so few activists apply the same ideology of interconnectedness to their own well being as organizations. Whether they know it or not, NGO’s, too, are subject to Darwin’s “survival of the fittest” doctrine. Whether they know it or not, they are part of an informational ecosystem, where news moves through various entities just as nutrients move systematically up the food chain. Story is the most basic of these nutrients. By utilizing the power of story, activists can not only further their causes, but help ensure their own survival.

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