

Face-to-Face

It's the only way to make a real impact.

BY LARRY D. LAUER

Ads, brochures, newspaper stories, and special events are all ingredients in getting your message across. But you'll harness the real power of communication only when people all over town start talking. And you can orchestrate this kind of impact only through a face-to-face program.

Do People Read Anymore?

Most researchers say no. Overloaded with information, we constantly put aside our reading "for later." We often mean it literally when we say we "looked at" the newspaper. Even when we pick up our favorite magazine, we're more likely to skim it than read it word for word.

Ironically, as media messages become more sophisticated, we read them less. That's why researchers urge face-to-face communication.

Send Messages or Build Relationships?

Your objective should not be to send messages but to change behavior. The only way to change behavior is to build relationships.

How many times have you sent out new materials and then sat back to wait for results? You probably got some responses, but the perception of a major initiative never took hold. What was missing was word of mouth, pure and simple.

How Can You Meet Your Audiences Face-to-Face?

It seems overwhelming at first. How in the world can you talk face-to-face with all your audiences? It takes organization, to be sure, but it's no more complicated than other projects you undertake. Here are the steps:

1. Identify your publics. List your most important publics, and describe their characteristics and locations. Include both internal and external publics. (Your publics—also called audiences or stakeholders—are the people who control your organization's future. External publics include current and prospective funders, donors, clients, government officials, and vendors. Internal publics include your board, staff, and volunteers.)

Now put your audiences in priority order. Your word-of-mouth campaign will focus on the top two or three. The more critical the audience, the more intense and personal your tactics should be.

2. Name the opinion leaders. Within your top two or three publics, pinpoint people who influence other people. Don't just list company presidents and politicians. Search the mass media for news makers—those who inspire others to act.

A staff member once challenged the rest of us, "I bet if we identified the 200 most influential people in town, we could visit them all in a reasonable period of time. Through them, we could start the whole town talking about us." That's the objective, and it's a realistic one.

3. Train staff. You'll want to involve your best staff as face-to-face ambassadors. It's a wonderful way to include board members and other key volunteers. They'll be making calls and visiting groups, but it isn't a fundraising solicitation, at least not this time!

Your training session should be simple and inspiring. First, describe the messages you want your ambassadors to disseminate. Then, ask each person to choose opinion leaders to visit. Next, explain their visit objectives:

- to describe your organization's vision
- to explain that the organization is revitalizing its service to the community
- to ask the opinion leaders to take an active, word-of-mouth role in spreading the word.

4. Arrange face-to-face meetings.

You will build your campaign mostly around one-on-one personal calls. But don't overlook opportunities to speak to groups. Presidents of organizations may let you talk to groups of employees. People may ask you to speak to their civic clubs. As your program develops, it will combine personal visits with speaking requests.

5. Follow through. Your first meeting with an opinion leader merely unlocks the door. To open it, you must continue to meet. The secret is to make the program ongoing and personal.

One way to build follow-through into your program is to create a special "insider's group" of key opinion makers. Give this group a name, and arrange for it to meet periodically. For example, a museum formed an "ambassador's group" which previews new exhibits and then spreads the word to the rest of the community.

Your word-of-mouth crusade can serve as a springboard for a fundrais-

ing campaign. During your second meeting with opinion leaders, ask them how they rate your organization's effectiveness. This interview amounts to a fundraising feasibility study. During your third call, you can ask for donations. Your next visit starts the information-giving cycle over again.

Do You Have Enough Staff?

Sounds great, you may be thinking, but do I have the staff to coordinate all this? When you take a hard look at your business plan, you may decide that a face-to-face program is the most effective use of staff time. Your brochures, press releases, and low-impact events may now seem much less important. If you make your face-to-face program a priority, you *do* have enough staff.

How One Nonprofit Did It

Texas Christian University (TCU) faced a crisis when four members of the Southwest Football Conference announced they were leaving. This might mean the end of football at TCU.

The board chair acted quickly to avert such a disaster. He formed a group of community leaders called "the committee of 100." Using the one-on-one approach, they visited others with the message that "TCU wants to be your home team."

How to Organize a Face-to-Face Program

- 1 Identify your top two or three key audiences. Understand that the others will receive less attention.
- 2 In each of those top audiences, identify the key opinion leaders. Scan the newspaper for the names of people who are currently influencing others.
- 3 Train staff (both paid and volunteer) as ambassadors who will visit the opinion leaders. Recruit new volunteers if necessary. Include key board members.
- 4 Have your ambassadors call on the opinion leaders. They should continue these visits regularly, varying the purpose of each visit. For instance:
 - **Visit 1.** Tell the opinion leaders about the organization.
 - **Visit 2.** Interview them about how they view the organization and its image.
 - **Visit 3.** Ask for support.
 - **Visit 4.** Repeat the cycle by once again giving information, updating the opinion leaders on what your organization has been doing.
- 5 Between personal calls, send key communications materials directly to the opinion leaders.

What's missing in most campaigns is word of mouth.

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The results were remarkable. Football attendance soared. The game attendance increase was one of the largest in the nation.

The essential ingredient in this success was an organized word-of-mouth campaign to involve the whole community. The feeling of renewal was a direct consequence of "the talk." TCU is now using the face-to-face approach in all its marketing efforts.

How Important Is Management?

This kind of program does not work with old-style bureaucratic leadership. Managers who have grown isolated from their staff and constituents cannot generate the dynamics for word-of-mouth programs. If your office is on the top floor and your idea of a good day is to stay in it, this kind of communication will not work for you.

What nonprofits need from their leaders has changed. Today's executives must be out front and hands on. They must actively explain goals and stand as visible symbols of the organization. Only this kind of leadership can create a word-of-mouth program that gets the community talking. ■

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QModern PRO communications software, Dustin Discount Software, 21010 Superior Street, Chatsworth, California 91311 (phone 800-274-6611; fax 818-772-7790).