

excerpt from MEDIA 101: Raising Public Awareness of Literacy

by Maija Saari

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“What’s new about literacy?”

■ Any journalist asking you that question is highlighting an important principle of news gathering. News is about change — we expect our media to tell us what’s new or different from our daily routines. News is what perks up our ears, the first words off a friend’s lips when asked what’s new. As such, a friendly reporter that takes you up on your offer to write a story about literacy is merely doing what reporters do best — digging around for that kernel of information that gives her a reason to write.

More often than not, the changes reported as news are negative. It’s a reality that walking to work daily without incident isn’t news. Neither is the smooth operation of your organization. One day, a car strikes a pedestrian, causing minor injuries but stopping rush hour traffic for 30 minutes. Suddenly, articles about pedestrian safety, the overuse of vehicles, staffing of police, even heroic paramedics could show up in the media, hinging on that one accident.

Therein lies the challenge to any non-profit organization that seeks to raise its community profile through the mainstream media. The benefits of a news article are obvious — publicity, editorial legitimacy over placing an advertisement, and wide circulation at no cost. The reporter comes to you, does a story, and the rest is history.

It may seem you have little control over when and how literacy issues appear. Negative issues may seem to be sensationalized or overemphasized, while alternate viewpoints or happy events don’t seem to attract reporters to cover them. This doesn’t have to be the case.

Consider the media as only one mode of transportation on your journey from the boardroom to the public sphere. Relying on the media for all of your public relations is a little like standing on the

side of the Trans-Canada Highway with your thumb up — there is no guarantee your ride will be going your way, if anyone stops at all.

Rather, imagine how you and your organization would reach a destination under your own steam. Imagine yourselves as the drivers of the bus, not the passengers waiting to hitch a ride. Create a journey intended to realize an explicit vision central to your mission. Start down the road yourselves, but stop along the way to let the curious find out more and maybe even get on your bus. As you progress and move closer to your goal, you’ll generate true change in your community. Generating change creates news. If you build it, the media will come.

...This sort of project takes a lot of vision, cooperation and plain hard work. But it also offers opportunities to engage directly with many more people who would normally not be open to your traditional messages... As you all work together, the missions and goals of your organization are communicated directly, potentially building your volunteer, client, or any other target base to your core programs.

...The key here is that you’re the one driving the bus — you’ve generated a sincere and legitimate purpose that helps you, helps your mission and helps your community. The media will come, but so will a new group of individuals. The mutual relationships you build will strengthen your community and your organization.

What a success story! I can’t wait to read about it in the paper. ■

MAIJA SAARI, B.A., B.Ed., M.A., is program coordinator of the journalism program at Wilfrid Laurier University’s Brantford Campus. To read the complete article, go to www.on.literacy.ca/newslet/dec04/dec04.pdf.