

Taking the Message to Your Community

Strategies to help churches communicate effectively in today's world

BY BARRIE DOYLE, APR



Our challenge is to define the church in the marketplace

The Apostle Paul was one of the first strategic-thinking public-relations practitioners. He knew how to deliver his message. He understood that to reach Athens—and therefore other parts of the world—with the Gospel, he had to communicate with a skeptical, unknowing, yet influential audience. He used the media vehicle of his day—public speaking—to engage that audience in a provocative way (see Acts 17).

Today's church needs to adopt 'Acts 17 thinking' in delivering its message: Jesus Christ is the same today, yesterday and forever, and God's redemptive plan is just as valid and available today as it was 2,000 years ago. But communications

methods and tools change.

No longer can we remain in our comfortable pews and pulpits, expecting our target audiences to

come in and listen. We must use media outlets the public respects.

Society is media-influenced and its attitudes are shaped by the evening news and monologues of late-night comedians. Special-interest groups, lobbyists and coalitions have learned to package their message for the media, persist in their attempts, are not discouraged if some don't accept their message and they celebrate those who do. The church must do likewise.

The Challenge

It's all about public relations (PR), though some in the church quiver at this idea. To them, it smacks of puffery and publicity, more akin to Hollywood than the cross. But PR is shaping perceptions,



MAKE YOUR STORY NEWSWORTHY

If a church is to penetrate the media with news, it must recognize the media's perspective. Here are 10 characteristics that make stories newsworthy. Use them as a filter and ask yourself how many of these aspects are embodied in your story. The more there are, the better the coverage.

- **It's news when it is new.** Look for a fresh angle, something that's a first.
- **Find an unusual aspect.** What makes this different from anything else the media have covered?
- **Names make news**—the more well-known the name, the better. This can be individual or corporate.
- **Your news item affects many.** A city-wide event affects more than a church-wide event.
- **The news item will happen in the future.** People are always curious about upcoming events.
- **Conflict makes news.** Any issue that creates discord will involve a news aspect. Sports events also fall into this category. Don't be surprised, therefore, when inter-church conflict hits the media radar.
- **Confidential information makes news.** Don't be surprised when the media get hold of it.
- **News often involves mystery.** Most crimes fall into this category, but you can have fun with this by creating other kinds of mystery.
- **Children and youth are special** news characteristics. Any item or event involving children is bound to attract media interests.
- **Romance makes news.** Is a particularly effective Marriage Encounter session running in your church?



Moving into the societal stream opens the church to increased scrutiny

redefining image and creating positive reactions to Christians and our message, as well as to a specific church and its actions.

Our challenge is to define the church in the marketplace. PR adds depth and breadth to ongoing communication efforts. It provides a broader audience than our community outreach events. It engages other minds than those within the sound of the pastor's sermon.

A key aspect of any PR program is to develop a strategic, effective, ongoing relationship with major media outlets in the community—regardless of whether they agree with the message. The media are simply channels to reach a

target audience, and this applies whether one is proclaiming the realities of Christianity or launching a major event.

It means stepping outside our comfort zones and understanding who the media are, how they operate and what they need. Armed with that knowledge, we can fashion our message to meet those needs.

Moving into the societal stream opens the church to increased scrutiny. Government bodies, corporate entities and celebrities are viewed with a jaundiced eye; it will be no different for the church. Whether the scrutiny is deserved or not, the microscope will be on us.

But well-done media relations can help build community





... reinforce the church and Christians as credible, proactive and concerned

awareness of the spiritual, ethical and moral issues facing society. They reinforce the church and Christians as credible, proactive and concerned community members.

The Message

Advertising doesn't cut it anymore because people are inundated with advertising. Ads are increasingly dismissed or ignored, so major corporations are building brand names and images based on PR strategies. In a word, believability. News stories in media outlets that are based on sound PR strategies create third-party endorsement—and thus credibility—in the eyes of the audience.

Does this mean the media will always run a story the way we want or give us positive coverage? No. Their job is to tell stories the larger audience finds interesting.

Sometimes we won't like the tone of a piece. We might not appreciate the alternative viewpoint reflected in the article. We won't approve of being lumped with other faith groups that we may consider non-Christian. But coverage is worth the cost.

In 2002 her husband's tragic death, coupled with a military uprising and the siege of an MK school, catapulted the C&MA and missionary Denise Golding onto the media stage. By engaging the media in a way that met their needs (a well-attended news conference, fact sheets and other PR tools), the C&MA developed a story that made positive headlines from coast to coast. And God received the glory.

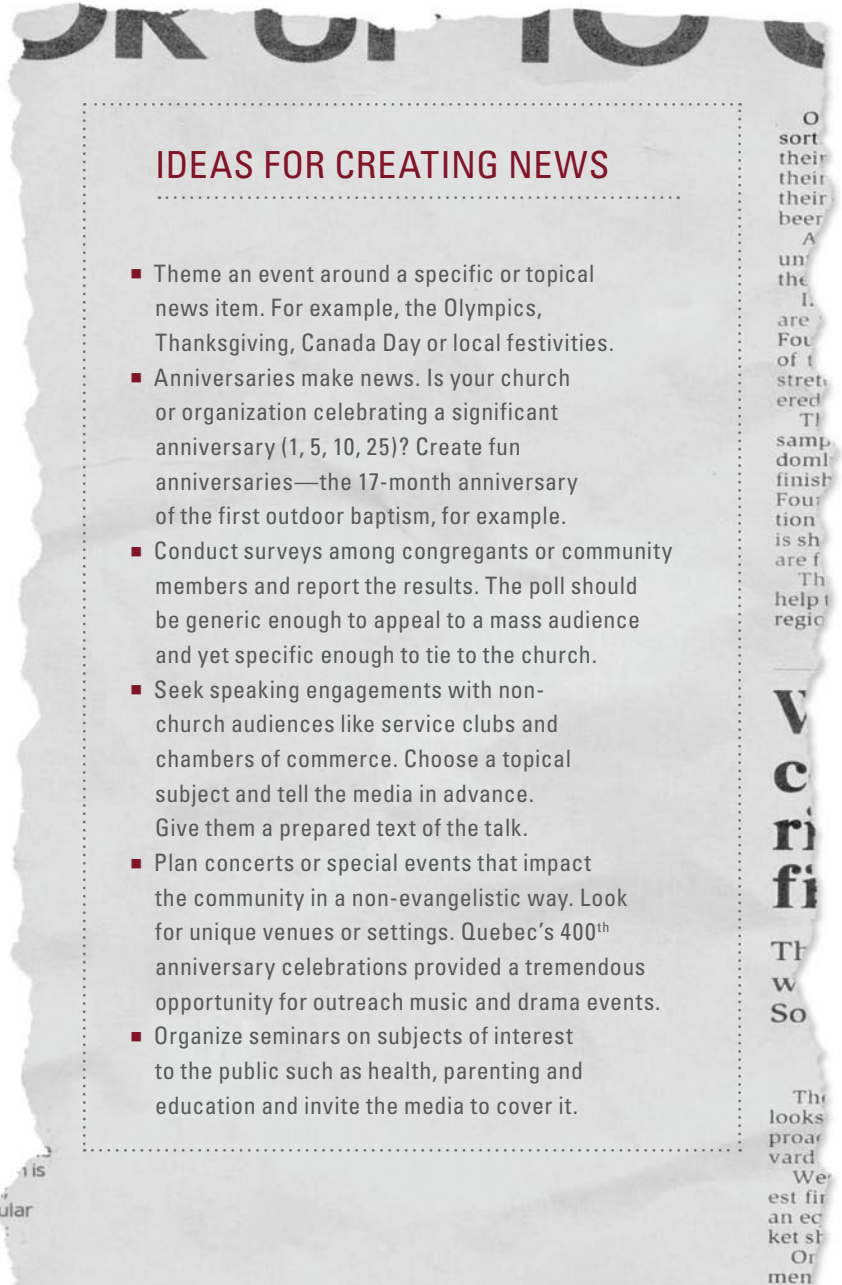
This year Tenth Avenue Alliance Church faced bureaucratic pressures

from city officials in Vancouver. The media immediately picked up on the issue of church compassion versus city regulations and the church became the centre of a media blitz. Local TV and newspaper articles placed the church front and centre in the community. Capable handling of the story by church officials

enabled city residents to gain a full and positive image of the church.

The Apostle Paul did it right. Can we do less?

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IDEAS FOR CREATING NEWS

- Theme an event around a specific or topical news item. For example, the Olympics, Thanksgiving, Canada Day or local festivities.
- Anniversaries make news. Is your church or organization celebrating a significant anniversary (1, 5, 10, 25)? Create fun anniversaries—the 17-month anniversary of the first outdoor baptism, for example.
- Conduct surveys among congregants or community members and report the results. The poll should be generic enough to appeal to a mass audience and yet specific enough to tie to the church.
- Seek speaking engagements with non-church audiences like service clubs and chambers of commerce. Choose a topical subject and tell the media in advance. Give them a prepared text of the talk.
- Plan concerts or special events that impact the community in a non-evangelistic way. Look for unique venues or settings. Quebec's 400th anniversary celebrations provided a tremendous opportunity for outreach music and drama events.
- Organize seminars on subjects of interest to the public such as health, parenting and education and invite the media to cover it.