

GOOD PRACTICES

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The Medium is the Message

VENICE FAMILY CLINIC

When the UCLA Center for Civil Society set out to find an example of nonprofit good practices in communications, one organization was mentioned time and again: Venice Family Clinic. However, if you are expecting a piece on communications that covers public relations or branding or marketing or Internet strategies, then you may be disappointed, because Linda Feldman, the Clinic's Communications Manager, has a different approach. "What we're trying to do with our communications strategy is to shape policy and play a role on the national stage on the subject of health care for the poor and uninsured," Feldman explains, "We aim for straight reporting."



ORGANIZATION PROFILE

The Venice Family Clinic, the largest free clinic in the United States with a budget of approximately \$16 million, was already 30 years old when Feldman joined the agency. Founded in 1970 by Dr. Philip Rossman and co-founder Dr. Mayer Davidson, the Clinic began as a volunteer-run, small store-front operation that saw patients in a Venice dental office. VFC today provides care to 22,203 patients, including more than 5,000 children, and 3,500 homeless people, who make 104,893 visits a year. Services include comprehensive primary health care, mental health services, child development services, and enrollment in public insurance programs.



THE CHALLENGE

A former Los Angeles Times columnist, Feldman's "outside the box" approach to communications is not groundbreaking, rather it is based on a deep-felt respect for the field of journalism, and an old school ethic that there is a fine line between journalism and public relations, a line that should not be crossed. "PR is important, but I don't think it should be the focus of a communications strategy," says Feldman, "I think PR belongs with development, which goes against much of the thinking today."

Rather than pursuing fluff pieces on the pages of Variety magazine featuring celebrity golf tournaments, the Venice Family Clinic receives coverage on the pages of the Journal of American Medical Association and the Los Angeles Times, as well as on PBS's Newshour with Jim Lehrer. "For me it comes down to being taken seriously. We rarely get into the entertainment section, but I believe that if you get coverage on the op ed page or even a mention in an important news story then the money will follow," says Feldman.

An internal 'white paper' written by Feldman explains the organization's overarching communications strategy: "The health care issue infiltrates the national dialogue through different channels—bankruptcy, employment, pharmaceuticals, national security, business practices—we need not be shut out of the issue because we treat the poor. We need to speak on this issue and always relate it to what we do, but be able to talk about health care on a larger stage." How successful have they been? "The head of a foundation came up to me at an event and said, 'You people are everywhere,'" Feldman proudly relates. "And we are everywhere. That

is our goal.” What is more, in her five years as the Venice Family Clinic Communications Manager, astonishingly Feldman says she has no complaints about any of the media coverage that VFC has received.

How does a nonprofit organization become an expert resource to journalists, get on the call list of major newspapers, and get the story that they want written? How does a nonprofit organization manage to be “everywhere” and play a role on the national policy front?

1 LEADERSHIP

It all begins with leadership and an Executive Director willing to commit to making communications a priority within the organization. Because there was no stand-alone communications position, Elizabeth Benson Forer, the CEO of Venice Family Clinic (VFC), brought Feldman on as part of the development team, and initially put her in charge of the annual giving program in a three-quarters time fundraising capacity, with just one-quarter of Feldman’s time spent on communications.

While Forer and Feldman knew from the outset where they wanted to take VFC—they both felt that the Venice Family Clinic should be participating on the national stage—they didn’t know how they would get there or how Feldman’s position would evolve to help them achieve this objective. Within a few months of coming on board, Feldman invited a former Times colleague to VFC and a piece was published on the op ed page the same day as the Clinic’s major fund raiser. The article launched Forer’s and Feldman’s joint venture into communications and helped to shape VFC’s communications strategy.

2 A GOOD REPUTATION

Over the years, the VFC had been able to build up a good reputation among key stakeholders, which increased its currency as a source of information, as a partner organization within the community and among funders. The Clinic had always received media attention in the past and Feldman was able to leverage VFC’s name recognition and strong reputation to help to propel the Clinic to national standing.

3 PLANTING SEEDS AND BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

The very first thing that Feldman did when she began working for the Clinic was to build relationships with journalists. By reading five to six newspapers a day, mostly on-line, Feldman was able to identify those reporters who were covering the health care beat nationally. She would contact these journalists, not to ask them to cover the Venice Family Clinic, but to tell them where VFC stood on various issues. This is what Feldman calls “planting seeds.” The key is not to oversell a story, which Feldman feels nonprofits can have a tendency to do, but to plant seeds: “Our self interest is important, but we never overplay our hand,” explains the former journalist.

Over time, Feldman has been able to develop a comprehensive media list, which includes contact information, detailed notes about her conversations with journalists, and information on their articles. However, building these relationships and “planting seeds” requires both time and patience. Executive directors and board members seeking to emulate VFC’s communications strategy need to understand that results are not instantaneous and coverage is never guaranteed.

4 FIRST RESPONDER STRATEGY

How does a nonprofit organization get on a journalist's call list and establish itself as an expert source? Based on her experience as a journalist, Feldman explains that whoever responds the fastest to a reporter's telephone call will usually be the source cited in the piece. Reporters work under tight deadlines, they leave multiple messages, and they quickly move on to other sources. When a reporter calls, Feldman says, nonprofit executives should return the call promptly, give forthright responses, and, when appropriate, suggest other potential sources to the journalist. At the same time she cautions, "You also have to maintain tight control and sometimes turn down requests. If you make one mistake in an interview, then you have to back pedal. Thankfully that hasn't happened to us." Feldman works with the Clinic's staff on how to respond to the press, briefs them before interviews, and has developed a protocol on how to do interviews (see "Interview Protocol").

5 MAKE THEIR LIVES EASY

Of all of Feldman's tips, her golden rule is if you want media coverage, then make life easy for reporters. If you are holding a press conference, then be certain to take care of all of the details and logistical considerations beforehand, such as parking, clear signage, staffing, seating, press kits, etc. If a reporter is doing a story, then give the journalist whatever he or she needs including access to experts, access to clients (as appropriate), fact sheets, additional sources with contacts, or access to a building façade to use for photos or television coverage. In addition, keeping a file with staff bios and a brief summary of their expertise makes it easy to

refer staff to a reporter. She emphasizes the importance of professionalism and courtesy, but adds: "If you are happy with a piece, don't ever call the reporter and thank them, or send a thank you note. It's amateurish. But do contact them and let them know that you enjoyed working with them and you look forward to working with them in the future." An element to a note would be the impact the article had on the life of the Clinic (e.g., twenty patients called for treatment or a million dollars was donated). Reporters like to know their work has meaning, too.

6 A FLEXIBLE STRATEGY THAT CAN EVOLVE AS NEEDS EVOLVE

When Feldman first started working for Venice Family Clinic as Communications Manager, she targeted primarily large news outlets. However, within a couple of years the Clinic faced a new challenge: because they had been so successful in signing up families for public insurance, for the first time in years, VFC had openings in pediatrics. Feldman recognized that she needed to adapt the agency's communications strategy to reach clients as well as policymakers, potential volunteers, and funders. She took a multi-tiered approach operating at several levels; she continued her national media outreach while at once putting forth a concentrated effort to reach local, ethnic press, such as *La Opinion* and *Hoy*, to attract new clients. Today Feldman is branching out into 'glossy' magazines including *Latina*, *LA Confidential*, and *Ventures*. She admits that the most elusive element is television coverage and is currently working with Univision and Telemundo to cover the Clinic.

More recently, Feldman faced a very different kind of challenge: producing Venice Family Clinic's first-ever annual report. Given the demands of an annual report—balancing creativity, clarity and effective communication, Feldman and her colleagues identified five annual reports that they felt were of superior quality. With a limited budget of just \$45,000, Feldman served as project manager, and worked with VFC's staff for a real team effort: CEO Forer, the Board of Directors, senior staff, and the development team contributed to the creative process; the Director of Program Development and Evaluation created a distribution list of key stakeholders; and their data processing person pulled together contacts. Feldman called the award-winning design firm, DeSantis Breindel, and they consented to do the project for a third of their typical fee and, through board member Neal Baer, hired young people from the community, participants in another local nonprofit program, Venice Arts, many of whom were VFC patients, to take photographs of life at the Clinic. The annual report received a Silver Award from the 2004 International ARC Awards Competition, which honors excellence in annual reports.

7 MEASURING SUCCESS

Unlike many organizations, the Venice Family Clinic's long-term goal is not to grow larger, indeed it is just the opposite: it is to go out of business. "People frequently talk about Venice Family Clinic as a model, but we always say this is no way to do medicine. This Clinic was started out of compassion and need," Feldman explains. "We'll know we've succeeded when there is universal health care and we don't need to exist."

With a tightly focused communications strategy that has helped to propel VFC to the national policy stage, just as CEO Forer initially set out to do, Venice Family Clinic may just one day succeed at playing a vital role in its own demise. In the meantime, Forer and her staff will keep the issues of the uninsured and providing quality care to the poor in the media's cross hairs.



GOOD PRACTICES For Interviews

- ① Interviews are typically by telephone rather than in person.
- ② Journalists are usually on a short deadline so make answers short and clear.
- ③ If you don't understand the question, ask for re-statement.
- ④ Speak slowly; you'll have a better chance of being quoted correctly.
- ⑤ Listen carefully, if your gut says the line of questioning could go somewhere you would prefer not to go, ask the journalist if h/she might go off the record. Explain that you want to be cooperative but that you don't feel comfortable speaking on this subject.
- ⑥ Never lie or fib or exaggerate. Journalists have good 'radar' and they take it personally when people lie to them.
- ⑦ Usually interviews are short so if you're not asked the question you think makes the most sense, make sure you get your message in with every answer you do give.
- ⑧ Be on alert for the last question trick. Because you may be surprised, you'll give up something you really don't want made public.
- ⑨ Always get the reporter's phone number in case you remember something after the interview is over and you want to either add to the story or clear up a misconception.
- ⑩ If you don't know the answer to a question, tell the reporter you'll get the information and call back. Promptly call with the information.
- ⑪ If an interview has been arranged in advance for you, it's a good idea to do a mock interview with someone, preferably with media experience and/or training.
- ⑫ Be prepared with written material i.e. fact sheets, stats, etc. This is the information that easily gets misquoted. The best way not to be misquoted on numbers is to send it in hard copy to the reporter.
- ⑬ If possible, alert people you plan on mentioning as a source in advance of the interview. Otherwise, tell the reporter you'll get back to them with the name and telephone number of each source.

The Center for Civil Society is the focal point for the UCLA School of Public Affairs' programs and activities in nonprofit leadership and management. "The Medium is the Message" is one in a series of "good practices" of Southern California nonprofits developed by the Center for nonprofit practitioners and community leaders. These vignettes, covering a range of topics from governance to innovation to volunteer management, are available for download, free of charge, on the Center for Civil Society's Web. Visit us online to read other Good Practices or to sign up for the next session of the Nonprofit Leadership Program. <http://www.spa.ucla.edu/ccs>