



DO YOU NEED A COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR?

*By Joe Surkiewicz, Director of Communications¹
Legal Aid Bureau Inc.*

What makes a good sound bite?

Do you know the best way to get out your organization's message?

How do you tailor that message for different audiences?

If the answers don't immediately spring to mind, consider this: You may need a communications director.

The reasons are many... and go beyond the usual definition of "public relations."

Let's start with the basics.

With a designated communications expert in regular contact with the media, your organization's successes will regularly make the pages of local newspapers and be broadcast by radio and television.

That, in turn, can lead to increased political support as elected leaders, government officials and the general public learn that your legal services outfit is an essential part of the community — that it is a problem solver and an important organization.

Good stories in the press also lead to increased funding, as the community views your organization as a "winner" that deserves its financial support. Another boost that can translate into dollars: increased pro bono as the legal community jumps on the bandwagon.

Another benefit is increased staff morale — for both those who are profiled and quoted in success stories and for everyone in your organization when it is seen as an important player in your community.

And do not forget clients. A good success for a single client can be turned into a major media story that helps many more clients. It can also affect clients when government agencies are exposed by the media for failing clients or pursuing incorrect policies.

A communications expert also fills an advocacy role by writing investigative articles, columns and op-

ed pieces that focus attention on issues (as opposed to specific cases or clients) that affect the community. Those issues could include, say, the plight of migrant farmworkers or problems faced by economically deprived communities. The result is more clients helped as the community becomes informed on issues it has not considered.

If those are not enough reasons to hire a communications director, consider this.

You are doing it anyway.

With a designated communications expert in regular contact with the media, your organization's successes will regularly make the pages of local newspapers and be broadcast by radio and television.

"We are communicating all the time, formally, informally, verbally, by action, inaction, inference, consciously, subconsciously, intentionally, unintentionally," said Wilhelm Joseph, executive director of the Legal Aid Bureau in Baltimore, Md. "The awareness of this reality is important."

Not just senior staff are communicating. Everyone is — board members, staff attorneys, supervising attorneys, office staff and the person who answers the phone.

With a communications director on staff, your organization benefits from a conscious process of education through a continuous flow of accurate, timely, and relevant information that effectively reaches and

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informs everyone.

That way, everyone is on the same page — informed and inspired to act.

In other words, a communications director is more than an on-staff PR expert who schmoozes the media.

At the Legal Aid Bureau, that job also includes informing staff of what is going on in a twice-monthly newsletter titled, appropriately enough, “What’s Going On.” Broadcast via email as an authoritative source of information from the executive staff, WGO keeps employees abreast of the latest happenings, boosts morale and helps keep rumors to a minimum.

A sampling from a recent issue includes paragraph-length items on awards from outside organizations garnered by staff members, a few legal success stories (including an appellate victory), “fan mail” from happy clients, a profile of a volunteer, a listing of outreach events, congratulations to an office staffer on her son’s graduation from osteopath school, and an update on fundraising efforts.

Another communications director task is Legal Aid’s newsletter, “The Justice Journal.” Published three times a year, “The Justice Journal” highlights the top success stories, features a topical message from the executive director, profiles a board member, and includes an article featuring the best media hits. (Much of its content is harvested from “What’s Going On” and given more extensive coverage.)

Distributed to employees, donors, key members of the private bar, the judiciary, government officials and others, “The Justice Journal” provides a public face for the Legal Aid Bureau. Other tools are Legal Aid’s annual report (which tells stories; gives our financial condition; lists donors, and provides case, client and service statistics) and our website, which continues to evolve.

Let us say you are sold on the idea of a communications director. What are the criteria for the job?

“It’s someone who ‘gets it,’” responded Joseph. “It’s someone who knows what legal services to the poor is all about.” Good candidates include court and police reporters familiar with the legal system. (Note: With the current trend of downsizing in the newspaper industry, this is a good time to recruit.)

This writer joined the Legal Aid Bureau more than a year ago after a three-year stint as a reporter at *The*

Daily Record, Maryland’s statewide legal newspaper. While there, I developed a public interest law beat, wrote award-winning stories — and learned about the importance of legal services, as well as the issues and challenges it faces.

At the Legal Aid Bureau, I now enjoy the best aspects of my old job, while helping the organization garner more public recognition and, as a result, increased support.

Critical to that success is my relationship with my boss.

“My role with Joe is to be accessible, share my vision and goals, and to provide a supportive environment,” Joseph explained. “In turn, I take his guidance and utilize his media expertise. Meanwhile, Joe keeps in touch with what’s going on around Legal Aid, seeks out information and disseminates it, and works with key staff in determining the best media outlets to take our stories.”

The result is a stack of news clips from the *New York Times*, the *Associated Press*, the news and op-ed pages of *The Baltimore Sun*, a regular column in *The Daily Record* called “Of Service,” and a wide range of other local media outlets, both print and electronic.

Another result: Last year, the Maryland General Assembly, while cutting and restricting the budgets of all state agencies and other recipients, approved an unprecedented \$300,000 budget item to fill a funding gap created by a drop in IOLTA revenues. Local bar leaders said higher media visibility of Legal Aid contributed to that success.

You say there is no room in next year’s budget for a communications director? Do not despair — there is a lot you do in the meantime. Here are some tips that will increase your organization’s media profile.

Take the initiative. Call the editors of local newspapers and set up meetings to introduce yourself. Do not be shy. Newspapers have an obligation to hear from pillars of the community such as legal service organizations. (Remember the old saying, “Reporters comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable” — not much different from what poverty lawyers do.)

Explain to them what your organization does and how it serves the community. Be prepared with ideas or topics of interest that the editor could assign to a reporter (a new location or building; an anniversary; a funding crisis; an issue affecting the poor and, therefore, the entire community; a pro bono lawyer profile; a day-in-the-life story where a reporter follows a legal aid lawyer for a day; a new program).

Craft your story and develop your message; this cannot be overemphasized. This meeting is a chance to establish a relationship. Make it a point to meet with editors and/or editorial boards at least once a year.

Do your homework. Read newspapers, watch television news, pay attention to bylines and remember the names of reporters who write on legal issues and nonprofits.

After a reporter contacts you on a story, build on that relationship. Ask the reporter to stop by for coffee or invite him or her to lunch at your office to discuss specific topics with a group of your lawyers, social workers or paralegals. Cultivate good reporters who care about poverty and legal issues.

Write op-ed pieces and short, to-the-point letters to the editor of local newspapers. Develop yourself and your program as a major resource for the media in your community. Become the media's expert on poverty law issues (after all, you are the expert).

Understand how reporters work. Here's a quick primer: Be aware of deadlines. When calling a reporter or editor, the first question should be, "Are you on deadline?" It makes you sound like you have some understanding of the news business.

"News holes" are the amount of news printed and are in direct proportion to ad sales, which explains why some good stories do not run (the news hole was small) and why not-so-good stories get printed (the editor had a lot of space to fill that day).

Remember that reporters do not write headlines. Beat them up about a misleading headline and you will look clueless.

Understand that most reporters do not have an ax to grind. It is just a job. Make their job easier (first rule: always return phone calls) and they will usually treat you right. Find out each newspaper's reporting schedule. For morning dailies, reporters are on deadline in mid- to late-afternoon. Mid- to late-morning is usually the best time to call.

Always tell the truth when talking to a reporter. If you are not sure how to respond to a tough question, say something like, "Can I call you back? What's your deadline?" Then develop your message, craft a reply and call.

Create an expert list for reporters who need quotes on legal stories they are writing that are not about your organization. Reporters are always looking for experts.

For electronic media, contact television and radio station public affairs managers and offer yourself and your organization's experts as guests on public affairs

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programs. They are usually hungry for guests. When you call, have an idea or two ready.

"Off the record" and "no comment" — banish these terms from your vocabulary. Everything you say to a reporter is on the record. "No comment" sounds evasive or worse.

Remember that pitching story ideas is a percentages game. You will never get every idea turned into an article. But if you are persistent, you will get results.

If you are misquoted or a story misrepresents your point of view, think hard before picking up the phone. It is water over the dam.

If a story contains factual errors, consider putting it in writing as a letter to the editor. Keep the tone civil, make it short and it might get printed (and provide another opportunity to get your organization's name in the paper).

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1 Joe Surkiewicz is the director of communications at the Legal Aid Bureau, Maryland's largest provider of civil legal help. He is an award-winning reporter whose articles have appeared in the *Baltimore Sun*, the *Washington Post*, *Boys' Life*, *Outside Online* and many other national and regional publications. He is also the author of nine guidebooks, including *The Unofficial Guide to San Francisco* (Frommers) and several bicycle guides.