

SEIZE THE DAY (Or at Least the Press...)

by Joe Williams

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IMAGINE FOR ONE MOMENT THIS UNLIKELY scenario:

You are the administrator of a small nonprofit organization that has been watching for weeks as its fund balance edges closer and closer to the “red zone.” With payroll checks going out today, the ledger will soon show that your organization has simply spent more money than it took in.

With beads of sweat dripping down your forehead and a quickened pulse from the stress of being at the top of an organization that is flat broke, you set out to do something you wish you had done months ago: You pick up the telephone and start cold-calling potential donors, most of whom know very little about you or your cause and probably won’t be very inclined to participate in your bail-out attempt.

This scenario simply defies common sense. Few managers would allow an organization to hit rock bottom before seeking to raise the money necessary to keep it afloat. And yet many nonprofits take this kind of backseat approach when it comes to dealing with public relations and the media. They allow the occasional and impersonal press release to pass for “media relations” and in the process miss golden opportunities throughout the year to sell the value of the

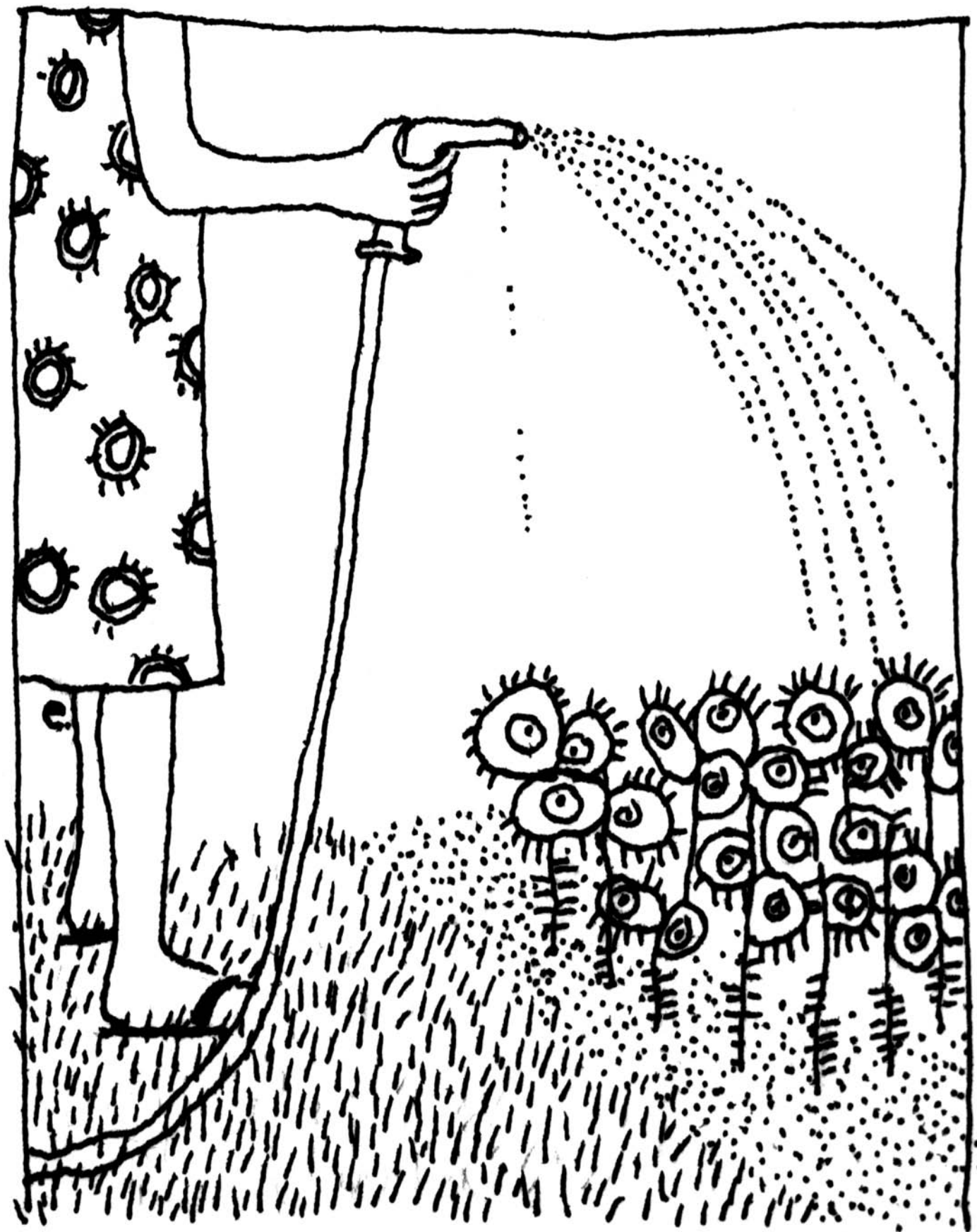
organization and its people to reporters and opinion-makers.

Even worse, some nonprofit leaders don’t see any value at all in media relations until they desperately need good press. Just like good donors, who can be cultivated and made to understand the true essence of your organization and what it is capable of accomplishing over time, the press is far more likely to be impressed with your story if it is presented in a non-urgent way that is absent of any perceived desperation. Working with the press requires the same kind of deliberate approach you use with your donors.

The point here is that in the real world, good public relations and good management often go hand in hand. An organization that is thoroughly and sufficiently managed will always have a much better shot at being proactive in terms of communicating its message than one that is constantly in fear of having its dirty laundry exposed by the press. In cases of the latter, it is important to note that the problem is usually poor management and not poor public relations.

There is no shortage of “How to contact a reporter” and “How to write a press release” kits available to nonprofits to help them deal with those sorts of mechanics. There are also plenty of public relations firms out there catering to nonprofits who will do this sort of work. But as a journalist who has worked with nonprofits in the education and other sectors, I have consistently found that the biggest obstacle for many nonprofit

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Nonprofit leaders who recognize that being proactive about contacting and courting members of the press are typically the ones who create good breaks for their organization. They are the ones who end up being quoted as experts in their fields, the ones who are able to place warm-and-fuzzy feature stories about people who make a difference in their communities, and the ones who are simply the most effective at convincing potential donors about the unique value their organizations provide. All because they took the initiative to reach out to the people who could best help them get their message to the masses.

Those who view their interactions with reporters in the same light as their interactions with other important constituencies (such as donors and well-connected supporters) will have a head start in the race to define their organization and the value it brings to the community.

In some respects, this type of proactive self-branding has never been as important as it is today. As Congress considers what could be the most sweeping changes in a generation to laws governing nonprofits, it is more important than ever for nonprofit leaders to understand and take advantage of the press' ability to level the playing field in the battle between the little guy and powerful forces in Washington.

Why allow those powerful forces to define nonprofits, when even the smallest shop has the necessary tools at their disposal to match those forces with truthful and inspiring messages that tell its story?

What follows are some quick and easy points, from the perspective of a longtime reporter, that can pave your path to better press for your organization.

Find out who the specialty "beat" reporters are for whatever area you work in (e.g., education, health care, aging issues, etc.). If it isn't obvious who this person is, contact the city desk at the local newspapers (or the assignment desk at TV and radio stations) and ask.

Invite the reporter to get together to chat. (A personal meeting is a much better way to communicate with a reporter than a scripted press conference-type event is.) Many reporters are

intrigued by invitations that have no strings attached—when it is made perfectly clear to them that you don't expect a story to come out of the meeting. Suggest that you get together over coffee to talk about the issue and your organization's role.

Reporters are constantly looking to expand their rolodexes (or, these days, their Palm Pilots), so make it clear that you have potential expertise to offer for the reporter's coverage. If your organization exists to solve a particular problem, establish yourself first as an expert in the problem. It will naturally follow that you can describe your organization's role as part of the solution.

Remember that reporters, by the nature of their jobs, traffic in gossip. So be careful what you say, but remember that it's OK to talk about trends in your field and issues you believe will be coming down the pike. Remember that a reporter who finds some value in speaking with you will be more likely to call on you in the future, particularly when those issues move to the forefront of news.

Tread lightly the first time around. Remember that this is a human interaction. It's perfectly acceptable to talk about your kids, pets, or hobbies. The idea is to break down any barriers so that a relationship of trust might someday form between the two of you. The best reporter-source relationships often involve two-way communications, where reporters feel free to talk about the issues and stories that they are working on and trusted sources feel comfortable pointing them in the right direction and providing context.

Understand that what you are trying to "sell" to the reporter is your expertise, credibility, and integrity. These are the foundations for future inclusion in serious news stories, which are often more closely read by people who matter than the kind of fluff pieces that are often sought after by nonprofits. Over time, you will be able to speak more freely about why your organization matters, and there will be no question as to the value you provide in your community.

Let's Talk!

Let's move this topic forward! Any ideas or arguments you'd like to share with the authors and editors? Send us an email, referring to this article at: feedback@nonprofitquarterly.org.

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