

Making Our Communications *Strategic*

by Karen Jeffreys

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COMING TO RICADV WITH 12 YEARS OF community organizing experience under my belt, one would think I would have a better grasp of how crucial communications is to the success of our social justice work, but I think my experience is a common one—too often, public relations/media is an add-on to our organizing work and not an integral arena that is afforded time, money, and resources. Obviously, in my previous jobs I understood media to the extent that I knew to send out press releases before big events, but didn't really comprehend how critical communications was to our work. Having public relations become my full-time job taught me that. I often think back on my former organizing work and wonder how it would have been different if I knew then what I know now!

On March 26, 2002, the Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence (RICADV) held a press conference to address the occurrence of three domestic violence murders in the previous five weeks. This number of homicides in so short a period was unprecedented in Rhode Island—at least in the 20 years in which RICADV had been documenting the problem.

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The room was packed, overflowing with domestic violence advocates, allies, and survivors of abuse. Also present were reporters from all of the major media outlets in Rhode Island. All three major television networks covered the event live at noon. This press conference and all that it represented was the result of RICADV improving its communications planning.

Rather than responding to each murder as the individual tragedy that it was, RICADV focused on the connection between these cases. By doing so, it created a context in which to present policy initiatives designed to prevent domestic violence and the homicides associated with it. RICADV brought together representatives from law enforcement, prosecution, probation/corrections, courts, legislature, and the community to present a collective plan of action to address the gaps in the preventive and service systems in Rhode Island.

History of RICADV's Communications Planning

In 1996, we set a goal: we wanted to be viewed as the go-to experts on domestic violence throughout our state. We wanted to be respected as a primary source by lawmakers, victims, other nonprofits, service organizations, government, the general public, and the media. In terms of the media, we had one overarching goal: to become the first point of expert contact whenever a story was being done on domestic violence.

In the 2002 press conference referenced above, we began to see the fruits of our labor.



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After seven years of building relationships with journalists—being available to them 24/7, meeting with them, and calling them on stories—establishing systems to improve our media work, developing our message, preparing our spokespersons, and making media and communications a priority, we had become a primary player on our issue. At the same time, we built a communications program that is a model in the national domestic violence movement.

How did this happen? First, RICADV had to make a commitment to communications—giving it attention, time, money, and resources—as it would public policy, fundraising, legislation, training, and other areas of our organization. This commitment derived from our understanding that communications is crucial in the work to end domestic violence. We can pass laws, train police, and serve victims, but if we don't change social attitudes about domestic violence, we will never end it. Communications done well can build social intolerance toward domestic violence—it is the context within which all our other work is pursued.

This is true for any social movement. To move an issue from being a concern of the already convinced to being a concern of a broader community, we need to cultivate that broader community. Social movement organizations in civil rights, women's rights, gay liberation, and environmental justice all learned that being effective meant expanding their support in broader communities, and that this meant developing relationships with those broader communities or publics.

Why Plan Communications?

Without planning, our work too often functions in crisis-response mode and as a result, tends to be scattered in its effect. When work is scattered, capacity never builds, nothing feels solid, and staff and members become demoralized.

Just as an organization's strategic plan clarifies its program goals and distributes resources to match group priorities, an accompanying communications plan helps an organization plan systematic communications work.

But if we see this arena as the area in which all we are doing is convincing others to see things our way, we may be doomed. A critical component in our understanding of how to discuss issues publicly is the quality of our communica-

tions with constituents (see "Constituent Voice is Critical" on page 26) and with the public. In other words, at the foundation of a good communications strategy is the reciprocal give and take with our various stakeholders where we listen to problems, raise grievances, ask for help, advocate for solutions, and learn from gains and losses.

Once we have established this base, we must identify which audiences are important in a given campaign, identify tools/tactics for reaching those audiences, and develop messages that convince those audiences to support the campaign. A communications plan focuses an organization on its key audiences, the best ways to reach them, and the key messages to deliver.

RICADV's communications plan maps how the organization will work to broaden public understanding of domestic violence. This means it must know how the public currently thinks, and it must be able to effectively pose a countervailing frame of reference which resonates with people.

Everyone Is a Communicator, Every Communication Is Important

A successful strategy sets realistic goals, taking into account the existing environment and the organization's strengths and weaknesses. It recognizes that external resource mobilization is as important as internal resource mobilization.

What is the series of actions through which your organization proposes to mobilize resources to achieve its goals? RICADV is lucky to be a coalition that involves hundreds of potential activists. Its six member agencies provide direct services to domestic violence victims and survivors—each of these organizations has a board, staff, and constituencies involved with it. We are also blessed to be associated with Sisters Overcoming Abusive Relationships (SOAR), our task force of survivors which involves survivors as spokespeople and analysts in domestic violence programs and policies. It is with all of these partners and others in law enforcement, the judiciary, the legislature, and even in sports that RICADV as a statewide coalition advocates for changes in social policies impacting domestic violence.

For every goal or objective in our communications plan, we must ask, "With whom must we communicate to achieve this? What publics or audiences—allies, potential supporters, etc.—should we reach and mobilize to accomplish this?"

Every organization member and staff person is a communicator

Some organizations are fortunate to have a dedicated communications staff. It is important to remember, however, that an organization communicates with broader publics through thousands of daily encounters—e-mail, faxes, phone calls, face-to-face conversations, meetings, letters, meeting minutes, and legislative alerts. Every organization member and staff person is a communicator, not just the official communications staff.

Not only is everyone a communicator, every communication matters. While mass media are essential ways to communicate for many campaigns, most communications tactics are not mass media. In RICADV's 18-page communication plan only four pages are devoted to mass media. The rest involve communication through newsletters, the Web site, and our ongoing work—meetings, events, trainings, and so on.

In short, organization staff and members are critical communicators and need to be brought into communications planning so that they understand how their daily tasks build the organization's communications capacity.

How to Make a Communications Plan

RICADV follows a seven-step approach to communications planning. The communications staff leads the effort, involving other staff and members as needed. The first step is planning who needs to be at the table. Then, the planning team takes each strategic goal and brainstorms audience, message, and tactics for reaching the audience. The team writes this down, prioritizes the ideas, and then translates the communications plan into a work plan that specifies who will do which task by what date. The team also decides how it will measure its progress and

Constituent Voice is Critical

Supporting Survivors' Full Participation

The direct voice and analysis of those who have experienced domestic violence has been critical to the Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence's legislative and communications successes. This participation has organized itself through Sisters Overcoming Abusive Relationships (SOAR), an independent but linked organization. SOAR helps RICADV develop its policy agenda, and it trains and supports survivor spokespersons to testify publicly through the media or in the legislature.

Background

While the movement against domestic violence was founded more than 30 years ago on the principle of self-determination, it always runs the risk of favoring the service delivery aspect of its work over the empowerment aspect (since much of the funding is in service delivery). This slide, when it occurs, robs the movement of its impact.

SOAR was founded in 1989 by a group of domestic violence survivors who wanted to move beyond the inner healing work of support groups to address the root causes of domestic violence. They use the firsthand knowledge and intensity of their direct experiences to educate the public and promote institutional change.

SOAR has grown from a group of individuals primarily serving the Coalition as a speakers' bureau to an organizing project in its

own right. While still being willing to function as spokespersons, the 112 survivors it actively involves don't want to be simply the human-interest story illustrating a point being made in the media. They have their own ideas about how to translate the knowledge—hard won from personal experience—into policy initiatives. Their own experiences with the abuse itself and then with police, shelters, the legal system, child visitation issues, hospitals, and other support systems bring a practical wisdom and power to public education and policy work.

While praising RICADV member agency services for victims in crisis, SOAR distinguishes itself carefully from direct services for victims: "SOAR is about change not service; justice not charity. It's a grassroots organization for survivors. To us, that means that people directly affected by the issue—survivors—should have the power to make decisions," notes SOAR member Rosa De Castillo.

There is a close collaboration between SOAR and RICADV, and they support each other's legislative agendas. The two organizations possess the same core values and philosophies and maintain a common organizational culture that stresses nurturing the leadership of members and staff alike. They share the same space and many of the same back office functions, but SOAR has its own niche in Rhode Island, framing much of the public discourse on this important issue.

In crafting its message, an organization considers what the audiences know and feel about the issue and what they need to understand to take the action the organization is proposing. Messages combine facts, stories, and visuals to make an issue real to an audience.

allocates resources and responsibilities for carrying out the evaluation.

When written out in detail, a communications plan can be lengthy. This is not a mistake; the plan simply makes visible important communication work that is often taken for granted, such as staying in touch with member agencies. If the written plan represents more work than is realistic, review it and set priorities that fit better with the labor and resources available.

1) *Who needs to be at the table?* Step one is to determine the process for writing the communications plan. Ask yourselves, "Who needs to participate in which aspects of the planning?" Each organization develops its own planning process, but any staff person or member with any responsibility for communications needs to be involved at some point.

RICADV doesn't write its communications plan in a single staff meeting or retreat. The communications staff lead the process involving other staff, interns, SOAR, and member agencies for which the plan affects their work. Thus, SOAR would be at the table if the communications staff were planning the communications component of the strategic goals relating to SOAR.

2) *Reviewing goals/objectives.* Once the planning process is set, team members start by reviewing the organization's strategic plan. The strategic plan proposes actions and campaigns to further the organization's goals and objectives. Even organizations without a formal strategic plan often choose an action strategy after having considered the organization's strengths, weakness, opportunities, and threats.

The communications plan creates the companion plan for communicating the organization's strategy, working goal by goal. Planning communication work is like any other planning: the team brainstorms and then prioritizes given organization resources. Some great ideas get tabled for the future.

3) *Identifying audiences.* The goals answer the question, "What do we want to achieve?" Audiences are the "who" of a communications plan: whom the organization needs to communicate with to meet its goals. Audiences, however, are not just outside the organizations. Staff, board, and member organizations are also critical audiences. Without mobilizing these core supporters, an organization fails to activate its best communicators. For example, until we

wrote a communications plan, we didn't recognize that our own member agencies were a primary audience! We took them for granted. Now we've worked to improve communication with our member agencies, focusing on better meeting minutes and more frequent phone contact, for instance.

4) *Framing messages.* The message is what to tell the audience. In crafting its message, an organization considers what the audiences know and feel about the issue and what they need to understand to take the action the organization is proposing. Messages combine facts, stories, and visuals to make an issue real to an audience. Messages are created to send to audiences; think of a message as a conversation, not as a position paper.

5) *Selecting tactics/tools for sending messages to audiences.* Tactics/tools are the "how" of planning communication: all the ways to send a message to a priority audience. These can be direct, such as phone calls, fliers, e-mail, face-to-face conversations, and meetings. Or they can involve mass media; this involves gaining access to a media outlet that you don't control (radio, television, print, etc.). They include paid advertising such as billboard ads, bus ads, or TV/radio ads. There are two tricks to picking the right tools/tactics for sending a message. Organizers must know which tactics/tools reach which audience. And they must know their own organization's strengths, picking tactics that they have the resources to use well. A bus ad, for instance, only works if the desired audience rides buses and if the organization has the resources to create an attractive bus ad and disseminate it widely.

6) *Creating a work plan: who does what by when?* To ensure the communications plan is implemented, RICADV translates it into a work plan. A communication work plan organizes communication work into a timeline: concrete tasks that must be accomplished by specific persons by a specific date.

The communications staff takes the lead in writing up the overall communications plan, involving relevant staff and members in composing their sections. Tasks are assigned to specific people and a work plan and timeline are drawn up to note who will do what by when. Routine check-ins (quarterly, bi-monthly, or weekly, depending on the situation) help the team estab-

lish accountability and adjust the plan if circumstances change.

7) *Establishing measures of progress.* Evaluation helps organizers know whether their organization has been successful in reaching its desired audiences with its desired message. Whenever possible, a communications plan should include specific measures by which to evaluate the communication work's impact. Evaluation measures could include increases in calls to a hotline, increases in numbers of calls to service centers, or increases or positive changes in media coverage, etc. Media monitoring helps track the impact of communications campaigns.

The Communications Spotlight

Communications links an organization to the publics/audiences relevant to its mission. In effect, communications turns a spotlight on an organization's work; it shows broader communities what the organization is doing. Communications draws attention to the organization's good work, widening its support base. Successful communications results from planning in communicating vision and goals to the predetermined audiences.

At the Heart of it All

Communications strategy does not stand alone; it builds from an organization's mission and overall strategy. If a group lacks a clear strategy, the media spotlight will highlight precisely that lack of direction.

At the heart of it all, social change work involves communication, and mass media is the central communication system—the big tent—of our times. Organizations simply don't have the luxury of not communicating. In order to achieve the mission of our social justice organizations, we must win the hearts and minds of a bigger community than is in our database. And to do that, we have to devote more time, money, and resources to our communications. It won't happen overnight, but keeping in mind "start small, build big," there is no better time than now to begin the journey.

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Chronology of a Media Campaign

When we began our communications work in 1996, one of our main goals was for the Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence to become recognized as the experts on the issue of domestic violence in our state, widely respected by lawmakers, victims, other nonprofits, service organizations, government, the general public, and the media.

By 2002, RICADV had made progress on this goal, and could unite diverse constituencies—domestic violence victims and survivors; domestic violence advocates and service providers; court officials; legislators; criminal justice professionals; regular citizens—around common policy initiatives. (This success is illustrated through the case highlighted on page 22.)

In a five-week period in early 2002 (February 13–March 17), three domestic violence murders shook Rhode Island, one brazenly committed in police presence. RICADV responded immediately to each of the murders, urging Rhode Islanders to redouble their efforts to keep victims safe and hold batterers accountable. One week after the third murder, RICADV and Sisters Overcoming Abusive Relationships (SOAR)—joined by other advocates, law enforcement, and court and legislative allies—announced their Seven-Point Plan for addressing loopholes in the state’s existing support systems.

Twice in RICADV history, a cluster of three murder cases occurred in a few weeks. In 1996, when RICADV first began tracking media coverage, three murders occurred in five weeks (April 15–May 20, 1996). News coverage followed the lead of local police, who did not refer to the murders as “domestic violence.”

“Man shoots wife, then himself, police say,” read the *Providence Journal* headline in the first case.

“3 die in murder-suicide; Boy, 2, among victims,” read the *Providence Journal* headline for the second case.

“Murder-suicide claims 4 lives in Providence,” read the *Providence Journal* headline for the third case.

In 1996, RICADV’s perspective that domestic violence is a social problem—everyone’s business—was invisible. From this starting point of invisibility, RICADV began to plan its priorities, build

its communication systems, train its spokespersons, and deepen its relations with police, reporters, etc.

When another cluster of murders occurred three years later (August 1–September 19, 1999), RICADV was in a better situation to influence news coverage. Quoting RICADV and other advocates, reporters identified these cases as domestic violence. At this point, RICADV could urge the public to treat domestic violence as “everybody’s business,” but we could not yet catalyze a public conversation about how to change existing systems to keep victims safe and hold batterers accountable. We could use the murders to educate, but not to create new policies.

A third cluster of murders occurred two and a half years later (February 12–March 20, 2002). Now RICADV was positioned to use the tragedies more effectively to create policy changes. Not only did RICADV help reporters flag domestic violence in each case, but RICADV also leveraged the coverage to jumpstart a successful campaign to reform support systems for domestic violence victims. Called the Seven-Point Plan, the policy campaign was led by advocates and survivors with strong support from police, community groups, legislators, and court officials. With the passage of the Seven-Point Plan, RICADV had moved from invisibility to the ability to voice issues to the ability to make policy. The Seven-Point Plan campaign illustrates using media outreach to build support for policy changes.

Analyzing the Success

The Coalition used the public attention sparked by three murders in five weeks to call for a review of the justice system to ensure that abusers are held accountable and victims be protected. RICADV’s meteoric success in passing the Seven-Point Plan should not be seen as a chance occurrence, however. Over seven years, RICADV had worked to create a communications infrastructure—systems for developing relations with key publics. The result was that RICADV could promptly mobilize not only the domestic violence advocacy community and survivors, but also key institutional actors—the courts, police, and legislature. Joining with the

family and friends of the immediate victims, especially the Friends of Barbara Lombardi, RICADV catalyzed the public will and pressure for institutional change.

The Seven-Point Plan was passed because RICADV had created a communications infrastructure—ongoing relationships and ways to communicate with all publics who shared an interest in domestic violence. The same could be said of RICADV's communications infrastructure—routines and systems that combine to allow RICADV to communicate quickly and consistently with the publics named above. By 2002, when the tragic trio of murders occurred, RICADV's communications systems were working together to provide a seamless collaborative response to each of the three murders and then, to facilitate turning the tragedies into an opportunity for policy change. After each murder, RICADV staff and relevant member agencies had caucused to focus their messages. The messages were transmitted quickly and efficiently, thanks to RICADV's up-to-date media database. There was no confusion about what should be done by a member agency versus central staff because there was media policy in place that negotiated divisions of labor in advance. The coalition prepared its spokespersons carefully and called back reporters to make sure they would attend the press conference, recording the press reaction in its press logs. "Of course we're coming," said one reporter when called back. "This is a must-be-at press conference." At the press conference itself, police, corrections officers, politicians, and RICADV spoke at length, but the lengthiest coverage the next day was given to SOAR member Rosa De Castillo, who described her own harrowing escape from an abuser. Again, this built on RICADV's groundwork to support an independent organization that gives voice to survivors. Finally, RICADV's media clipping files ensured that the coalition could review news coverage to update its media database and to reflect on how to improve.

RICADV started small but built big, establishing its communications systems one step at a time. It took seven years for Rhode Island to put in place the communication infrastructure described

above. The 2002 Seven-Point Plan (Year Seven) demonstrated all the building blocks of RICADV's communications infrastructure working in synchrony.

Setting the Plan in Motion

During the first three years, RICADV focused on setting up the basic systems. In the next three years, RICADV consolidated these systems and shared them with SOAR and other coalition members. With basic systems in place, outreach to wider and wider communities became possible as SOAR and member agencies increasingly participated in communications.

RICADV no longer received coverage only for its planned events; its media protocol spells out for all staff how to respond to unexpected crises, and RICADV proactively called media and police when a murder occurred. This had become easier because RICADV staff, as they went about their various responsibilities, had cultivated ongoing relationships with reporters, courts, legislators, and police departments.

In contrast to its limited communication resources in 1996, RICADV had by 2002 used its building blocks to establish a strong communications infrastructure from which to further the mission of ending domestic violence. RICADV's core values and philosophy were thoroughly established in cultural agreements—rules for decision-making and conflict resolutions. Communication work had been distilled into a set of systems for monitoring media, developing messages, maintaining press lists, and tracking results.

In short, RICADV had, by this point, established its organizing approach and integrated it into routine systems. RICADV could respond quickly to unexpected events, and could support its members if events occurred in their localities. Other institutions such as the police, courts, and attorney general's office saw RICADV as a helpful ally. Reporters saw RICADV as a strong and reliable source of information, a capable, articulate voice for ending domestic violence. RICADV's building blocks had created a solid infrastructure from which to further its mission of ending domestic violence.