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Media and Social Media Best Practices for Feminist Activist Groups and Organizations

Abstract

Feminist organizations and activist groups from the Women's Suffrage movement to the Women's March have utilized media relations tactics and techniques to share organizational messages. Over time, the art of media relations has evolved from a tactical role to a strategic necessity, one that is vital to the success of any activist organization or group as they seek to inform, educate and/or persuade their intended audience through the use of media and social media.

This essay identifies best practices for feminist activist groups and organizations to help begin or improve their media relations efforts, ranging from initial hiring, to media relations planning and social media strategy.

Keywords

media, media relations, public relations, public opinion, social media, journalism, activism, communication

MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA BEST PRACTICES FOR FEMINIST ACTIVIST GROUPS AND ORGANIZATIONS

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Feminist organizations and activist groups from the Women's Suffrage movement to the Women's March have utilized media relations tactics and techniques to share organizational messages. Over time, the art of media relations has evolved from a tactical role to a strategic necessity, one that is vital to the success of any activist organization or group as they seek to inform, educate and/or persuade their intended audience through the use of media and social media.

Media relations, a practice area within the field of public relations, refers to the development and maintenance of relationships with editors, journalists and reporters in the mass media, as well as those in social media (often referred to as "influencers") in an effort to obtain positive media coverage for a company, organization, or cause. Media relations efforts can be proactive (a push)) and/or reactive (a pull)) in nature. Proactive media relations work includes the development of a story idea and eventual pitch of that story to a member of the media or multiple media outlets. Reactive media relations work involves responding to incoming requests for interviews or information from members of the media. Resulting media coverage, whether it originates from an organization's intentional outreach to obtain that media attention, or because the organization has done something newsworthy, is called "earned media." This media coverage is not paid for by the organization; it was earned by the group or organization by doing something that media outlets deemed newsworthy to their readers, viewers or listeners.

This essay identifies best practices for feminist activist groups and organizations to help begin or improve their media relations efforts, ranging from initial hiring to media relations planning, and social media tactics to increase intersectional feminist representation.

SKILLS MATTER

Media relations practice has evolved rapidly over the years. Pre-internet, the media landscape was much less dense, much slower, and far less complex, existing primarily of print newspapers and magazines, broadcast TV, and terrestrial radio. Cable television eventually ushered in an era of 24/7 news, which changed the television landscape and created many more opportunities for television placement. The advent of the internet added websites and led to the creation of blogs, podcasts, social media and more. As a result, media relations work has become more complex and requires a variety of skills in order to achieve success including: relationship building, communication, and strategic thinking. In addition, knowledge of the ever-evolving media landscape, an ability to think like a reporter, and social media management and analytics skills are crucial.

Sharp written and oral communication skills are, and always have been, vital to the success of media relations efforts. The ability to craft a clear, concise, and cohesive story pitch that will attract the attention of an often overworked member of the media is critical skill. Appendix 1 provides an example of a job posting from Time's Up Now, "a social welfare organization that works to create solutions that cross culture, companies and laws to increase women's safety, equity and power at work." The listing provides extensive detail about the duties of a media relations practitioner at a high-profile feminist activist organization and highlights the skills needed in order to be effective. The job requires over five years of experience working directly with members of the media and/or as a journalist, in addition to existing relationships with members of the political press and extensive knowledge of news media operations in all formats.

Unfortunately, due to resource scarcity in many smaller grassroots organizations or non-profits, the person tasked with reaching out and responding to the media may not have a background in media or communication or may need updated training on best practices in media relations. If that's the case in your organization, consider partnering with a likeminded organization to split costs or outsource to an agency or consultant as needed. Or, consider ways to reallocate your budget to allow for hiring an experienced media relations practitioner.

RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

The strategic cultivation and maintenance of relationships with members of the media and social media that align with the needs and interests of your organization is at the heart of media relations and can be helpful in getting your message through to the right audience. In their book, *On Deadline: Managing Media Relations*, Howard and Mathews state:

This is a people-to-people business. A media relations person deals with writers, editors, bloggers, producers and photographers – not with newspapers, television stations, radio microphones and websites. Knowing how to assist reporters and their supporting cast can make a positive difference in establishing and maintaining long-term relationships with the media – the only kind to have (62).

For feminist activist organizations or non-profits, it's important to establish relationships with those in the media who cover feminist issues in traditional *and* social media. This may mean identifying traditional print journalists or broadcast reporters who cover or care about your cause, as well as identifying influencers in social media that can help amplify your message.

Just like any relationship, it takes time to get to know someone, and it takes effort to maintain a relationship with them. “Good media contacts proliferate once they are established. They’re built only gradually, based on a variety of contacts over time, and strengthened by experiences that foster growing knowledge and respect” (Howard and Mathews 62). And, consider this: by some estimates, media relations practitioners outnumber journalists by as high as 6 to 1 (Schneider). This means that journalists and reporters face a deluge of communication from those seeking media attention. Practically, this means that they get a ton of emails from media relations pros and there’s no way they can (or want) to cover every story idea that’s sent their way.

Yet, if you have built an established working relationship with a journalist, it's fair to say that your email has a greater chance of being opened than an email from someone who is unfamiliar to the journalist. For feminist media relations professionals working to build relationships, it's also important to know that men still dominate the media industry. The Women's Media Center report “Divided 2019: The Media Gender Gap,” found that of the 28 top news outlets, “male journalists continue to report most news, especially for wires and TV prime-time evening broadcasts.” Practically, this means that more likely than

not, a media relations pro will pitch a story or respond to a request from a male member of the media.

Finally, it's important to note that the relationship between media relations practitioners and members of the media can be both friendly and adversarial. Those handling media relations have a reason for communicating that may not always align with that of a journalist or reporter. But good, ethical working relationships with members of the media that cover your issues may help you earn coverage. If you haven't already, develop a list of journalists, reporters and influencers that you would consider allies of your cause, and work to build (or renew) relationships with them.

LONG-TERM STRATEGIC PLANNING IS VITAL

Whom should you communicate with and when? What exactly do you communicate, and to whom? Who should be the face and the voice of the organization? A media relations plan will answer these questions, and a skilled media relations practitioner will develop a long-term plan that includes the identification of key messages and story angles that help meet your organizational objectives. Once these stories are pitched to members of the media, resulting media coverage is monitored and measured to determine whether or not your intended message(s) are getting through to intended audiences. Ideally, your media relations plan helps to create controlled and consistent messaging across media outlets to reach your target audiences. However, despite best efforts, it may not always go according to plan, because you can't control the kind of media coverage you earn. For example, in 2011, The Occupy Wall Street movement sought to end income and wealth inequality. In an ABC News story, the movement was criticized for a number of reasons, including a failure to clearly communicate its message:

As the Occupy Wall Street movement enters its fourth week of protests in lower Manhattan and spreads within New York and to several other major U.S. cities, its message is becoming a bouillabaisse of views representing the many groups that have signed on, and their demands are unclear.

Their causes include such diverse issues as global warming, gas prices and corporate greed—though most seem to be fueled by the common thread of anger at the wealthy and powerful at the expense of the middle class and less fortunate.

... But with the protests spreading to so many cities, there is no clear, single message, leaving many wondering what exactly people are protesting about (Katrandjian).

PARTNER WITH OTHER FEMINIST ORGANIZATIONS TO MAKE NEWS

Feminist activist groups with aligned objectives can and should work together to craft messaging and media relations strategies in order to maximize impact. A collaborative approach could help to frame major issues, ensure message clarity and consistency and enhance an overall understanding of the issue at hand. It's hard to know what earned media coverage has come as the result of proactive media relations efforts. The *TIME* article, “#MeToo and Time's Up Founders Explain the Difference Between the 2 Movements—And How They're Alike,” provides an interesting example of organizations with aligned messages possibly working together to clarify the missions and goals of their organizations and using the media to get their message to the masses. The article explains, “Although they overlap, there are distinct differences between the #MeToo and Time Up's organizations and the movements fueling their formation” (Langone). It goes on to interview #MeToo founder Tarana Burke and Christy Haubegger, a Creative Artists Agency executive who helped start Time's Up, “about what they see as the similarities and differences between their two organizations” (Langone).

For organizations with less visibility than #MeToo and Time's Up, collaboration can help to increase newsworthiness. For example, if two organizations collaborate on an event or protest, if there is evidence of a trend, or if they work to develop another newsworthy angle, there is a chance of increasing media coverage by working together. Finally, because many activist groups and organizations work with small budgets and staff (or volunteers), a collaborative approach to building relationships with feminist allies in media and social media can increase impact by saving time, resources, and money.

SOCIAL MEDIA CAN (AND SHOULD) BE USED TO AMPLIFY INTERSECTIONAL FEMINIST VOICES

From a communication standpoint, the advent of social media has been advantageous to feminist causes and activist organizations, as it has removed barriers to traditional media coverage, allowed for the identification of allies and

influencers, and given a voice to the often voiceless. Social media allows practitioners to craft the story of their organizations in the way they want it to be told, without having to go through traditional media. Social media is considered “owned” media (as well as “shared” media), meaning that you are in control (you “own”) of the content you create. For feminist organizations seeking to increase the diversity of voices and stories being told, social media provides the perfect space to highlight intersectional feminist voices.

Due to the nature of social media, much of this has happened organically, without the push of traditional media relations practitioners. From the article “Social Media Minds the Intersectional Gap,” published in *Ms. Magazine* in 2013, two popular hashtags on Twitter addressed a lack of intersectional feminism:

#SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen created by Mikki Kendall and #BlackPowerIsForBlackMen created by Jamilah Lemieux. The first addressed the racism black women face from some white feminists and the other spoke of the sexism they deal with from some black men. The stream of tweets pointed out the countless ways both of these groups, white women and black men, benefit from privilege, and how their refusal to acknowledge race or gender privilege throws black women under the bus (Little).

Of course, the #MeToo hashtag provides us with a blockbuster example of the power of social media to give voice to a wide range of people. According to Anderson and Toor at Pew Research, by September 30, 2018, the hashtag was used more than 19 million times on Twitter since Alyssa Milano’s initial tweet on October 15, 2017.

Certainly, not every organization can achieve such exposure or virality. But every organization *can* consider the role that social media platforms play in sharing messages, and use social media intentionally to highlight intersectional feminist voices. This approach involves the creation of content and the strategic sharing of content, by identifying the appropriate social media channels and the right influencers to amplify your content. Women from various backgrounds, races, and classes, including those without access to traditional forms of power, have emerged as strong feminist voices and allies on social media, elevating feminist causes like #MeToo from social media platforms to the top of the mainstream media’s agenda.

The role of social media and media relations practitioners within feminist activist groups and organizations, is to keep that momentum going.

CONCLUSION

Because media and social media have the power to influence public opinion, feminist activist groups and organizations must employ skilled communicators with a depth of understanding of our complex media environment in order to successfully get their messages out to the intended audience. With highly skilled practitioners and a robust media and social media strategy, activist groups and organizations have the ability to utilize the media not only to cover important issues, but to make significant impact.

APPENDIX 1

Advocacy Communications Manager, Washington or New York, TIME'S UP

TIME'S UP is looking for a Communications Manager to implement media relations strategies that inform and influence key audiences on TIME'S UP's corporate change and legislative change initiatives. Reporting directly to the VP of Communications, you will help oversee our advocacy storytelling and campaigns strategies, while executing daily communication tactics to enhance, and demonstrate, the impact of TIME'S UP. The Communications Manager should have a demonstrated excellence in multi-channel advocacy campaigns management, with particular experience producing material for the media, responding to media requests, preparing high-impact spokespeople, and proactively securing placements in a variety of media outlets.

What You'll Do:

- Own earned media strategy in support of TIME'S UP's objectives related to public policy, corporate change and industry change (with an emphasis on healthcare and tech sectors) by identifying and creating opportunities to elevate TIME'S UP and its surrogates in local, national and digital media.
- Supervise day-to-day work of PR agencies related to policy and corporate change advocacy.
- Support communications initiatives by drafting pitches, press releases, statements, advisories, op-eds, talking points, briefings, message guidance, fact sheets, blog posts, advisories, remarks, roundups, reports and more.
- Create and maintain a media contacts database of key journalists, columnists and editors, and take responsibility for building and maintaining strategic relationships.
- Create and maintain a database of high-impact surrogates and influencers, and take responsibility for forging and maintaining strategic relationships.
- Monitor media coverage and keep TIME'S UP leadership and staff up to date on breaking news, earned media opportunities, and important developments through daily clips and campaign reports.
- Manage events and editorial calendar, including writing impact and recap stories, outlining schedule, managing creative materials development, and recommending overall topics for storytelling.

- Proactively identify and deploy ways to disseminate key messages and build awareness of TIME'S UP to a diverse group of audiences.
- Assist in the development, coordination and execution of events that support the goals of the organization.

Key Competencies:

- Bachelor's Degree
- 5+ years of experience working directly with members of the media and managing communications plans, and/or as a journalist, ideally in state or federal advocacy.
- Motivated self-starter with excellent verbal/written communication skills, interpersonal and presentation skills.
- Ability to quickly develop in-depth knowledge of policy issues facing TIME'S UP with proficiency speaking and writing about them.
- Deep understanding of media and the workings of newsrooms and interview processes for both print and broadcast.
- Existing relationships with members of the political press and extensive knowledge of news media operations, including print, online, blogs and broadcast (encompassing cable, new media, podcasts, and other multimedia platforms).
- Experienced and comfortable with public speaking and cold calling reporters.
- Experience with media training specifically for broadcast and television.

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