

## **“No, It Has Nothing to Do With CSI” Using Public Relations to Promote New Forensic Programs**

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### **Abstract**

Directors of new forensic programs are commonly faced with the challenge of building program support within communities that have little, if any, prior knowledge of competitive forensics. The diversity of forensic events, organizations, and awards can make message development and program promotion a daunting task. The organizing schemata of a public relations campaign and an understanding of college and community media needs can be powerful tools for a new program director. This report provides forensic directors with specific strategies and tactics for implementing a public relations campaign to build program support.

### **Introduction**

Financial constraints and budget cuts are a common concern for forensic educators, and have been a recurring theme in forensic scholarship and at the Development Conference on Individual Events (Pettus & Danielson, 1992; Littlefield, 1989; Underberg, 1989). Current economic realities make budgeting concerns all the more daunting for many programs. In Florida, the state legislature has cut the budget for state schools by roughly \$130 million for the 2008 – 2009 year (Aasen, 2008). As universities tighten the belt by decreasing costs, those programs that are viewed as being costly and non-essential to the mission of the institution may face severe financial constraints or even the chopping block.

In order to ensure the continued development of forensic programs, program directors are charged with ensuring that their institution views the program as essential. There are many excellent arguments and studies available that explore the importance of collegiate speech and debate, unfortunately, the academic or pedagogical merit of a program does not always translate into a persuasive financial argument. For smaller programs in particular, the high cost of travel versus the number of students on a squad can be viewed as a costly expense to college administrators. Thus, directors must illustrate to administrators that the college realizes a tangible benefit through the funding of forensic programs. This is, in essence, a problem of public relations and can be tackled through a strategically-designed publicity campaign.

As many faculty have noted (occasionally with a note of cynicism), popular athletic programs often receive significant institutional support, even during

periods of budget cuts. As Moscowitz notes, “in a culture dominated by intercollegiate athletics, co-curricular competition in debate and IE ... usually resides in the shadows of football, basketball, and even field hockey” (2005, p. 61). In the eyes of administrators, athletic programs can fulfill two important roles for an institution: they may be a revenue source, and they raise the profile of the institution. Most forensic programs are not likely to provide the same wealth of alumni donations or media coverage as a strong football or basketball program. However, diligent promotion of collegiate forensics can provide a steady flow of local media coverage that exceeds other co-curricular activities. By working to build a higher program profile, program directors can generate a level of “buzz” about the activity that will help with recruitment while providing the college at large increased media exposure.

### **The Promotion Problem**

Forensics is a complex culture with a diverse body of organizations, events, rules, and competitions. As the title of this article jokingly points out, the very moniker “forensics” often confuses those not involved in the activity. From a public relations perspective, the primary problem becomes: how does one promote a complex program that the average individual knows little about? Even local media gatekeepers are unlikely to run stories that allow for a full discussion of the various forms of debate or individual events.

The role of the Director of Forensics entails wearing a variety of hats including educator, coach, travel agent, accountant and more. Program promotion adds another role to that list, which can be discouraging for those without a public relations background. Unfortunately, there is a lack of easily accessible promotional materials for DOF’s, particularly in regards to media relations. While strategies for recruitment are available in a variety of publications and conference proceedings, a review of the National Forensic Journal revealed only one article focusing primarily on publicity (Moscowitz, 2005). The literature available on promotion and publicity provide excellent suggestions for raising program awareness through demonstrations within the community, outreach to internal publics such as student government, website development, etc. but tend to overlook local media. Obtaining media coverage ranging from feature articles to news shorts is feasible for program

directors, and can be achieved without major additional time expenditures.

### **Elements of a Public Relations Campaign**

For public relations educators, there is no shortage of texts and articles proposing the “ideal” elements of a public relations campaign. Seemingly, each public relations author has compiled his or her own collection of items that are bundled into acronyms for ease of use, such as the RACE method (research, action, communication, evaluation) (Grung & Hunt, 1984), the ROPE method (research, objectives, planning, evaluation) (Hendrix & Hayes, 2006), and the ROSTE method (research, objectives, strategies, tactics, evaluation) (Parkinson & Ekachai, 2006). I am not brave enough to coin my own acronym, and full discussion of each element is beyond the needs of most program directors. The two areas that this article will focus on are research and strategies / tactics focusing on internal and local media.

The most basic objective for most program directors would be simply to increase the amount of media coverage a program receives. While a true public relations objective should be measurable, most teams do not need to establish a goal as specific as increasing reach and coverage by 20% over a six-month period, for example. An objective within the reach of most programs is regular coverage in school publications and local print media.

### **Researching Publicity Opportunities**

Gathering the necessary information for a campaign need not be a time consuming process, and can largely be handled by team members or work study students. The key is finding the right contact people within your institution and in the local media to target. Knowing who the gatekeepers are and what they are looking for is the starting point to increasing program awareness. The following are some research starting points for increasing a programs’ publicity network:

1. Create a media contact list which includes the college paper, local papers, and the college in-house public relations department / personnel. In-house PR personnel may also be willing to share a copy of the college media list.
2. The media list should include specific contact information for key editors (usually education section editors in your local paper). Also include journalists and editorialists who write for the education section of the paper.
3. Regularly read the education section of the local paper to get a feel for the writing style and topics that are covered.

4. Find out what the in-house process at your college or university is for creation and distribution of press releases.
  - a. Many schools have an online form for faculty to fill out with newsworthy information. In my experience, it is preferable to draft your own press releases and submit them rather than use this form. This will allow you to highlight the newsworthiness of your release, rather than allowing someone else to decide whether your update necessitates a press release.
  - b. Most institutions will not allow individual faculty or departments to send out promotional information without institutional approval. Make sure you know who the decision-makers are in that process. You are more likely to gain approval by submitting complete, newsworthy press releases.
5. Explore other avenues beyond college and local papers. Many local papers now offer online blogs or editions where users can post their own news. In-house publications such as alumni magazines or newsletters can also be targeted.
6. If your campus has a student public relations organization such as the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA), suggest that they organize a campaign for the team. If you have a public relations or journalism student on the team, suggest he or she take on the role of team publicist.

### **Strategies & Tactics for Getting by the Gatekeepers**

The problem program directors face in gaining publicity, as noted above, is that it is difficult to succinctly synthesize what the activity entails, what occurs at a tournament, the differences in events, forms of debate, and so on. For many of us in the forensic community, our passion for the activity makes it a challenge for us to explain it in a way that would fit within a ten-minute informative speech. If we have to explain the activity every time we want to promote it, the likelihood of getting our messages heard is small. Fortunately, there is one particular aspect of forensics that every editor and reader understands, and that collegiate media thrive upon: competition. Public relations efforts that strategically focus on competition are more likely to be well received and used by local media.

An easily overlooked resource for drafting press releases is the sports pages of college and local papers. Framing forensic press releases in a similar manner to athletic programs raises the interest level for readers. Even the most obscure of collegiate sports receive semi-regular coverage during a successful season. It is not necessary for journalists to explain those sports to the reader, because the

newsworthy element is the competition itself. Below are a number of framing tactics, some inspired by collegiate athletics, that can be employed by program directors in their own publicity efforts.

1. Don't overlook the value of college rivalries and dominant state sports teams. For example, some might argue that there are two types of Floridians: Gator fans & Seminole fans. So, when my team competes against UF or FSU, I note it in the press release.
2. Tie the program to school pride by connecting it to the college mascot name, particularly in headlines and lead paragraphs. For example: "Forensic Bruins Score Big at Kentucky Invitational".
3. At large tournaments, make note of the number of teams participating, at smaller tournaments, focus on the number of students participating.
4. Report both on students who have done well at a tournament and students who have shown improvement.
5. If the program is participating in a number of tournaments on consecutive weekends or there are not a lot of "breaks" to report, report two consecutive tournament results in one release. For example, "Smith and Jones Close the Season with Regional and National Wins."
6. Incorporate quotations from students on the team, team captains, and coaching staff. Use quotations from coaching staff to focus on a student or the team's success or improvements. Listen carefully during awards ceremonies for quotable statements by the tournament director.
7. Explain the importance of regional and national tournaments that act as division qualifiers, state championships, honorary nationals, etc.
8. Mention when students qualify for national tournaments, and note how many events the student has qualified in. For example: "Doe's 2<sup>nd</sup> place finish in after dinner speaking qualifies her to compete at the American Forensic Association national championship. This is the third AFA event Doe has qualified for this season."
9. If you host a competition, pitch the tournament as a feature story to local editors or invite a local columnist to judge.
10. When a speech or interpretive topic is timely in relation to regional or national news, include the topic in the release. For example, "Jones also placed third in after dinner speaking with her

presentation on how the marketing industry sexualizes preteen girls."

11. Create a boilerplate (closing paragraph) that summarizes the history of the team and provides contact information for readers. This is a basic press release element and will add consistency to releases. (See bottom of appendix A for example).

### Conclusion

While no set of strategies or tactics can guarantee successful coverage of a program, following the suggestions listed above should help program directors improve frequency of publication in local media. A full public relations campaign must go beyond press releases and media relations, but press releases are a primary means for reaching the objective of increasing local awareness of forensics through media coverage. For administrators, co-curricular programs that receive regular media coverage provide an attractive selling point for the quality of academics at the institution.

Nearly twenty years ago, Robert Littlefield (1989) noted the need for a promotional package for forensic directors lacking public relations expertise. In that time, a wealth of materials have developed with suggestions for fund raising, program justification, and profile building on campus. The budget crunches colleges and universities are facing across the country provides a renewed incentive for the forensic community to spread the word beyond campus through local media.

### Appendix A – Sample Press Release

#### FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**Contact:** Public Relations  
(863) 555-4118

#### FORENSIC "BRUINS" START THE SPRING SEASON OFF STRONG

SPRINGLAND, Fla. (Jan.21, 2008)-Sophomore John Doe and junior Jane Smith kicked off the spring competition season over the weekend with three top finishes at the Winter Haven Invitational Tournament.

The University of East Florida hosted eleven college and university teams at the Winter Haven Invitational, including the University of Florida, Florida State University, University of West Florida and others. Doe and Smith were the only members of the team competing at the tournament, and placed in three out of the four events they entered.

Doe continued his winning streak from the fall season, walking away with a first place finish in Dramatic Interpretation and fourth place in Prose Interpretation. Newcomer Jane Smith shined in her first outing, finishing in the top ten in Impromptu Speaking and sixth in After Dinner Speaking.

“John has been on his game this year,” said coach Jack Jones, “he has showed consistent improvements in his rankings at every tournament.”

This is the second time the team has walked away with multiple awards at the Winter Haven Invitational despite a small entry. With several new recruits to the team, this looks to be a promising semester for the forensic “Bruins”.

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The Wright University Forensics Team began competing in intercollegiate competition in Fall 2005, and is sponsored through a generous grant by local businessman, T.T. Landerry. In their three years of competition, the team has earned regional and national recognition. For more information about Intercollegiate Forensics, please contact Coach Jack Jones at [jjones@wrightuniversity.edu](mailto:jjones@wrightuniversity.edu).

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