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Framing the Fight: Media Savvy Bolsters Corporate Campaigns

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Framing the Fight: Media Savvy Bolsters Corporate Campaigns

Abstract

[Excerpt] Marc Rich was a marked man. His face smirked from thousands of wanted posters plastered across the country, hung up in union halls from Scranton, Pa. to Sacramento, Ca. The poster even found its way to Switzerland where Rich resided. Rich was a man marked by the United Steelworkers of America in its battle with the Ravenswood Aluminum Company of West Virginia. The Steelworkers' corporate campaign to save the workers at "Fort RAC" included a media strategy with all the right moves.

Keywords

media strategy, corporate campaigns

WANTED

MARC RICH

◆ FUGITIVE ◆



\$750,000 REWARD

Marc Rich, head of the Marc Rich Group Companies, is wanted by the U.S. Government, which is offering a \$750,000 award for his arrest, on a 65-count indictment for:

- ◆ Tax fraud
- ◆ Racketeering
- ◆ Conspiracy
- ◆ Trading with the enemy

Rich is also alleged to have:

- ◆ Traded grain to the Soviet Union during the US grain embargo of 1979-80
- ◆ Shipped oil to South Africa during the international trade embargo

HIDEOUT:
WARNING:

Zug, Switzerland
Apprehension of suspect may be **EXTREMELY DANGEROUS**—alleged to be protected by mercenaries armed with sub-machine guns.

Framing the Fight

Media savvy bolsters corporate campaigns

■ *Karen Keiser*

Marc Rich was a marked man. His face smirked from thousands of wanted posters plastered across the country, hung up in union halls from Scranton, Pa. to Sacramento, Ca. The poster even found its way to Switzerland where Rich resided. Rich was a man marked by the United Steelworkers of America in its battle with the Ravenswood Aluminum Company of West Virginia. The Steelworkers' corporate campaign to save the workers at "Fort RAC" included a media strategy with all the right moves.

A media strategy in a corporate campaign deploys a range of public and private actions all focused on the goal of changing or stopping a corporate behavior. The components of the strategy range from expensive newspaper ads to street theater events, from standard news releases to costly video productions. In combining news events, news coverage and perhaps paid media, the strategy builds one hit upon the next. For example, an in-depth investigation by an individual newspaper reporter could be followed by a news event such as a rally, to be further expounded upon in a radio call-in talk show, and enhanced by a media ad buy.

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The key to successful media strategy is its linkage to the goals and timetables of the overall corporate campaign—the media component should *never drive* the corporate campaign. Becoming diverted from the main campaign goal is always a danger for people caught up in the glamour and perceived legitimacy that can come with extensive media coverage. Strategists should resist the temptation to exploit every publicity opportunity if the overall campaign dictates more reticence. The success of a media strategy cannot be measured only by how many inches of newsprint or how many seconds of TV coverage the issue received. The more accurate, but difficult measure, is judging how effective the public spotlight has worked to create enough heat to force the corporation to change.

FRAMING THE ISSUES OUR WAY

The communications effort begins with the right approach, or frame, for the issue. The frame is crucial to both the media's and the public's understanding of the story. It offers a useful point of reference so that the story can be understood without going into all the details. The frame creates "the big picture;" it makes the story easy to grasp and to remember.

Labor can frame issues in several ways:

■ **David vs Goliath** This is always a popular positioning for unions who are battling a large corporation. The American public and the media have a large reservoir of sympathy for "the little guy." This frame works well for many plant closing situations or labor disputes where a small local is pitted against a big multi-national. Recently a tiny 30-member local of Teamsters took on the boot manufacturer Iron Age and successfully promoted a national boycott.

■ **Social Justice** Calling upon a higher moral force or religious institutional endorsement is a successful method favored by unions representing exploited and low-paid workers. This approach has worked very well for the Justice for Janitors campaign through the Service Employees International Union and the United Farm Workers.

■ **Political Clout** This can be a dangerous positioning that sometimes backfires in media coverage. But demonstrating a union's economic or electoral strength and political savvy can be a very effective tool with powerful people. In many cities the local teachers association has achieved its goals through this approach.

■ **In Common Good** Coalition-building around a common interest can be a strong approach for media coverage as well as for organizing on the issue itself. This strategy has worked well in linkages with environmental groups and women's groups. For example, in Northern California when building trades unions linked up with environmental groups, they successfully stopped several non-union, environmentally damaging building projects.

■ **Strange Bedfellows** A variant of the "common good" approach is an alliance with organizations that unions don't normally work with, such as the NRA. The oddity of the association can reap some media attention, but it can also be divisive within each organization. A decade ago, the OSHA-Environmental Network began as an alliance pushing the worker-community right-to-know laws, at a time when labor and environmental interests were generally considered enemies. The linkage received favorable media attention because it was unexpected.

■ **Betrayal!** Claiming that the corporation cheated, lied, schemed and broke promises is a standard position for many unions. Portraying oneself as a victim can be useful but also debilitating if the members or leadership conclude they really are powerless victims. The United Auto Workers' campaign against Caterpillar uses this frame.

A media strategist must weigh the resonance and dissonance of each approach to determine which fits best. When a corporate campaign is being considered, trying on these different frames and thinking through the possible developments will be a helpful exercise in setting the overall strategy.

Frames may even be changed during the course of a campaign and can sometimes be combined as long as they don't send contradictory messages. For example, a "David and Goliath" frame won't work in conjunction with a "Political Clout" frame. But a "Social Justice" frame fits nicely along with an "In Common Good" frame. It's vital to understand that frames only work if they reinforce our culture's presumptions and assumptions. A "counter-culture" frame is almost an oxymoron; it simply doesn't fit.

"Pitching" a story or "working an angle" is a kind of game in itself. The goal is to get past being a nonentity and becoming a media reality with coverage of your issue, event or grievance. Getting the first credible reporter, preferably a newspaper reporter, to write the definitive story is the first step towards media credibility. Once that's achieved the campaign can move forward.

To help give the cause more credibility when seeking news

attention, a typical publicist ploy is to copy a newspaper article that relates to the issue from the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal* or perhaps the *L.A. Times*. The main article needs to come from one of these publications because they typically set the agenda for nearly all the rest. One can use articles from local papers, but they never seem to have the same impact. This approach can cause a “snowball” effect that actually works pretty well with sophisticated, cynical reporters.

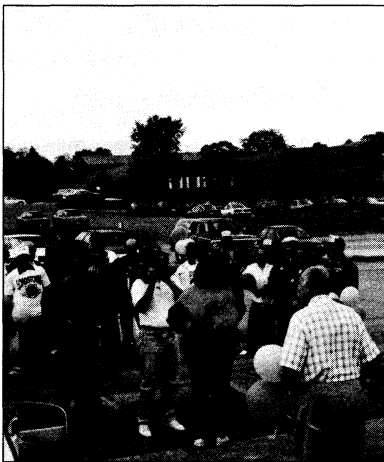
Getting through the gate takes persistence, timing and luck. It also requires that you have a “good story.” A story deemed worthy of coverage must meet basic news values:

1. Does it affect the general public in a direct way?
2. Does it have strong human emotion?
3. Can it be linked in some way to other major recent news events?
4. Is it odd, unusual or bizarre?
5. Is there anything interesting to take pictures of?

If the union’s story cannot connect with at least one, and preferable two of those basic news values, it probably won’t get much coverage.

Applying pressure through publicity and ever-growing public support is a useful tool in achieving change. Corporations have a long history of changing behavior in response to public opinion. The important question to answer is how much public support can the campaign build through the various means of publicity.

To build public support one has to decide which “public” will have the most impact on the targeted corporation.



The campaign must then find what message will likely move the targeted audience to be sympathetic to the union’s case. The union must understand the values of its targeted audience and speak to it appropriately and persuasively about those values. If the audience values low, low prices, the union must show prices aren’t as low as they had been led to believe. If the audience values service, the union must show that service is shoddy, and so on. The United Food and Commercial

Workers, for example has recognized the importance in appealing to consumer values in their fights against Food Lion and Wal-Mart by pointing out food safety issues and false advertising about “Made in America” merchandise.

No matter how strong or weak unions are in a given area, campaign planners will make a big mistake if they base their message solely on union lines. The vast majority of Americans are not union members and have no direct knowledge of union culture. Hard core unionists who want hard core union messages—such as “Don’t Cross Our Picket Line!” will be perplexed when their messages don’t hit their targets. *The only successful strategy is to identify correctly what values your targeted audience holds and then speak clearly and honestly to them about how those values are affected by your cause.* Sending the wrong message to the correctly targeted audience will misfire. It might even backfire.

Any union taking on a large corporation must be prepared for and have a counter-strategy to deal with the corporation’s response to the union’s attack. Brainstorm about the worst case scenarios before any negative publicity develops rather than reacting to charges or accusations. The corporate response can be very heavy handed or very sophisticated, and either way, it may have significant media support, especially from local newspaper publishers. A prepared union corporate campaign should be able to undercut media sympathy with a counter-strategy of its own. The key to successful counter-strategies is a credible, prompt response. No corporate charge or media move should be unanswered, preferably the same day.

One final item of preparation must also be addressed: the budget. Media strategies are not in themselves expensive, but some elements are. Media buys or newspaper ads will easily run up to several thousands of dollars, direct mail campaigns can cost a bundle and producing professional video is excruciatingly expensive. Low budgets can be just as effective as big budgets, if the strategists use the full range of free media options to their full potential. It’s a helluva lot of work to stretch a media budget, but with creativity and a fair measure of rank and file participation, it can be accomplished.

ALL THE RIGHT MOVES

Once the corporate campaign’s goals and outcomes are thought through and the media plan is roughed out, the real tactical work of a media strategy begins:

■ Develop a comprehensive, up-to-date, functional general media

mail and phone list of the market(s), local and/or national, even multi-national media outlets. If the targeted corporation has branch offices in other cities, check out those media outlets. If the targeted corporation has offices in other countries, begin to research the media outlets available internationally. Buy these lists, get them through sources in the public library, or create one from scratch. For the life of the campaign, this will be a “bible” for the media campaign.

■ Select the most influential media voices on the issues being framed and on the company being targeted. Judgment must be used here. Become a keen media observer. Do not choose to contact an individual reporter or writer because of personal preference. Choose them because of their beat, their influence or position. Generally newspaper, editorial columnists, and sometimes television commentators hold the most influence in local markets.

Target the many special interest magazines and publications that specialize in the industry of the corporation. Every company has its trade publications that cover developments from an insider’s perspective, such as “Aviation Week & Space Technology.” They alert competitors to the latest news and can be very useful in a union’s strategy.

Also, don’t forget our friends in the labor movement. The regional labor press associations can help you get the word out to other local unions, and central bodies in your area. The International Labor Communication Association (ILCA) can help get the story out to other International Unions. Be aware that the time lines for union publications and some trade publications are much longer because they may publish on a monthly or bi-monthly basis. Send them an early advance release dated embargoed until their next issue.

■ Build a substantial press packet filled with background materials that presents the union’s research and arguments. As soon as a few newspaper articles are published that reflect the union’s position accurately, include those in an updated press packet. Give press packets to individual reporters, producers and editors as they cover the story over the next several months. Try to freshen the press packet with new information often.

■ Make appointments for one-on-one meetings with those influential media voices that have been identified. A strategic decision to make is whether those columnists or reporters should break the story or would it be better to have them hold it until the formal campaign is launched. If you want it held, be sure to make that clear before the meeting begins. If they don’t agree to hold it, do not confide any advance information.

You are in a trust-building first meeting with these influence-shapers, so you must be very careful of how it is conducted. Do not play games or try to pull off a quick coup. Be honest, forthright and clear.

- Shortly after the one-on-one meetings, send out that campaign's first full news release to the universe of the media mailing list. This is the campaign's "for the record" release. It should briefly announce the campaign, the campaign goals, and the reason for the campaign. Include the names of whom to contact, with day and night phone numbers included. It can be made tantalizing, with a "This is only the beginning. . ." promise.
- Follow up with news releases on a regular basis. As every phase of the campaign unfolds, be sure to mark it with a full-scale release.
- The labor press associations will often provide labels of member publications or might even include camera ready materials in a mailing—but only if you ask for their help and can offer labor editors articles, art or photographs.
- If the campaign has the financial wherewithall to purchase newspaper or radio ads, they can be very effective at the launching of a campaign, running simultaneously or just before news releases go out. As in all advertising, repetition (some say at least seven repeated messages are needed for a person to really respond) is key. By combining paid and free media in a concentrated period of time for the launching, one can sometimes get a level of repetition that is really effective in "putting you on the map."
- Track the coverage received from the news media. If certain outlets ignored the issue or event, redouble efforts towards them. If individual reporters treated the issue fairly, be sure and do them a favor in the future.
- Because of who we are, we find the most success when our members are involved. This is especially true in media events. Any media event (other than the mailed out news release, or one-on-one meeting) should have rank-and-file presence. Our members are almost always our best missionaries and reporters will zero in on them. Whether it's an informational picket line in front of a stockholders meeting, or a sit-in in company headquarters, having our rank-and-file union members take the public lead creates the most successful media coverage. Make sure the members are articulate on the issues before sending them into a public media event. In many cases, our members tell their own story better than any official or authority can.

Conversely, we know—and the media knows—a campaign is in trouble when the only people leafletting, picketing or conducting the news conference are union officers and staffers. If a union doesn't have involved, committed members enlisted in the cause, it will have a difficult time winning its campaign.

■ Although more people watch TV than read newspapers for their information, television news generally follows newspaper coverage, so a newspaper article should be your primary goal.

On the other hand, certain events are just “made for TV.” When colorful, confrontational, action-oriented events are planned, television is the natural medium to turn to. Television has its own energy and excitement; and our members find encouragement and inspiration when the union's story is covered by television.

■ Well-produced videos can pack a powerful punch. Although a good 7-15 minute video costs a lot, a union would be well advised to hire a union crew to shoot and edit the project. Several campaigns have used these videos to help spread their message. The United Farm Workers was one of the first unions to use this technique. It began distributing the “Wrath of Grapes,” in the mid-1980s. The Steelworkers's video about RAC proved to be a useful fundraising tool for the locked-out workers.

In a case of life imitating art, the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Local 11 in Los Angeles distributed “City on the Edge” just before the Rodney King case and the ensuing uprising. The video, produced during protracted contract negotiations with the powerful Hotel Employers Association, predicted civil disturbances if the wage gap between the wealthy and poor continued to grow. The union planned to send copies to convention planners all over the country warning them that Los Angeles was a powder keg about to blow. The initial distribution targeted members of the Employers Association, the uprising occurred, and the Employers Association quickly settled.

Amateur video can also be a useful tool if it is in the form of a “hidden camera” or “inside story” perspective. Many of our members have personal video cameras, and they can be used to authenticate conditions or treatment inside a plant or company where the media cannot go. If, for example, one wanted to expose a company dumping waste at night, a handcam in the hands of a motivated member might just be able to blow the story open. This “eyewitness video” approach is becoming more and more common, and we should make every effort to include the strategy in our media plan.

■ Editorial Boards and Letters to Editors is another avenue to pursue, but don't count on any editorial support. Meeting with the

editorial page writers and editors of major newspapers is almost always a useless exercise for a union engaged in a corporate campaign. Newspaper publishers set policy for editorial pages. Publishers almost always oppose union campaigns. Letters to the Editor pages can be one avenue to an editorial page presence. A substantial number of letters supporting a union position can find their way into print in a sustained effort. Individual editorial page columnists can be part of the union's "influential voices" effort described earlier.

■ With the continuing escalation of direct mail costs, it is questionable whether huge direct mail campaigns are worth the effort. Getting people to mail post cards or other form letters to corporations might have some effect if the response totally inundates the company's mail room. But a disappointing trickle of response mail is a risk the campaign might not want to take.

New kinds of direct mail techniques, and some new strategies to contain direct mail costs must be developed to keep direct mail as part of a successful media strategy in a union's corporate campaign. Perhaps hand deliveries of bulk copies which are in turn distributed by hand on the shop or store floor is a more effective approach. This kind of one-on-one approach to "mass mail" projects seems contradictory but might generate additional benefits beyond what can be expected from the typical direct mail campaign. At any rate the tactic of direct mail should be carefully considered from a cost/benefit perspective.

CONCLUSION

Corporate campaigns can be run without a high media profile, and that too is a strategy that is sometimes successful, especially when the commitment of large investors is hinging on certain developments. But in general, corporate campaigns are undertaken to publicly pressure a company to change its behavior. The public pressure can be created and enhanced with a fully developed media strategy. The individual elements of that strategy are not new, but the total focus on a clearly-understood goal is. The chances for success for the corporate campaign goal increase dramatically when a clear media strategy is an integrated part of that campaign. ■