

SUSTAINING YOUR MEDIA PRESENCE

ARSHAD HASAN: Welcome to DFA Nightschool's summer 2006 session on the media. Today is the third of three sessions on the media. Today we'll focus on the more strategic side of media work, sustaining your media presence. My name is Arshad Hasan, and I'm the training director for Democracy for America. Nightschool is a project of the DFA Training Academy whose mission it is to network, focus, and train grassroots activists. We've always said, "You have the power." Now we challenge you: How are you going to use it?

We've discussed at length different ways to break into the media and get on the news. This session will focus on sustaining that media presence. Voters need to hear a message many times before they start paying attention to it. We need to get them the news not once but many times over a sustained period of time. The two goals of this presentation are to figure out how to build up that media profile over time, and how to incorporate the skills we learned in the past two sessions, which were "breaking into the mainstream media" and "leveraging online media."

Good media coverage results not only from using the tools we've discussed in the last two sessions (such press releases, radio feeds, and blogs), but also from using these tools according to a well-thought-out plan. And that's the key, having a plan. The key to having a good plan is being able to effectively manage the three components that comprise your plan. You'll need to manage a message calendar, manage your press lists, and manage your relationships with key reporters and bloggers.

The first step in developing a good communications plan is to figure out a system which helps you prepare for media coverage you intend to receive. This system should coordinate your message inside your organization between and among your departments. It's counterproductive to have a media spokesperson saying one thing and all the volunteers saying a different thing. Everyone should be on message, reinforcing each other. If you're working with a number of different organizations to support a common goal, then the whole coalition of organizations should coordinate their message together. This message should be reinforced at every event, every announcement, and every outside appearance. You've got to make sure that everyone is coordinated well. At the same time, making sure that you're paying attention to the news cycle.

So how do you do all of this all at once? Well the message calendar is where all of this comes together. It's your way of maintaining control over political media coverage. The message calendar is a planning guide used to keep people focused and proactive about news coverage. Earned media, paid media (which are advertisements), events, appearances, announcements, and even volunteers should ideally adhere to the message on the calendar.

Campaign communications is sometimes reactive and opportunistic. An event happens or a news item breaks and your campaign has got to respond. Because of the chaos of the campaign, especially as the election date draws nearer, people forget that much more of the communications plan is that—is planned out. The campaign makes an event happen. The campaign is the news item. The campaign should be controlling the news that comes out of it.

Remember that news cycle from the previous sections? Your events and announcements don't happen in a vacuum. They happen in a competition with a flood of other events. And they happen when people are and are not paying attention, when reporters are and are not ready to cover them. So that's why we have to consider the news cycle as we do our media calendar. To break through all this clutter you have to plan your events ahead of time. More than that, you have to plan a consistent message which runs through each event, each announcement, and each effort to contact voters. The message calendar helps you plan for the news and to proactively insert the message into the news cycle.

So what does a message calendar look like? Well here's a fictional example. The first column is the message for the week. And the next columns are the different tools and tactics used to carry out that message on a timeline. Each public event, announcement, appearance and voter contact activity is plugged into this calendar. Each of these events reflect that message, whether it's at the door with a volunteer, on television as an ad, or in person with the candidate, each communication is going to highlight the message. And in this case, in the first week the message is "Every Vermonter deserves a doctor." Note that next week the message moves from universal access to quality health care. The message can repeat, or a message can change from time to time, so long as there's a plan.

We mentioned earlier that the key to getting media outlets to respond to your stories are to get to know your media outlets. The most basic aspect of this is to know who to contact and how to get ahold of that person. At the very least, you're building up a list of beat reporters for various news outlets. But let's take this a step further and figure out not only who to contact, but also what to expect. Campaigns and organizations typically keep up-to-date media contact lists, sometimes called press lists or press books. Your media contact list is more than just a series of names and numbers. It's your first outreach for media outreach. Your media list should give you all the information you need to start up or to continue a relationship with a targeted employee of any media outlet.

Look for information both about the outlet and the relevant reporters, news directors and assignment editors for each outlet. You'll want to find a system for sorting out this information. The basic paradigm is just to sort by type of outlet (TV, radio, etc.), by name of outlet, and by names of reporters. Information about your press contacts is valuable, not just because of the beat that they cover, but also the kind of coverage that is given to you or similar subjects. Include the kind of things that interest the reporter, and be sure to include a spot for marking in previous contacts and notes about your relationship with that contact.

You can find some media lists publicly available or available for a fee. Even some libraries will have reference books with some of these listings. Most of the publicly available lists are only starting points for you, because you'll want to keep a record of your contacts and your conversations. Remember, your list is dynamic. And it's something that you'll want to keep up to date, because reporters really do move around quite a bit, they move to different outlets, and they even change their beats frequently within an outlet.

Certainly, the more use you make of your list and the more detailed and organized your list, the more valuable your media list becomes. So how do you make use of your list in the first place?

How do you get started on your media list. Well let's say there's a story you want to get in your hometown media. First we look at the outlets you're targeting. Some are going to be more important than others. The largest circulation newspaper in a city is a high priority for just about any news item, whereas a small neighborhood newspaper which covers mostly gossip is probably low on your priority list. Then look at the relationships that you have. Maybe the reporter at the major paper only sometimes returns your call. The small local paper usually returns your calls, and the local radio station frequently returns your calls, and so on.

The outlets on which you'll have the greatest impact are going to be the ones you have a good relationship with. That could be a factor in your targeting. You want to spend time with the people who will give you return for your time. At the same time, you do want to spend time on those outlets that will make the greatest impact among your readers and listeners. That high-circulation newspaper, that major newspaper, always needs to become a priority. It's a relationship you're going to think about developing and improving. We'll talk about that more in a bit.

Second, target for relevance. If you've got a story that affects people in the city limits, you would exclude outlets whose audience isn't primarily city residents. It's not worth your time. You want to be targeting a particular constituency. If you're targeting a particular constituency, let's say the business community or Spanish-speaking populations, be sure to include specialty outlets which cater to those communities specifically. Then start making your contacts. Keep persisting pleasantly with those contacts. Ask them if they received your press advisory. Ask them if they'll be attending the event, and so on. It helps to maintain regular contact with people on your press list, even if you're not pushing for a story. The more familiar they are with you, the more likely they'll listen to you and to your message. The more likely they listen to your message, the more likely they'll get that message out to the outlet.

You might find ways to be helpful to a reporter. And it's much easier to be helpful if you're paying attention to that reporter. For example, if you know a reporter is working on an unrelated story but you can point them to a good resource to help them out, they're more likely to remember you later when you interact with them for your stories. Keep track of your relationship as it develops. If a reporter prefers tea to coffee at morning events, make a note of it. It's not going to make sense to keep serving this reporter coffee and they keep saying, "I'm really a tea drinker, but thank you anyway." If a reporter is lactose intolerant, it's a good idea to make sure you're not giving them a cheese danish at your morning events. If a reporter is a Red Sox fan, ask if he or she has seen the last game, assuming you've seen the game and have similar interests.

These examples can keep going on. The important thing is that you write these down in your press book so that you remember. One of our regular media trainers is a biking enthusiast, and an editor for one of the papers which she commonly pitches stories to was looking for a bike, and they went shopping for a bike together. Not that the media consultant really didn't buy the bike. But, you know, it helped them and they went shopping together. You can imagine that they have a very close relationship. And the next time that person calls up that person for a story, they'll make time to talk to that person and listen to what they have to say. And a good press list will help you respond more rapidly when a story breaks, and helps you control the story

as it develops. Because that list is sort of the key to all your relationships. That's how you've tracked everything down.

This screen starts out with, "The only bias that counts is familiarity." And that's really the case when it comes to working with the media. The biggest bias to worry about is not right vs. left, and it's not the interest of corporate control. It's you. The relationship you develop with a reporter is the greatest advantage that you're going to have over the long run sustaining a media presence. Most reporters aren't nearly as partisan as the people who make accusations of partisanship are. If reporters were so partisan and if it really were affecting their reporting, we'd actually see a lot more left-leaning coverage, since the vast majority of reporters, according to study after study, are in fact Democrats.

Most reporters also don't have any contact with the corporate owners of their media. Frankly, corporations are more worried about selling the next story and making a profitable outlet than they are about altering each and every detail of the story. If they have an agenda, it's difficult to enforce from afar. A good relationship gets you better stories and more of them because the most partisan face that they will have the most exposure to will be yours. And that can be a really good thing. The important thing here to note is that editors—the people who are assigning stories and the people who do have the power to change a reporter's stories—will listen to those reporters when those reporters make a good case about the story. So the key then is to develop that good relationship with the reporter such that the reporter becomes an advocate for the story and the angle that you have pitched.

The best way to develop a good genuine relationship with reporters is to follow a sort of golden rule of media relationships, and that's respect: respect the reporter's time; respect the truth; respect the relationship; and respect the record. Good relationships are built on a foundation of mutual respect. No public figure who openly distained the media ever really got a break from them. So throughout your time on the campaign or in an organization, these are the four key principles of working with the media, respect.

Respect the reporter's time; get to know their deadlines. Reporters work on story ideas, interviews, and travel throughout the morning and early afternoon. They sometimes work with editors into the evening. So the best time to contact any media outlet for a story is in the morning. Again, ask the individual reporters about their deadlines. Return calls and emails as soon as you can. Remember, they can air or print the story with or without you. So if you want to get your side of the story in, make sure you have a good idea of what the reporter's time looks like. Previous Nightschool sessions have detailed what that timeline is in talking about the news cycle, so please do review that.

Second, respect the truth: never, never, never lie. And that's sort of obvious to say. The reason is that no lie will gain you a greater advantage than the risk of getting caught for it. The cover-up will be a much bigger story, a much greater story, than whatever the truth had been in the first place. And if you don't know the answer, just say so. If you don't want a reporter to talk about something, don't talk about it. And if you know that your opponent has something damaging about you, reveal it first—pre-emptive truth telling. That steals all the thunder. So

make sure that you're not trying to cover something up. Or even half-truths can get uncovered and be awkward for you later to deal with.

Third, respect the relationship. Reporters are always looking for good stories not friends. Their loyalty is to their job not to their subjects. But you should be friendly. But even in the most casual of settings they're still a reporter and you're still a potential news story. You want to respect the relationship on two different levels. You don't want to become their absolute best friend and think that's where it stands. At the same time you don't want to be cold and distant to a reporter. You'll get their attention and you'll get their respect by having a casual relationship with them that doesn't get too casual; a casual relationship with them that doesn't turn too stiff. So, for example if you know a reporter loves to bike, then go ahead and help them shop for bikes. But don't, as a favor, buy the bike for them. You want to respect that relationship. You don't want them to resent you or take advantage of you.

And then finally, fourth, respect the record. Anything you can say can be used for print or broadcast. The whole sort of comment about "off the record" makes for great television drama but it doesn't always work so conveniently in practice. When you're beginning your relationship, assume that you and everyone else are always on the record. At the end of the day it's the reporter who determines what they're reporting, not you. As you develop your relationship you can make it clear and explicit before you say anything, "I'd like to keep my comments off the record. Is that okay with you?" But beyond that, beyond actually having developed that relationship, and without actually making very explicit what your comment should be regarding the record, you want to make sure and you want to assume that all your comments are on the record.

One great way to get started developing a relationship with a reporter is just to meet them, to greet them. If you're running a campaign, for example, or even an organization, it would be useful to have your executive director or the candidate themselves actually go and have lunch with the reporter. Go and have breakfast, or go to the reporter's office, or just have a sit-down chat. It can be on the record, and it usually is. Or you can decide beforehand that it's just sort of off the record as a good way to familiarize yourself. This is as simple as calling them up and asking them if they have time later on just for a chat, just to let them know. This is particularly useful for campaigns, but it can also be useful for issue groups and non-profits.

At events and at announcements and this kind of thing, you want to make sure that you're prepared with a reporter. If they've never seen you before that you introduce yourself, that they sign in so that you can contact them again. If you've given them a press packet, for example (which is just a packet that includes the press release, maybe the press advisory, a bio, some additional information) you're giving that to them and sort of starting that relationship, building them up. Make sure you're always introducing your reporter to the candidate or making sure that they get some time with the candidate if the reporter wants to. As always, first impressions are important, not just because first impressions are generally important in life, but also because this first impression translates into the first impression not just for the reporter but for the entire public. Remember that reporter is reporting on you not just to their small group of friends but to the entire listening audience, readership audience, or viewing audience.

Editorial board meetings are a particularly special kind of meeting. Again, it's something that you set up beforehand, but it's set up with the editors usually of a newspaper. Editors will take a position on an issue or on a candidate election based on editorial board meetings. Newspapers generally do not put out an endorsement without inviting each candidate or without inviting both sides of an issue to sit down at a table and brief the editor about the different angles. The editor will usually take a good amount of time familiarizing themselves with all the nuances of the campaign, including the reporting that the newspaper outlet has done previously. Editorial board meetings are not only just about developing a relationship, but coming prepared with enough information. Sometimes having a good editorial can be a real coup in a campaign. Sometimes having an editorial board meeting just prevents something devastating from happening in a campaign.

People take seriously the editorial section of a major paper. Most people really do see the newspaper stories as being objective but the editorials as being an opinion that they can follow. Editorials are by definition opinion-making pieces. So you want to make sure that when you sit down you have a good formal relationship, you're able to talk about the kind of things that you want to talk about, you're always on message whether you're on or off the record, but you're making a good impression and that you're being as prepared as possible. Set up editorial board meetings in advance as much as you can. Generally newspapers don't have editorial board meetings more than six weeks before an election. So make sure you get that dialog going and make that offer around that time, or maybe even before that time.

Persistence is a key trait to a good communications plan. You want to make sure that you're being pleasantly persistent, of course, but that you are always following up with a reporter, checking in to make sure that a story is getting published, or that your quote is correct. You want to make sure that you're also being prompt. If a reporter has a question for you, try to answer it as quickly as possible. If you don't have that answer to that question immediately, do make sure you get that answer to them in that same news cycle. Remember, again, they can print with or without the information you give them, so you want to be prompt.

The other side of this is to try to be as accessible as possible. So if you're giving a reporter your cell phone, which is a good idea, then make sure you do answer that call. If they're calling your voicemail, make sure you update your voicemail regularly. Let the reporter or whoever's calling know where you are and how you can be reached if you're away from your desk. Because reporters have deadlines and because they have a certain amount of lead time, you want to make sure that you're not only being persistent but also being as helpful as possible, as in doing as much work as possible. They've got to balance multiple stories; they're balancing multiple priorities. So you want to make sure that you're not only being persistent, that you're not only following up, but making yourself a priority in their daily lives.

The best way to make it a priority for the reporter to report your story is to make it easy for the reporter to report your stories. Again, reporters are busy and they're stretched thin, so the more work you can do for them on the story, ready and available for them to print, the more likely they'll be able to go to print with your story, the more likely they'll be to go and put it on the air or put it on line with your story. You want to prepare as much of the research for them; you want to have quotes written down for them, so that even if they weren't at the event or even

if they were doing something else when the good quote came along, you just so happen to have it written down in the press release itself.

Remember back to the press release, when you write it up, it's one of those documents that are written as if you could write the story yourself. As if you could just cut and paste and put it in the newspaper. In fact, if you've written a really good press release, the reporter will go ahead and take bits and pieces right from the press release and put it in the paper. This is enormously easy for the reporter to do. It saves them a great deal of time and puts the campaign in the perspective that you want it to be put in. A reporter, of course, would only do this if they trusted you and if you wrote a good story, if it fact it was a good story. If you've got a whole stack of research and you want to give it to the reporter, they're not going to be able to read all of it. But what you can do is highlight the bits and pieces that you want to actually have the paper, the kinds of things a reporter might run with. So do as much of the work for them as possible.

In your press packet, the document or set of documents that you give to a reporter when they show up to an event or announcement, they'll have the press release in it. It may also have some research in it. It might have a candidate bio in it or speaker bios inside that packet. It can have a brochure about your organization or a piece of lit from your campaign. It has all the materials a reporter would need to write the story right there for them, including the contact info if you need to get any of that to them. And this really reinforces the importance of being accessible and persistent. You'll become a priority if it's just very easy for the reporter to report your story, and if you're always on that reporter's mind. It's just something that practically writes itself because you have made yourself so accessible and you've made yourself so easy to report on.

As you know, every DFA Nightschool session ends with an assignment, so you can put to use the skills that you're learning. One of the things that you can start doing right there from home or wherever you're watching this is to fill out a local media list template. On our web site—www.democracyforamerica.com/Nightschool—you'll see a template for the beginning of a basic media list. It includes the contact info for reporters and spaces to put in other information. It's just an example. So you want to try filling in your own. Make your own template and start filling it in. It could be as simple as going and calling up your news outlets and asking how to get in touch with certain reporters. Or you can go and look up the media list on a Google search or in your library.

The second thing you can start doing is start building a message calendar. You can build a message calendar to promote your local DFA group, your own campaign events, or to figure out volunteer stories that you want to get out in a number of different ways. Really, anyone can build a message calendar. Certainly any group or campaign must build a message calendar. So start doing these things. As always, you can email your message calendar or examples of your media list to training@democracyforamerica.com and get some feedback on what we're doing and how this all works out for you.

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