

How to Make Headlines: *Your church has a great story, but news editors yawn. Here's how to really get their attention.*

United Church Observer magazine. October 2010.

By Graeme Stemp-Morlock

In a society overwhelmed by mass media, individual churches without large advertising budgets can have a tough time getting noticed. “Researchers tell us we are exposed to about 5,000 media messages a day,” says Phil Cooke, author of *Branding Faith: Why Some Churches and Non-Profits Impact Culture and Others Don't*. “In that world, no matter how anointed the message, no matter how gifted a speaker, no matter how doctrinally correct your message may be, if people aren't listening, you've failed. So our first task is to cut through that clutter and get our message heard.”

Here are some lessons from other churches that have found ways to make the media sit up and take notice.

Think of your audience

You might know what you want to say, but how you say it hinges on who you're talking to. For example, ministers can preach the same message a variety of different ways depending on whether they're doing a Bible study, children's story or Easter Sunday sermon. The same goes for how you talk to the media.

“In the church, we've built this language . . . that people out in the world just do not understand,” says Cooke. “So we need to throw out the Christian lingo and start talking like normal people.”

Be prepared to explain all your beliefs, symbols or terminology. “Most people don't consider the church as relevant as those inside the church do,” says Aaron McCarroll Gallegos, executive producer of the United Church's Emerging Spirit campaign and a former Sojourners journalist for 10 years. Congregations that want to get their message across in the media “shouldn't assume anybody knows anything about Christianity.” He adds, “We've run into a lot of people who don't know who Jesus is and can't distinguish the Catholic Church from the United Church.”

When you talk to the media or send out a press release, use language that editors can easily adapt for the news. “Know that when you give a sermon on Sunday, you're

preaching to people who know your language,” says Martha Perkins, editor of the Bowen Island Undercurrent, a community newspaper near Vancouver. “Newspapers have a different language, and the ministers have to know how to speak that language. But if you give good quotes and interesting information, then editors are far more likely to seek you as a source again.”

Prepare your pitch

Good preparation will make getting media attention much easier. First of all, think ahead. If you want a story to come out in a magazine, send out the information months in advance. For newspapers and radio, send it weeks ahead of time. And don't be afraid to remind editors or reporters about your proposed story with a short telephone call.

At Headingley United just west of Winnipeg, the most effective media attention for the church's annual dinner theatre fundraiser is a short well-prepared phone call to the local CBC station a few weeks prior to the event. “Usually what I'll do is just call and leave a message to be played later on the Winnipeg *Radio Noon* show, which has traditionally focused on small community issues,” says Margaret Mills, production co-ordinator for Headingley's dinner theatre. “I'll take a few minutes and write out what I want to say beforehand. I focus on the things that will make it interesting to the listener, as well as talking about the exact program, and I do it in a very short time.” CBC always broadcasts the call, she adds.

There is also a cycle in local newspapers and radios that can be easy to tap into. Certain topics are typically covered in the media at certain times of year. For instance, many newspapers have special back-to-school sections in September, Christmas supplements in December, and stories about love in mid-February. If you can find a new angle for stories that come around every year, editors or reporters will eat it up, says Perkins. “Ministers should get better at marketing and providing story ideas, because how do you make Christmas new? That's always my issue with my 24-page December supplement. Somehow I have to make Christmas seem like it's this new phenomenon every year,” she observes.

Get to know your local reporters

For Rev. Robert Merritt of First United in Cambridge, Ont., embracing the media comes naturally: they're his former colleagues. Before becoming a minister, Merritt worked as a reporter and a public relations officer.

His biggest trick is to make and keep strong relationships with the local media, so there is more regular contact instead of erratic, awkward encounters. "I think too often we assume that we have to do something and wait for people to come to cover us," says Merritt. "There are many opportunities to let others know what we are about."

Merritt points out that in many community newspapers, the number of reporters and editors has declined sharply in recent years. So if a newspaper doesn't show up at your event, the reason might not be a lack of interest but rather that it's too understaffed to send someone. He suggests taking pictures and writing a just-the-facts press release to send after the event in case the paper can still use it.

Understand the media's methods

One of the most frustrating aspects for a group seeking media attention is controlling the message once the media get interested. Rather than fretting, however, McCarroll Gallegos suggests that you accept the differences between how media coverage works and how you might like it to work. "Once the media takes your message and starts using it, it's up to them how they want to use it," he says. "News outlets have their own reasons to present things in certain ways."

Churches should be aware that stories can be bumped back by days, weeks or even months if other news is deemed more important. And if the church is spearheading a controversial issue, the opposing point of view will likely be quoted in an attempt at balance.

If relinquishing control of your message is just too difficult, remember that there are media avenues where you can still have complete say. Many churches buy weekly ads in newspapers, and Merritt recommends that instead of just printing the sermon title, you use that space to emphasize other items important to the church's life, such as upcoming mission work or significant events. Letters to the editor are usually printed verbatim as

long as they're well written. And online social media such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are another way for churches to convey their message directly.

Embrace challenges

Many churches might decide to cover up a controversial issue, but in this age of online exposure, keeping quiet is increasingly difficult. Moreover, it could actually work against good publicity.

When First United's Habitat for Humanity building project ran out of money, rather than hiding the fact, Merritt wrote a press release and got the story in the newspapers. "We used the media to report our fundraising goals and that we had failed," he says. "We didn't want to sugarcoat everything. If you have a struggle, communicate that to the media and let them dig deeper to find out why."

After First United's story was published in the newspaper, a teachers' union in nearby Kitchener, Ont., offered funding that enabled the build to go ahead.

"I think people fear the media," says Merritt. "They're happy if the newspaper takes a good picture of their congregation doing something positive, but they fear embarrassing questions on whatever the issue. I don't think you should fear those situations, but rather, I think you should welcome them as a chance to be part of the community, to know who is saying what about you and to encourage dialogue."

Graeme Stemp-Morlock is a freelance writer in Waterloo, Ont.