

## Reaching Out to the Media: A Union Can Make Itself Heard

by Martin G. Waldman\*

**T**he media has an anti-labor bias" . . .

"The media practically never prints or broadcasts anything about labor" . . .

"When you do get in the papers, they twist what you say" . . .

"All the media cares about is making union people look like crooks or goons" . . .

"The media doesn't understand unions or what we do."

Phrases such as these are heard too frequently when one discusses public relations with leaders of many unions. Unfortunately, this type of thinking has led to a to-hell-with-the-media attitude, with some unions either failing to undertake any public relations program at all or else conducting media relations in a half-hearted and unprofessional manner. But it doesn't have to be that way.

In the eight weeks between March 2 and April 25, 1987, a labor dispute received some of the widest media coverage in recent years, and the coverage was generally sympathetic to the members of the union. The story involved the strike against ABC and CBS by television and radio news staff members of the Writers Guild of America. Virtually every day for more than eight weeks—before, during, and even in

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the days after the strike—stories about the dispute appeared on the national wire services, in newspapers throughout the country, in the major newsmagazines, in trade publications and countless specialized publications, and were broadcast on network and local television and radio. Many people still remember the television images of Dan Rather, Diane Sawyer, Douglas Edwards, and other stars of the news firm—actually coming out to the picket lines to show their support for the newswriters who were on strike.

How could one story receive this type of coverage? Was it because it was a big union with many people involved? Actually, the Writers Guild of America—made up of the Writers Guild, East, and the Writers Guild, West—has about 9,600 members including writers of motion pictures and entertainment television shows, but the ABC and CBS news group within the union consists of only 525 people. And it was these 525 people who went on strike and received all the attention.

Was the coverage because the dispute involved a glamorous industry? Yes, in part. Yet only a few months later, when newswriters in another union went on strike against NBC, the dispute did not receive nearly as much coverage, and what coverage there was did not present that union in as favorable a light. Further, in the Writers Guild strike against ABC and CBS, the action was against the management of the very networks that would decide whether to carry or not carry news about the dispute, hardly the most sympathetic audience.

Basically, the public relations for the strike—and the strike itself—were successful because of an enlightened union leadership that understood the importance of public relations to the success of the strike, the use of modern, sophisticated public relations techniques, a well-informed membership whose activities created the grist for the mill of daily media coverage, and an understanding of the needs of the media.

In these pages are described some of the public relations approaches we used in that strike in our role as PR consultants to the Writers Guild of America, East—techniques we have also employed in representing other unions and organizations. They involve the development of “themes,” the establishing of credibility, becoming a source of information, reaching out to the media, responding quickly to media requests, and understanding the special requirements of the media. These are methods we have found effective in day-to-day media relations as well as in the pressure-cooker atmosphere of a strike crisis.

## *Background to a Strike*

First, a bit of background. The Writers Guild members in the 1987 strike against ABC and CBS included newswriters (some of whom were also producers), news editors, researchers, promotion writers, and graphic artists employed in the ABC and CBS network TV and radio news operations based in Washington, D.C. and New York, as well as members at network-owned stations in New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago. The network news operations included the major nighttime network newscasts anchored by Dan Rather at CBS and Peter Jennings at ABC, “Good Morning America,” and other network TV and radio show news shows.

Because most of the network newswriters and others represented were based in New York and Washington, the chief negotiator in the talks with the networks was Mona Mangan, executive director of the Writers Guild of America, East. The Guild negotiating committee was made up of members from various key shops. My own company, Communication Planners, Inc., serves as public relations consultants for the Writers Guild, East, and edits the Guild’s publication. When the contractual crisis developed we were asked to handle national media relations for the Writers Guild of America related to the negotiations and ultimately the strike. Fortunately for us, Mangan, a skillful negotiator, understood the importance of media relations in complementing and supporting the negotiating process. Her cooperation and willingness to keep in close touch with us throughout the negotiations and strike enabled us to continually discuss PR strategy with her as the situation evolved and to provide the media with timely and accurate reports on the status of the talks.

The Writers Guild had been negotiating with ABC and CBS for several months before the strike began. At both ABC and CBS, there had been recent changes in management, with the new owners—Capital Cities at ABC, and Lawrence Tisch at CBS—emphasizing bottom line profits of the news divisions. This was a departure from the time when the networks, which always made huge profits from their entertainment programming, knew they had a public service responsibility to provide news coverage and enjoyed the prestige that came to them from the type of news operations personified by Edward R. Murrow at CBS.

As the negotiations developed, it was obvious that the networks, which had already made extensive cuts in their news divisions, were trying to undo many of the hard-won gains of the Writers Guild. In an



environment in which the companies were imposing unbearable work loads, the network negotiators were seeking the ability to fire at will without arbitration and to use temporaries to replace permanent employees. Essentially, the networks wanted to avoid long-term commitments to their employees.

As the contract deadline approached, it became clear that the networks might want to force a strike. Meetings were held at the Guild to gear up for the necessary communications programs and to develop the necessary "themes" to be conveyed to the public through the media. (In all good PR programs, repetition of simple "themes" is vital to a successful program.) We agreed that we had to communicate to the public that this was not just another strike about money—that the networks were actually "diminishing the quality of news operations" by their actions and, in effect, were failing to meet their responsibility to the public. We believed this would be especially effective against CBS where Laurence Tisch had come into the company claiming he would "save" CBS News and maintain its reputation for quality.

### *Developing a Strategy*

In a release we gave to the media before the strike, Mangan stated, "The quality of television and radio news programming will be seriously diminished if present trends continue. While the networks are proclaiming their desire to rebuild the stature of their news operations, they have laid off news personnel, increased work loads to impossible levels, failed to replace people who leave, and in other ways have taken steps that will ultimately lead to a significant impairment of broadcast news quality . . . We hope that as the bargaining progresses they will come to understand that our members are united in their desire to maintain journalistic quality and will fight for the protection of their jobs and contractual rights."

The second theme the union decided to stress—the networks' attack on job security—was in the same release: "The Guild negotiators said that quality in news programming is being diminished by uncertainty over job security, by scheduling abuses and impossible workloads due to cost-cutting programs at the networks, and by the use of temporaries which enable the networks to avoid making long-term commitments to employees and paying appropriate benefits." We knew that job security was something with which the average American, concerned about his or her own job, could easily identify. These same themes

would be repeated time and time again throughout the strike and would be picked up in countless news and feature stories.

Even before the strike, Guild committees were set up to gear for the strike and to plan necessary strike events. To provide members with news of the negotiations, a telephone hotline was established. A special newsletter was to be prepared by the members themselves as another vehicle for membership communication. Meetings were planned to discuss the issues with various groups within the Guild and at the individual shops.

In the public relations area, we immediately moved to set up procedures that would assure that all media contact would be closely coordinated with the negotiations. Following the procedure we use with all our public relations clients, it was agreed that during the strike all calls from the media would be directed to my office. In this way, I could arrange for interviews with Guild officials and members when advisable, speak to the media on behalf of the Guild when officials were not available or when it would not be desirable to have them speak directly, and coordinate stories for the print and broadcast media. Also, we could be sure that what was being said to the media—either in news releases or verbally—was coordinated with what was happening in the negotiations and was supportive of the bargaining process.

It was vital that the Guild speak *with one voice*, to avoid having conflicting statements or opinions coming from a variety of people who would purport to represent the Guild position. Despite the fact that the strikers included sophisticated news people, many of whom might have liked to tell their friends in the media their own version of what was going on, this was not a great problem and the contact with the media was effectively centralized.

We started the public relations campaign before the strike began. We reached out to the media, initiating contacts with key reporters and columnists and providing background on the issues involved, talking to the wire services and major newspapers and broadcast media and sending out news releases. We knew that we had to become a prime source of information to the media and quickly establish our credibility, our reliability, and our availability to the media at all hours of the day or night. It is unfortunate that some labor unions are not quick to respond to media requests for information and often fail to understand the deadlines against which the people in the media are working.



### *Implementing the Themes*

Once the strike was under way, we regularly called fourteen newspaper and magazine writers, news service reporters, and key broadcast people—usually two or three times a day—to provide verbal updates on the status of the negotiations, as well as news about strike events and developments including information about celebrity support and human interest items.

These calls were timed to meet the deadline requirements of the various media. We tried to avoid giving out a major story late in the day, past the deadlines for the next morning's newspapers. Strike events were held at noon to allow time for television and radio crews to cover the event, return to their home base, and edit their material in time for the early evening local and network newscasts.

The daily telephone press briefings helped us to become a prime source on the story. Because the chief negotiator kept us abreast of the latest developments in the bargaining, we were able to give the media fast-breaking news as soon as it happened, no matter what the time of day. We would even relay to the media such basic information as when the negotiations sessions started and ended, news that was of continuing interest to the wire services and print media.

The networks, being super-cautious or maybe just embarrassed by their own actions, held back on making statements to the media in the early part of the strike. As a result, the media turned more and more to us, and we received a constant barrage of calls from the media seeking interviews, information, location of events, and our help in arranging television and radio coverage, feature stories and picture opportunities. Whether public relations for a strike is done in-house or by outside consultants, it should never be a 9-5, Monday through Friday activity. In this situation, it was crucial that the media be able to reach us at any time.

In the phone briefings, as well as in written news releases, it was necessary for us to understand the particular requirements of the news media with which we were in contact—the nature of their audience, their orientation, and the kind of stories that interested them. Our continuous phone briefings helped keep the story of the strike continually in the print media and on the airwaves. The quantity of stories, and the speed with which they moved, led a CBS negotiator to complain that he had to listen to the radio to find out where he was having dinner that night.

In the phone briefings, as in all information disseminated, great care

was taken to assure the accuracy of the information being given to the media. We knew that any incorrect information or distortion would backfire and destroy the Guild's credibility. For this reason, when we were given information by members that we thought might be of interest—such as word that a leading TV or motion picture star, honoring the Guild strike, had refused to cross the picket line to go on an interview show—we checked and double-checked the accuracy of the information before giving it to the media. Again, our credibility was all-important, and the media came to know that we were a source they could trust.

Written advisories were used to inform the media about upcoming events, in order to obtain coverage by the broadcast and print media. These advisories emphasized the visual aspects of the event, the fact that people would be available for interviews, and the relationship to the developments in the strike.

We sent these pre-event advisories to the wire services and other key media the day before the event, transmitting the information by computer modem to private news wires that disseminated it within minutes from the time of receipt. We then followed this up with phone calls to make sure the media had received the release. Early on the morning of the day of the event, we made additional phone calls to the TV and radio assignment editors and others who were responsible for assigning TV crews and reporters on that day. After the event, we phoned reporters who were unable to be present to provide them with follow-up information about what had transpired. All this helped to obtain continuing and broad coverage of strike-related events.

(As technology develops, of course, even better techniques are available for quick dissemination of information. In 1988, when the Writers Guild, East and West, were on strike against the major producers of entertainment motion pictures and television, we used the facsimile machine as a way to reach the media people even more quickly and directly.)

In order to have news to convey, something must be happening. In this strike, the members themselves developed picketing demonstrations and rallies that focused on the key issues and the themes that were being emphasized in the public relations campaign. One demonstration in New York was staged as a "funeral for quality journalism" in which the striking members held a mock funeral (complete with hearse and bugler blowing taps) at the site of the Edward R. Murrow Plaque for Quality in Journalism at the CBS Broadcast Center. Another, outside



of the New York Emmy ceremonies, was a curbside salute to striking Writers Guild members who had won awards in the past. A "corporate greed" rally, with celebrities and representatives of other unions, emphasized the "bottom line" mentality of management. In Washington, two Congressmen held a press conference in front of the Writers Guild picket line to call for hearings by Congress to look into the effect of corporate takeovers on news coverage. All of these received extensive media coverage.

We benefitted from the fact that TV graphic artists—well aware of the visual requirements of the TV medium—were also among the strikers and had created some of the cleverest picket signs I have ever seen. One of these signs, showing the familiar CBS eye with a tear falling from it, appeared on the front pages of newspapers throughout the country, in newsmagazines, and, of course, on television.

Drawing information from Mangan, we were able to turn some of management's more outrageous actions against them by publicizing what they did. When, a short time into the strike, management took the unusual step of telling the Guild it was cutting off medical benefits to the strikers, we informed the media of the companies' "Scrooge-like" action. Instead of frightening the strikers as the management might have hoped, the action led to negative publicity for the networks.

In a similar manner, a week into the strike, CBS announced further major cuts in their news staffs, mainly for those who were working in non-struck news positions. The strikers, not intimidated, organized picketing demonstrations at CBS and ABC at which major on-the-air personalities came out to show their support for the striking Writers Guild members and to protest the cuts in the news operations. We informed the media that major personalities were expected to be there, and the demonstration received tremendous coverage in all the national and local media. The show of support by Dan Rather, Diane Sawyer, Ed Bradley, Douglas Edwards, and others focused public attention on the strike and what was happening in the news operations.

In a like manner, when "60 Minutes" personality Andy Rooney—in sympathy for the strikers—refused to go on the show, further attention was given to the Writers Guild strike. Whenever a political figure, such as Gov. Mario Cuomo of New York, or a celebrity, such as Christopher Reeve or Mary Tyler Moore, refused to cross the picket line, we quickly spread the word to the media. The goal, of course, was to generate a feeling of growing support for the strikers in their fight.

Although frequently we would develop special features with individual publications or TV or radio stations, or help provide officials or

others for individual interviews, we were very careful to treat the media equally. On the major developments in the strike, there were no "exclusives." We could not afford to antagonize the rest of the media by favoring any individual reporter or publication.

We used written releases for the major developments in the negotiations, such as the presentation of the demands before the strike, the terms of the proposed settlements, and the vote on the strike. Great care was taken to write the releases in an objective news style familiar to the media. When an opinion had to be expressed, it was done in the form of a quote from a Guild official. If there is one thing an editor cannot stand it is a news release filled with "puffery" and editorializing. When you tell it straight, it is much more likely to be used. With written releases of this type, of course, immediate dissemination and follow-up were crucial.

Of course, all of this required a lot of work. No matter how interesting a story is, if you want to obtain the maximum possible media coverage you have to work for it. Too often, people in unions assume that what they are doing is newsworthy and the media should be coming to them. Some times that will happen, but not always. You are always competing for media attention with all the other people who think their story is also terribly important. To keep a story going, to obtain maximum coverage, you must reach out to the media continually in an intelligent and professional manner.

When the Writers Guild strike came to an end, the negotiators and strikers had been able to fight back the attempts to undo their past contractual gains. They had been able to do it by the tenaciousness and creativity of the strikers, by the skills of their leadership and negotiating team, by a continuing program of membership communication, and by the effective use of media relations that helped influence the public and maintained the morale of the strikers themselves.

### *Lessons for Other Unions*

How does all of this apply to media relations for unions in non-strike situations? Many of the principles are the same: Use themes that are understandable to the public, become a credible source, respond quickly, know the requirements of the media and work with them to meet their needs. Above all, good media relations must be a continuing process and it should be handled by skilled professionals.



Years ago, labor won its battles on the streets and in the factories. Now it must win them as well on the airwaves, in the newspapers and magazines, on the screens in the homes of millions of Americans. Labor will not always receive the coverage it wants and deserves. But by understanding the media and the audience, and by using public relations techniques aggressively and intelligently, labor can make itself heard.

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