

**JENNIFER R. FARMER**

# **EXTRAORDINARY PR**

# **ORDINARY BUDGET**

**A Strategy Guide**



**If you enjoy this excerpt...**

consider becoming a member of the reader community on our website!

[Click here for sign-up form.](#) Members automatically get 10% off print, 30% off digital books.

## **Praise for *Extraordinary PR, Ordinary Budget***

“When we worked together in the Forward Together Moral Monday movement, Jennifer Farmer skillfully heard me. She allowed me to be myself while highlighting for me and the North Carolina NAACP team foundational communications techniques.”

—**Rev. Dr. William J. Barber, President, North Carolina State Conference of the NAACP, and architect of the Forward Together Moral Movement**

“Jennifer Farmer is one of the smartest and most talented communicators I know. She’s passionate, knowledgeable, and relatable about her work. Plus, when we spent time together, she made sure I never ate alone.”

—**Ari Berman, Contributing Writer, *The Nation***

“*Extraordinary PR, Ordinary Budget* is a practical and detailed guide for building and nurturing relationships with the media, relationships that will position your organization to make a lasting impact. This book is beyond helpful; it’s necessary.”

—**Judith Browne Dianis, Executive Director, Advancement Project National Office**

“The noise in the public square is deafening. And yet, more than ever, the ability to penetrate that noise so that your story can be heard is critical to successfully contesting for power. Jennifer defines a way to think and steps to take to insure your voice is heard. This book, filled with wisdom and practicality, is delivered with humor and passion.”

—**Scott Reed, Executive Director, PICO National Network**

“I loved this book. It is smart, practical, and filled with personal examples that underscore the author’s central message: there are concrete things you can do to promote your organization with or without a large budget. *Extraordinary PR, Ordinary Budget* is required reading for anyone wishing to use strategic communications to make a difference.”

—**Celinda Lake, Principal, Lake Research Partners**

“*Extraordinary PR, Ordinary Budget* is one of those rare books that is straightforward and poignant. It guides readers in crafting an effective and executable PR strategy—all on a budget! This is required reading from a trusted PR expert!”

—**Becky Williams, President, SEIU 1199 WV/KY/OH**

▪ JENNIFER R. FARMER ▪

# EXTRAORDINARY PR ORDINARY BUDGET

————— A Strategy Guide —————



BK<sup>®</sup>

Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.  
*a BK Business book*

# Extraordinary PR, Ordinary Budget

Copyright © 2017 by Jennifer R. Farmer

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, write to the publisher, addressed “Attention: Permissions Coordinator,” at the address below.



**Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.**

1333 Broadway, Suite 1000

Oakland, CA 94612-1921

Tel: (510) 817-2277, Fax: (510) 817-2278

**BK**<sup>®</sup>

[www.bkconnection.com](http://www.bkconnection.com)

## Ordering information for print editions

*Quantity sales.* Special discounts are available on quantity purchases by corporations, associations, and others. For details, contact the “Special Sales Department” at the Berrett-Koehler address above.

*Individual sales.* Berrett-Koehler publications are available through most bookstores. They can also be ordered directly from Berrett-Koehler: Tel: (800) 929-2929; Fax: (802) 864-7626; [www.bkconnection.com](http://www.bkconnection.com)

*Orders for college textbook/course adoption use.* Please contact Berrett-Koehler: Tel: (800) 929-2929; Fax: (802) 864-7626.

*Orders by U.S. trade bookstores and wholesalers.* Please contact Ingram Publisher Services, Tel: (800) 509-4887; Fax: (800) 838-1149; E-mail: [customer.service@ingrampublisherservices.com](mailto:customer.service@ingrampublisherservices.com); or visit [www.ingrampublisherservices.com/Ordering](http://www.ingrampublisherservices.com/Ordering) for details about electronic ordering.

Berrett-Koehler and the BK logo are registered trademarks of Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

## First Edition

Paperback print edition ISBN 978-1-62656-993-5

PDF e-book ISBN 978-1-62656-994-2

IDPF e-book ISBN 978-1-62656-995-9

2017-1

Produced and designed by BookMatters, copyedited by Tanya Grove, proofed by Judy Loeven, indexed by Leonard Rosenbaum. Cover designed by Rob Johnson, Toprotype, Inc.

*To my children  
Cameron and Maya*

## CONTENTS

|              |   |     |
|--------------|---|-----|
|              | <i>Preface</i>                                  | vii |
|              | <i>Introduction</i>                             | xi  |
| <b>ONE</b>   | The Case for Communications                     | 1   |
| <b>TWO</b>   | Be Credible                                     | 17  |
| <b>THREE</b> | Be Creative                                     | 36  |
| <b>FOUR</b>  | Be Responsive                                   | 53  |
| <b>FIVE</b>  | Be Relentless                                   | 66  |
| <b>SIX</b>   | Social Media on an Ordinary Budget              | 82  |
| <b>SEVEN</b> | PR Tactics on an Ordinary Budget                | 93  |
| <b>EIGHT</b> | Crisis Communications                           | 126 |
|              | <i>Conclusion: Leading in the Midst of Fear</i> |     |
|              | <i>Using the Four Principles</i>                | 137 |
|              | <i>Acknowledgments</i>                          | 147 |
|              | <i>Glossary</i>                                 | 149 |
|              | <i>Notes</i>                                    | 153 |
|              | <i>Index</i>                                    | 158 |
|              | <i>About the Author</i>                         | 163 |

## PREFACE

It is no coincidence that as the granddaughter of a pastor and the daughter of an evangelist—whose mission is to spread the gospel—I would enjoy a career as a communications professional. Just as an evangelist sees her work as spreading good news, my calling is to promote good causes that would otherwise go underappreciated. Just as an evangelist rails against sin, I rail against racial and social injustice. My passion for publicizing the work of organizations whose missions resonate with me could be compared to that of an evangelist on a God-directed mission.

I utilize every mode of communication (media relations, public relations, digital media, graphic design, training, events, etc.) to highlight injustice and urge accountability and change. When I'm traveling from city to city leading communications and media workshops for mission-driven organizations, I'm propelled by a passion to elevate work that would otherwise go unnoticed. The joy I feel upon placing a story about a pressing issue with a moral imperative in a national



outlet, such as the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*, or getting a guest column published in the opinion section of CNN.com or other well-respected media outlets is unrivaled. It is how I make an impact.

It should come as no surprise then that public relations and communications is a form of evangelism. I am not alone in this belief. Guy Kawasaki, former communications chief for Apple and author of more than thirteen books, considers himself an evangelist for the causes he passionately promotes.<sup>1</sup> Just like faith is a vehicle for some to achieve great things, I see communications as a tool to help organizations large and small achieve lofty and seemingly impossible goals.

The advice I offer here is drawn from personal experience. Over the course of my career, I have found myself at the center of major social justice movements and political campaigns. I did much of this work as a communications leader with a healthcare and social services union for the West Virginia, Kentucky, and Ohio region called Service Employees International Union District 1199 (WV/KY/OH), their international affiliate the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), and the national racial justice organization Advancement Project.

While serving on the international union staff for the SEIU, I spent time in Madison, Wisconsin, in 2011. I witnessed the height of major unrest before and after the passage of the then newly minted Governor Scott Walker's provision limiting collective bargaining for public sector unions.<sup>2</sup> I was part of a broader team of communications professionals flying into the state to provide assistance following a barrage of anti-union policies and proposals. I offered communication services such

as crafting press releases, talking points, convening press events, and staffing high-level surrogates for public sector union members and leaders, including rank-and-file union member Ann Louise Tetreault, union leaders Bruce Colburn and Dian Palmer, and many others. I also had the pleasure of arranging media interviews for actor Tony Shalhoub who joined his sister, a teacher in Wisconsin's Denmark School System, in protesting the collective bargaining limitation.<sup>3</sup>

From 2004 to 2009, I worked on several political and issue-advocacy campaigns in Ohio while employed with the SEIU District 1199 (WV/KY/OH). The campaigns included a Paid Sick Days ballot initiative that would have kept working families from missing much-needed pay due to their illness or their child's illness. I also worked on a ballot initiative to defeat the Colorado-inspired Taxpayers Bill of Rights (TABOR), which would have shrunk government services by restricting revenue growth.

I've also worked on numerous political campaigns, including a brief stint on President Barack Obama's 2012 re-election campaign as communications director with Obama for America in Nevada, former Ohio Governor Ted Strickland's 2010 re-election campaign, and the 2004 and 2008 presidential campaigns as a member of the communications staff for SEIU District 1199 (WV/KY/OH).

My time on President Obama's 2012 re-election campaign was particularly memorable for the unrelenting nature of the work. My day started at 7 a.m., in time for a daily 7:30 a.m. conference call with communications directors and staff from western states, and usually ended around 10 p.m. Each

week we plotted communications events, such as press conferences and other actions, with the goal of publicly defining the opponent, Mitt Romney, before he had an opportunity to define himself. Pulling off half a dozen press events per week was no small feat, but in the end it was incredibly effective as President Obama won the state of Nevada on election night.

These roles reinforced for me the importance of the four principles of extraordinary public relations: being credible, creative, responsive, and relentless. With more than fifteen years' experience working in communications and in the political and policy fields, I know firsthand the difference these four principles make. While the organizations I worked for had budgets of varying sizes, the key to success was always being credible, creative, responsive, and relentless. It was a surefire way to elevate issues that would otherwise go unnoticed or underappreciated.

*Extraordinary PR, Ordinary Budget: A Strategy Guide* is a natural by-product of my commitment to strengthen small organizations and grassroots campaigns by offering basic but critically important communications tips. This book is for the mission-driven organization that is spearheading critical work and seeking to promote its cause in the public domain. It is for the outfit that is doing everything right—yet few know they exist. It is for people who find themselves in a communications and public relations role for which they feel ill-equipped. It is for the grassroots leader seeking to elevate an organization's public profile. This manual is also for the executives and leaders looking to assess and evaluate his or her organization's communications program.

## INTRODUCTION

Evangelism can be defined as spreading the gospel through personal witness and passionate advocacy. To be an effective evangelist, you must be passionately committed to your cause. But even unbridled passion is not enough. Being effective in anything, but especially communications and PR, requires creativity, credibility, responsiveness, and relentlessness.

In a twenty-four-hour news cycle with multiple issues competing for attention, it is imperative to understand how to break through in the media. It's not enough to build a vital, noteworthy campaign. If reporters don't find you *credible* (meaning they don't trust that you are an expert in your field or providing accurate information), if you aren't finding *creative* ways to garner attention, if you aren't *responsive* when the media reaches out or *relentless* when they don't, you're likely to experience minimal success.

### **Being Credible**

You could have a public relations budget the size of Disney World, yet without credibility, members of the press will not

take you seriously. What's more, once a PR professional or a spokesperson develops a reputation of lacking credibility, reporters may discount them as a source for future stories. It can make your organization a laughingstock in media newsrooms.

Most people don't set out to lack credibility. It happens when you, wittingly or not, provide inaccurate information that can damage your or a reporter's reputation. Imagine providing the wrong data to a journalist who includes it in her story. The journalists and the media outlet that employs them now run the risk of being forced to run a costly and embarrassing correction. Now, we're talking not only about damage to a reporter's reputation but also to their employer's.

Another way spokespeople get labeled untrustworthy is by being afraid to admit they don't know an answer when asked a question. Pretending to know the answer to a question is a surefire way to be labeled unreliable, and no amount of money in the world can solve credibility issues.

### **Being Creative**

Money also doesn't correlate to creativity, which is the cornerstone of a winning pitch and sustained media attention. A pitch is a short paragraph or pithy statement explaining your issue and why it merits coverage or media interest. In media terms, creativity is about developing an unusual and appealing way to present information. It could be sharing information in the form of an infographic rather than a press release. It could be developing unusual props for a press conference.

The bottom line is that outside-the-box thinking is especially important when you work for a cash-strapped entity.

Reporters receive hundreds of press releases from competing interests, so thinking through creative and visually appealing ways to share information is key. If you're a one-person communications shop, you can network with other communicators from other organizations to get ideas for how to present information in unusual ways.

### **Being Responsive**

By *responsive*, I mean replying to media inquiries in a timely fashion and using the initial contact as an opportunity to build a long-term relationship with a reporter. Responsiveness is about following through on promises to the media as well as to allies. It also means being prepared to jump on current events to tell a story you've been sitting on for months or longer.

Even if you're pressed for time and unable to provide a detailed response, a simple acknowledgment of a message shows a level of responsiveness that is appreciated by those working on tight deadlines. In fact, of all the work on my plate, I view media inquiries as one of the most important aspects of my job. That means I'll drop everything to research reporters (and their media outlets) who have contacted me for a story so I can respond effectively. I even make it a point to check my email a couple of times throughout the weekend so I can respond to after-hour inquiries as quickly as possible.

### **Being Relentless**

To be relentless you must believe in something bigger than yourself. If you believe in something bigger than yourself, you'll go to the ends of the earth fighting for it.

Relentlessness is important in communications because public relations professionals are often bombarded with the word “no.” It takes time and many rejections before successfully placing a news story. If you become discouraged after a reporter ignores or is disinterested in your pitch, you may be unwilling to pitch to other reporters. If this happens, you're likely to get minimal coverage. If you become discouraged when you don't get a timely response to a pitch and consequently fail to follow up, you might be missing an opportunity to engage a reporter who may simply be busy, rather than permanently uninterested in your story. Relentlessness is not shutting down at the first or second “no.” It's also about refusing to believe a “no” today is a “no” tomorrow. Just because a reporter can't cover one story doesn't mean he or she will be unwilling to cover future stories. Moreover, a lack of an immediate response from a reporter could mean the reporter missed your email, and you may need to follow up. Maintaining enthusiasm in the face of “no” or in the face of silence is critical in this line of work.

### **How to Use This Book**

While I've worked for organizations (such as SEIU and SEIU District 1199) who had paid media budgets, those budgets paled in comparison to those of corporations. I offer this

information in the spirit of full disclosure, as even a modest paid media budget is more than what many of the people who read this book may enjoy.

Certainly, if you're working for a candidate for political office in an era of outsized money in politics and you're thinking about how to get your message out in the face of stiff opposition, you need significant funds. Imagine a presidential election in which one candidate had funds to advertise on television and the other did not; the person without the funds would surely lose. However, it's a little different if you work for a social impact entity. In this case, you do not need a multimillion-dollar communications budget (although I will not begrudge you if you have one) to elevate your organization's critical work. Your issues aren't less important because your budget is small. And regardless of your resources, the four principles to highlighting their importance remain the same: being relentless, responsive, credible, and creative. In drawing from my personal experience on a number of social justice campaigns, I provide a road map for using the four principles to successfully promote your issues—even on a cash-strapped budget.

In Chapter 1, I make the case for communications. When money is tight, spending it on communications can often seem superfluous. It is not. I explain why.

In Chapters 2 through 5, I dive deeply into each of the four principles. I use real-life examples to illustrate their power and provide concrete tips on how to leverage them to get the most bang for your buck. I also offer valuable no-cost tips for increasing your communication impact.



Chapter 6 is an exploration of how being credible, creative, responsive, and relentless apply to the growing and increasingly important area of social media PR.

Chapter 7 is full of hands-on budget-friendly PR tactics built on the foundation of the four principles.

Chapter 8 provides specific advice to communications professionals on how the four principles should come to the forefront when managing a crisis.

And last, I conclude with tips I learned along the way about how to press on in the midst of fear, burnout, failure, and doubt. The communications field can be very stressful yet rewarding. By applying the four principles I discuss in the book, maintaining a mind-set of reflection and growth, and finding aspects of your job that feed your spirit, you will undoubtedly find success.

My goal in writing this book is to provide a sound foundation for communications professionals who are struggling to make an impact on a limited organizational budget. My hope is that this book provides you not only with helpful tools to promote your issues in a cost-effective way but also with proof that if you stay on the track of being credible, creative, responsive, and relentless, you will have success. I did, and I hope my stories give you the resolve to keep on passionately evangelizing for worthy causes.



# The Case for Communications

There's a reason press secretaries are among the first staff hired on political campaigns. The decision to appoint and train a team of communications professionals is among the most important actions a leader can take.

A well-trained communications team can challenge unjust or unpopular policy decisions, lay the groundwork for major public policy initiatives, catapult a professional career, influence the outcome of political campaigns, establish a favorable narrative or counteract a problematic one, and support or decimate a company's brand. For the organization or campaign, communications can mean the difference between success and failure.

Communications is a broad umbrella under which public relations, media relations—including paid and earned media—rapid response, digital media, graphic design, and print and production all fall. For the purposes of this book, I focus on the broad umbrella of communications with an emphasis on public relations and earned media. If you're a

cash-strapped organization, earned media (i.e., media coverage you don't have to pay for) will be your best friend.

I also discuss how public relations supports communications. By *public relations* I am referring to a well-intentioned and deliberate strategy to communicate who you are and what you represent to donors, clients, constituents, or customers through the media and other public channels. PR is both proactive (e.g., outlining an affirmative vision for an organization or leader) and reactive (e.g., responding to inquiries from any range of public outlets, including the media).

As essential as communications is to an organization, communicators and PR professionals sometimes get a bad rap. We are sometimes referred to as talking heads and accused of indiscriminately carrying our organization's water. While problematic, this is probably preferred to another common label: spin doctors. These are, of course, pessimistic views of communications and public relations. But keep in mind that my brand of public relations is mission-driven, communications for organizations whose sole objective is making the world a better place. There is nothing wrong with advocating on behalf of a mission-driven organization or an issue you truly believe in. And there is nothing undesirable about advocating on behalf of groups working to address pressing societal issues, such as structural racism, social injustice, inequities in education, income inequality, and poverty.

### **Communications for Mission-Driven Organizations**

For the mission-driven organization, communications is a powerful tool to rail against injustice. If you don't like the

way politicians treat the least of us, there are myriad communications tactics—such as showcasing testimonials from impacted communities through a photo series or YouTube videos, highlighting the impact of a proposed policy through an infographic, an open letter shared with the press, media conference calls, newspaper ads, and video press releases—to publicize the impact of public policy and encourage decision-makers to reverse course.

When combating unjust policies, a well-oiled communications and public relations program can allow a mission-driven organization to punch above its weight class. I learned this firsthand as a communications staffer for the local healthcare and social services union SEIU District 1199 (WV/KY/OH). Union representatives were negotiating a collective bargaining agreement for nursing-home workers in West Virginia. As you can imagine, most nursing-home workers (who are at the heart of the nursing-home industry) make very little money, even as they sometimes pay exorbitant fees for necessities such as healthcare insurance. At the same time, nursing-home owners enjoy much higher salaries and profit margins than the frontline staff who allow the business to thrive. Like everyone else, nursing-home workers want to be able to care for their patients and earn enough money to support their families. In this case, winning in the court of public opinion required us to present a stark contrast between perceived right and wrong. We had to highlight the discrepancy between the salaries and profit margins of nursing-home owners and operators and that of their staff. Painting a clear picture of how nursing-home workers are suffering in the face of these disparities was the key to invoking demand for change.

Consider also the digital advocacy group Color of Change, led by Rashad Robinson.<sup>1</sup> Color of Change has launched a series of powerful campaigns that have held multimillion-dollar corporations accountable to local communities. They played a key role in exposing the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) and what some would characterize as ALEC's nefarious policies to push template legislation that is harmful to working families and communities of color in state legislatures across the country. ALEC is a membership-based organization that spends significant sums of money lavishing expensive trips on lawmakers who are then encouraged to introduce model legislation advancing conservative ideology in their respective state legislatures. The policies include anti-voting measures and stand-your-ground laws that have a disparate impact on communities of color. In addition, ALEC's policies have adversely impacted working-class individuals and families, drawing the ire of labor unions and left-leaning political groups.

Color of Change launched petitions, sent direct mailers to companies that were members of ALEC, regularly sent email updates to their hundreds of thousands of followers, and generally called out ALEC using every traditional and social media platform available. The emails directed followers to take action that in turn placed pressure on the companies that were members of ALEC. The campaign succeeded in causing grave embarrassment for dozens of companies, which led many to part ways with ALEC as the *National Journal* reported on November 10, 2014:

ALEC has witnessed a torrent of high-profile departures in the past. In 2012, a collection of major corporations, including Blue Cross Blue Shield, Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, and Kraft, left the organization following public outcry over the group's then-sponsorship of controversial "Stand Your Ground" laws, which came under heavy scrutiny during the Trayvon Martin case. The organization no longer works on legislation related to firearms.<sup>2</sup>

While there were many groups, including labor unions and legislative watchdogs, who launched accountability campaigns targeting ALEC, the role of Color of Change cannot be understated in successfully calling out the organization and bringing about positive change. There's another, more practical reason for highlighting the Color of Change ALEC campaign. It is an example of what can be accomplished when groups with similar ideologies work together.

Working in tandem with other groups on a specific campaign is a key strategy for maximizing limited resources. In the civil rights community, organizations that challenge barriers to voting, such as The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, NYU's Brennan Center for Justice, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, and Advancement Project, often work collaboratively. When one organization is leading litigation or the work around a specific case, other organizations routinely offer aid—even if that aid is limited to helping to promote the case or frame it in the proper context in the media. Through regular calls for communicators, lawyers, and other civil rights advocates, work is easily divided up,

and individual players get more accomplished. For instance, when Advancement Project was preparing for a legal appeal to North Carolina's anti-voting measure, I organized numerous conference calls with voting rights advocates and communicators in which I outlined communications needs and asked different coalition members to help fulfill those needs. During the calls, I requested groups issue press releases, write opinion essays, and assist with promotion of the case on social media. Many obliged my request.

Advancement Project reaped many victories using aggressive communications campaigns during my time there. In 2013, my former colleague Cynthia Gordy organized a media conference call for our partner New Florida Majority, sent a powerful press release, and drafted a compelling opinion piece questioning an amendment to Florida's omnibus budget bill (Senate Bill 600). The measure would have required voters with disabilities, persons with limited literacy, and those with language barriers to personally know their assistors prior to receiving help on Election Day. The amendment would have also restricted assistors to helping ten people each. Many felt the measure was put forward to make it harder for certain voters, namely those who vote Democratic, to cast a ballot. Following immense public pressure that included nonstop media coverage featuring the people most impacted by the measure, the sponsor of the amendment, Senator Jack Latvala, pulled the proposal from consideration in 2013.<sup>3</sup> Had we passively allowed the debate to play out solely in the halls of the legislature without the glare of media scrutiny, the harmful and unnecessary measure would likely have gone into effect.

One more example: In the spring of 2013, the Reverend Dr. William J. Barber II of the North Carolina State Conference of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NC NAACP) organized “Moral Monday” protests at the North Carolina General Assembly. Barber’s Moral Monday protests were one part of his broader Forward Together movement, which advocated fusion or coalition politics, the likes of which had not been seen since the civil rights movement of the 1950s and ’60s. Barber was at the helm of not only the NC NAACP but also the Historic Thousands on Jones Street People’s Assembly Coalition, and serves as senior pastor of Greenleaf Christian Church in Goldsboro, North Carolina. He is accomplishing in North Carolina what many political parties in states across the country have been unable to do: challenge unjust policies through the lens of morality, hold political leaders accountable, and build cross-cultural and ecumenical alliances.

His weekly protests challenged a wave of extreme and regressive policies passed by ultra-conservatives in the state legislature. At the conclusion of the first wave of Moral Monday protests in 2013 and 2014, close to a thousand people had been arrested for peacefully petitioning their elected leaders for a redress of grievances. The protesters included doctors, nurses, teachers, and students. They entered the statehouse to pray, sing, and meet with their legislators but were charged with trespassing and disturbing the peace. Media coverage of the protests and arrests gave Rev. Barber and his colleagues the opportunity to reach a much broader audience with powerful moral messages about the immoral and illegitimate laws being passed by the General Assembly.



While the concerned community leaders never should have been arrested and charged in the first place, the sustained organizing work and the help of over 100 volunteer lawyers who defended the protesters, created an environment where charges against hundreds of people were ultimately dropped. They did this by being in constant contact with the community and highlighting the immoral policies being passed by the legislature. This allowed the community to understand what was at stake and support the resistance movement. Additionally, the contact with the community was covered favorably in the press, which kept the momentum on the side of the organizers. It was the massive grassroots movement afoot in North Carolina led by Rev. Dr. Barber and the people participating in the Moral Monday protests that laid the groundwork for the dismissal of charges.<sup>4</sup>

I should mention that the goal of Barber's movement was not primarily to get the charges dismissed but rather to get the North Carolina legislature to change course.

### **Communicating Your Alpha Dog Story**

The organizations that stand out and have the most trusted brands have at least one thing in common: a strong communications infrastructure. Note I wrote "strong" not "costly." While considerable resources are needed for political campaigns, organizations can get by with far smaller communications budgets. So long as communications team members are credible, creative, responsive, and relentless, they can work miracles in terms of their ability to effectively advocate on

the organization's behalf. As I explore throughout this book, communicators can use these four principles to create an effective narrative or Alpha Dog story about their organizations regardless of their budgets. They can also use these principles to change an unhelpful Alpha Dog story that may have been created prior to the communicator joining an organization.

The Alpha Dog story is one of the earliest and most defining stories written or produced about your organization, candidate, or campaign. The person or entity who creates the story benefits from defining an organization or campaign before others have an opportunity to do so. Former *USA Today* reporter and author Sally Stewart, describes the Alpha Dog frame this way:

When an editor assigns a story about a company to a reporter, the first move the reporter makes is to seek out everything that has ever been written about that company. The Internet has made that process very easy. At some of the larger newspapers, magazines, and TV news shows, the reporter calls the in-house librarian and orders a Lexis-Nexis search. If the resulting research turns up unflattering facts, such as a pattern of unscrupulous business practices and faulty merchandise, it's a given that the reporter will mention those old accusations in her new story. Moreover, it doesn't matter if the company has changed or if new management is in charge. The first story written about the company is the Alpha Dog Story, and the Alpha Dog leads the pack. Therefore, it is absolutely essential to any company that you take time securing that all-important Alpha Dog Story, as it will determine your company's coverage for years to come.<sup>5</sup>

If the Alpha Dog story is negative or unflattering, as Stewart mentions, you and your organization are invariably and unceremoniously on the defense. The defense is obviously the unwanted position in politics, business, and grassroots organizing because it surrenders control. Rather than pushing your message, you are spending your time responding to a set of questions and circumstances that you did not create. You are in a reactive versus proactive position.

In politics, it is often said that arguing on an opponent's frame is a losing proposition. What does this mean? If I set the frame, I am crafting it in a way that is beneficial to me and the issue I'm advocating. My opponents who engage on my terms, using my frame, are at a distinct disadvantage. What is more, an unhelpful Alpha Dog narrative lingers like a bad cold or a house guest who has long overstayed his welcome.

I've had several experiences challenging harmful Alpha Dog stories. When I joined the labor union SEIU District 1199 (WV/KY/OH) in August 2004 as a communications coordinator, I was thrilled to be leading communications and advocacy work for an organization representing nursing homes, hospitals, libraries, Head Start facilities, and public sector employees. The work was not without its challenges. For decades, there has been an intense backlash against labor unions. In 1945, more than a third of working people belonged to unions.<sup>6</sup> In 1998, just 13.9 percent of people belonged to unions. Today, the percentage of union membership in the private sector is in the single digits. Since fewer people belong to unions, fewer people understand the role labor unions play—and have played—in our society. Moreover,

decreased membership also means unions lack the power they had in earlier eras. Since opposition to their existence is fierce, highlighting working conditions for working-class people through earned media was beyond difficult. The court of public opinion was not on our side, and many reporters often seemed hostile to our pitches. The only exception was when the spokesperson was a rank-and-file union member (as opposed to a paid union staff member or leader). When we did score press coverage, such as news articles and editorials, I noticed they were laced with personal jabs at our then president, Dave Regan.

The bad blood stemmed in part from the union's position on a 2003 ballot measure that levied a special tax on Cuyahoga County homeowners to pay for services for indigent families and persons with disabilities. In exchange for supporting the levy, the union asked county officials to commit to refraining from using public funds to launch high-pressure, anti-union campaigns. When the county refused to do so, the union launched a campaign urging defeat of the levy. This approach backfired horribly. Asking the public to defeat a levy for persons with disabilities—who serve as wonderful messengers and automatically garner public sympathy—was a losing proposition. Trying to explain to the public what happens when companies run anti-union campaigns also proved difficult in an environment where union membership was particularly low. The union was fighting a losing battle, and the media ruthlessly attacked us and our leader, Dave Regan. Our unwanted Alpha Dog story was that we were bullies who didn't care about people with disabilities.

The media turned every mention of our organization into an opportunity to remind readers of our earlier opposition to the levy and the attacks went on for over a year. We eventually hired a savvy media consultant, Dale Butland, who developed a plan to allow the union to move from defense to offense. Butland's plan included a statewide editorial board tour permitting Regan to explain who he was and his vision for making life easier for working people, such as nurses, prison psychiatrists, Head Start workers, home health aides, and librarians. It was only after we crisscrossed the state meeting with editorial boards large and small that the vilification in the press finally subsided.

The editorial board meetings allowed us to humanize Regan. It allowed him an opportunity to display his concern for working families, including union and nonunion households. Regan is an Ivy League-educated leader, so he also challenged preconceived notions about so-called union bosses. There wasn't a question he was asked during the editorial boards that he couldn't answer. After the meetings, most editorial boards had an understanding, if not appreciation, for Regan and the work he was spearheading.

It bears mentioning that leadership matters. If the media is impressed with your organization's leader and mission, it's easier to garner favorable news coverage. If donors and investors have confidence in an institution's leader, they are more likely to invest financial resources in the entity. Let this serve as a reminder to leaders who do everything in their power to avoid the media: reporters cannot get to know you if you avoid them. Preserving or repairing a leader's image

is imperative to an organization. Failure to do so may result in the furtherance of an unhelpful Alpha Dog story, which can follow an organization or company for years. A bad Alpha Dog story is more than a temporary inconvenience or black eye. It casts aspersions and results in costly distractions from the important work your organization is doing.

A strong public relations program can help create a positive Alpha Dog story so that the organization can focus on the issues that really matter. And developing a strong program is as simple as being creative, credible, responsive, and relentless.

### **Your Seat at the Table**

The most important point to keep in mind about using communications to further your organization's goals is that the communications team must be fully integrated in all strategic discussions. This allows communicators to understand the thinking behind different proposals and craft plans to support various organizational campaigns. This integration must happen early and often. Here's why: The communications field is broader than mere implementation. It also involves thinking strategically about the impact of various business decisions and outlining best practices for how to talk about those decisions. "Communicators," as my former boss Dave Regan would chide, "aren't maintenance repairmen." We don't exist to fulfill orders, and forcing us to carry out someone else's vision without an opportunity to co-develop work plans is ineffective and demoralizing. The

integration of communications should be substantive, meaning the communications and PR team must have a say in the development and execution of strategic decisions. When you combine the perspective and input of public relations professionals with a carefully crafted strategic plan, you help maximize output and ensure the very best outcomes for your issue-advocacy campaign or organization. You also ensure your communications team feels valued and respected, which can help with retention. Organizations get a bigger bang for their buck if communicators are included at the outset of the campaign.

**Communicators:** The key to making the case for inclusion at the outset of campaigns is persistence. Be relentless in making the case for your inclusion in the early phases of campaigns. Frame your argument in a way that shows how your early involvement benefits your manager and organization. For example, “You’ll understand the strategy, which will prepare you to develop appropriate communications plans and tactics.” People are ultimately self-interested; so appeal to something they want, and you’ll set yourself up for success.

**Executives:** It is costly and distracting to constantly replace staff, including communicators. Involving them in the early phases of a campaign boosts morale while ensuring you are benefitting from diverse perspectives. Early engagement of your communications team also gives them an opportunity to develop communications plans to carry out your work while also nurturing relationships with the media. If your staff members appreciate a heads-up on important projects, imagine how overworked journalists feel.

In the end, early involvement of communicators benefits both communicators and the organizations they serve.

### **Tactics versus Principles**

Now that we're clear on the important role of communications in furthering your organization's goals, I will dissect the four principles of extraordinary communications as they apply to issue-advocacy campaigns and mission-driven organizations. When thinking about the elements for success in public relations, you may be tempted to focus solely on specific tactics. I am resisting this urge since I believe the four principles of being credible, creative, responsive, and relentless are as big a determinant to success as tactics. If you indiscriminately employ tactics without following core standards, your success may be short-lived or inconsistent at best. But if you operate from a blueprint that outlines the importance of, for example, responsiveness to a deadline-driven media, you'll be far more effective than focusing on the tactic of, say, sending a press release.

Moreover, tactics can and should vary from campaign to campaign and from organization to organization. They are influenced by a variety of factors including organizational culture and long-term campaign goals. I cannot possibly advise you on a comprehensive set of tactics to promote your issue or cause without a deeper understanding of the organizational culture and, more important, the goals of a given campaign. If the goal is to pressure an employer to allow workers to have a voice on the job and bargain collectively,



the communications tactics may be far more aggressive than if the goal is to applaud an institution for implementing a favorable policy. But regardless of the tactic, principles matter. So, while I do highlight a range of tactics throughout the book (and particularly in Chapter 7), I invest more time in principles. My promise: if you follow the principles outlined in the next four chapters, you will be much better prepared to successfully implement the tactics your institutions and internal leadership team shape.

**If you enjoy this excerpt...**

consider becoming a member of the reader community on our website!

[Click here for sign-up form.](#) Members automatically get 10% off print, 30% off digital books.