

Final Report – Practicing Democracy

Publicity

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Overview

The publicity campaign for Practicing Democracy was designed to have a broad reach with multiple target audiences. Theatregoers. Community workers and activists. Social Services workers and their clients. City staff. Academics studying Participatory Democracy. And the most nebulous focus group of all, the general public. With a mandate to shape civic policy recommendations, diverse representation in audiences was vital to the success of the production.

To achieve this, outreach and publicity began with those who know Headlines, and fanned out from there. The idea was to activate a word of mouth campaign early, and give it opportunity to grow. From there, all efforts would be supported by the knowledge borne by Headlines' supporters.

Publicity was then sought by approaching varied outlets in mainstream, community and activist media. The goal was to get mentioned in as many outlets as possible, with extra attention paid to the media with the widest reach. Not including web postings, PSAs, and sponsorship-related promo spots on Shaw TV and Co-op radio, there were more than 50 media hits.

A lengthy lead-up allowed for prolonged public presence, a slow building of momentum that proved beneficial. As well, there were many newsworthy stages to the project, which merited media attention at each step of the way.

The Message

The first step was to identify the pitch. It was agreed that the subject, poverty, was compelling. Vancouver's streetscape is increasingly littered with the human detritus of dismantled social programs. The public cannot help but be aware of panhandlers, break-ins, line-ups for free food that snake along several city blocks. But a focus on poverty would be a focus on the negative. How could we possibly lure people to this dynamic – and *fun* - event with an abject message?

We chose instead to concentrate not on the problem, but what can be done, and the public's role in finding solutions. The message became one of empowerment, promoting democratic engagement, and ultimately pointing out the sheer innovativeness of Practicing Democracy's mandate: to create civic policy recommendations from forum theatre performances.

With this in mind, we arrived at two slogans, which were usually used in tandem; "Using Theatre to Make Law" and "City Hall is Listening". These concentrated attention on the final impact of the project.

All communications delineated the complex idea of Legislative Theatre in clear terms to provide a framework for discussion. Then the topic (poverty) and the producer (Headlines) were dropped into that framework. This approach proved effective, and coverage clearly conveyed the project.

Media Coverage

By the end of Practicing Democracy's run, the majority of local media outlets had covered the show. But attracting media attention proved more difficult than originally expected, and the kind of media attention gained was also something of a surprise.

From a publicity standpoint, Practicing Democracy is a hot story. It's local politics (working with the unanimous backing of City Council), it's national (a Canadian first), it's unusual (using theatre to create policy recommendations), and it's urgent (the effects of poverty in Vancouver have escalated dramatically in recent years). Headlines has tremendous track record, and the production team was made up of seasoned professionals. So where was the landslide of coverage?

The key to this question may be found by considering Print vs. Broadcast. Practicing Democracy enjoyed a slew of print coverage, with a persistent presence for a full month leading up to opening night. Indeed, print coverage began March 2003 with the National Post reporting on City Council's support of the project. On the other hand, radio and television reporters were slow to pick up on the story (a CBC radio piece March 2003 notwithstanding). This in inverse proportion to coverage of the February 2003 project, Don't Say A Word, which was weighted toward broadcast.

I speculate that the complexity of the project makes it more conducive to print media. Also, to look at the contrast between the two projects, the teenagers of Don't Say A Word made for upbeat, youthful broadcast voices and images while the struggles of Practicing Democracy are less appealing.

It need also be mentioned that Vancouver's premiere talk shows - Vicki Gabereau, Fanny Keifer, and CityTV's Breakfast Show - all declined to interview David about the project. I suspect for similar rationale.

How do we solve this in the future? To showcase the broadcast potential, creating a promotional DVD would be a worthwhile investment. There is a great deal of compelling archival footage and interview segments that could be compiled in a mini-doc to sell the product with moving images.

It must also be stated that two major publications – The Vancouver Sun and Courier - declined to review Practicing Democracy. The Courier cited lack of space, and the Sun simply did not respond.

Successes

Database Maintenance as a PR Strategy

The Headlines database is massive. Clocking in at approximately 8,500 contacts accumulated over more than a decade, it requires serious maintenance. 2003 was to be the year Outreach and Publicity tackled this task, and the results have been satisfying.

There have been two stages to updating and culling database entries, AKA Headlines contacts, AKA real people. The first involved phoning or emailing those with obvious connections to the organization; past workshop participants, donors, supporters, members, and collaborators.

Attempts were made to track people who had moved, note when organizational staff had changed, and confirm that maintained contact was desired.

Stage two was the direct mail campaign. Contacts less than three years old (numbering 2,500) received a fundraising and informational brochure. Remaining contacts were sent a postcard with information about upcoming projects and a request to check in to maintain contact.

The direct mail campaign has indeed made database management possible, and resulted financial contributions to Headlines. The strongest impact, however, has been advance publicity of Practicing Democracy. Six months prior to opening, contacts were well informed and equipped to discuss the project. This provided a way to maintain presence before production even began, and created an invaluable base for future communications.

If possible, an annual mail-out could fulfill these functions - database management, information sharing, and publicity - on a more continuous basis.

Tracking Response

In an effort to determine which promotional techniques were most effective, Headlines staff asked audience members when they reserved tickets, "How did you hear about the show?" The response was as expected: a wide variety of sources were cited. Community and resource centres, friends, media, posters, and newsletters (including Headlines' own) comprised the main sources, but we knew we had reached critical mass when the most common response was "everywhere".

Responses were recorded in the reservation file. It is recommended that such tracking be maintained in the future. Over time, the information supports promotional strategies and provides insight into the effectiveness of the campaign.

Pitfalls and Troubleshooting

Design Schedule

Scheduling a spring production invariably raises the specter of Christmas break as an important deadline. To hit the ground running in the New Year, a multitude of tasks need to be wrapped up before the holidays. This is true not only for Headlines, but for most organizations. In particular, our contracted designers were predictably swamped in December, and this resulted in some anxiety around the execution of print materials, namely the posters and flyers. At each stage of the design process, time is necessary to evaluate effectiveness. A draft arrives, is considered, discussed, tested, and sent back with comments. Clipping the feedback loop is *not* an option. A full month is required to usher a design from concept to final draft. The materials for Practicing Democracy were executed in three weeks. This shorter timeline should not be repeated.

Promotional Photos

It is challenging to conceive of promotional photographs before a script has been written; the approach becomes necessarily conceptual and expressionistic. With Practicing Democracy, David came up with the idea of City Hall as a backdrop, a strong, meaningful choice. From the ensuing photo shoot, one shot was a standout, a wonderful combination of meaning and beauty. It was not chosen for print, however, while the other, less powerful ones were. What happened? The "weaker" shots were brighter and clearer. The exterior of City Hall is more iconic than the

interior. The cast is more visible. To editors of mainstream print media, the choice was straightforward.

All the shots were of the whole group, and at a distance. While lovely images, and inclusive of the ideas and people involved, I suggest also capturing tighter shots in the future.

Long Term Goals

National Presence

A number of significant breakthroughs occurred, which, while they failed to result in coverage, did mark Headlines' arrival in the consciousness of several national media organizations, outlets that have been added to the media database and have expressed interest in future coverage. Most significantly, Bravo TV arts profiler Arts and Minds was unable to schedule coverage to run concurrently with the run, but enthusiastically requested continued releases. This Magazine expressed interest, with potential for future coverage. Maclean's Magazine also responded favorably to direct contact and joined the media list. Considering the caliber of Headlines' work, it is only natural to pursue national and international coverage: these are truly far-reaching stories. It appears that achieving this goal will not happen instantly. Relationships must be cultivated with each media organization. This process is now underway, and there is good reason to be optimistic about future communications garnering attention.

Increased Depth of Coverage

Locally, the goal is to increase the depth of coverage. Each project brings with it the same dilemma: forum theatre is complex, and difficult to describe. So each time a journalist broaches the topic, they start from scratch, expending the better part of their airtime or ink on simply explaining what Headlines does. There are two ways to address this problem. The first is to continue seeking longer-format coverage. Larger features naturally allow for increased depth. The second is to increase the recognition of forum theatre as an art form, to erase the constant necessity of explicating afresh with each outing. This is a job larger than Headlines, but one we can actively contribute to, foremost by fostering and maintaining a media community who understands what forum theatre is.

Increase Effectiveness in Reaching the Theatre Community

It has been noted in the past that Headlines productions attract fewer members of the theatre community than one would expect. To address this, special attention was paid to raising awareness of Practicing Democracy. Theatre program ads were purchased for four major productions, each compatible in some way with the project. As well, several arts listings services and email postings to personal contacts were used to promote the show.

At opening nights for other theatre productions leading up to Practicing Democracy, most people I spoke with knew it was happening, and expressed interest in attending. High levels of awareness did not translate into massive attendance from the theatre community, but there was an improvement. If a steady presence in the theatre scene is desired, it is worthwhile to maintain this push.

The Street Campaign

The distribution of posters and flyers can play an integral role in promoting an event. When done well, the public has a constant reminder of the show, and the promotional image accumulates meaning as media and word of mouth kick in. The street campaign for Practicing Democracy was very effective, not only were people talking about the show, they were talking about how prolific the promo material was.

A total 20,000 flyers and 1,000 posters were distributed. This was an ideal quantity for the campaign, allowing for a generous distro with no wastage. Materials were focused in the City of Vancouver, with handfuls reaching the suburbs through libraries, community centres, and arts venues.

Building on the experience of Don't Say A Word, distribution was done by many people. Two different postering pros handled 500 posters, while the rest were put up by volunteers and community activists who received them through Outreach. I personally put up about 100 posters, filling in gaps during the two weeks leading up to the run. Using a number of people is necessary, as each person has their own routes and contacts. Volunteers proved especially important in reaching campus and multicultural communities.

Distribution through supporting networks was also useful. City Hall sent postcards to each employee, VanCity sent posters and flyers to every branch for their community events boards, and the library, as always, was an efficient way to get materials to the public.

Linking to Events

Headlines staff or volunteers distributed materials at a number of events, making announcements from the stage whenever possible. Attending events proved indispensable in raising awareness of Practicing Democracy and Headlines as these are opportunities to put a face to the organization, answer questions in person, and take part in building community.

The first was at the Out on Screen film festival, at the screening of the documentary Brother Outsider, about civil rights activist Bayard Rustin. The event was in August, significantly in advance of Practicing Democracy. We chose to attend regardless to show support and maintain contact during the off-season.

Attendance at other events happened during the month leading up to Practicing Democracy; a benefit for the Stop War Coalition, the International Woman's Day March, and opening weekend screenings for the Corporation, among others. The latter, especially, was a distro boon. Screenings were uniformly sold out, and audiences pouring out of cinemas responded positively to the flyers handed out by volunteers.

Sponsorship

The Westender and Co-op Radio provided media sponsorship. The Westender gave a 40% discount on ads, and Co-op recorded a 30 second spot that was played at least 20 times leading up to opening night, and ensured information was shared among programs at the station.

Application for sponsorship at CBC TV and Radio was denied. The reason was unclear, as people from both departments were dealt with, and each gave a different reason for their decision.

At first, Jill Webber-Hrabinsky in TV was approached, and she seemed supportive of the project, but also very busy. I phoned on a weekly basis, always told to call back. She never gave a negative assessment, in fact said the project looked quite appropriate, but simply said that the committee that made sponsorship decisions was otherwise occupied with promoting a new series. Ms. Webber-Hrabinsky herself was busy training a successor as she prepared for maternity leave.

As the deadline for print materials approached, I asked for someone else to talk to and was passed to Beatrijs Brett in radio. Beatrijs declined the project instantly, based on its supposedly political content. When her claim was disputed by David, and then myself we were passed on the manager of Communications, Susan Mader. Ms. Mader then suggested that the project wasn't cultural enough to be considered for arts sponsorship. And then, it was simply too late.

David wrote a letter of complaint. Ms. Mader responded simply that Headlines was welcome to apply for future productions. Why Practicing Democracy was overlooked was not addressed.

Unless there is a change in policy, the Georgia Straight is not worth approaching for media sponsorship. They offer a 40% discount on ad rates, but in exchange require commitments no other sponsor requests; announcement of thanks from the stage on opening night, and banners hung at the venue, for example. When an attempt was made to negotiate a compromise, it was flatly refused.

Conclusion

The experiences of Practicing Democracy yielded similar findings to those of Don't Say a Word a year prior: Headlines' audience is diverse, potentially vast, and reached through many, many avenues. The importance of maintaining several approaches simultaneously cannot be overstated.

It was also confirmed, through extensive work on the database, that beginning publicity campaigns with Headlines supporters works. They come from many walks of life, and are frequently active members of their communities, well equipped to spread the word.

Coverage

Print

Georgia Straight -Arts Notes – March 13, 2003

- Arts Notes – April 24, 2003
- Tony Montague profile – February 26
- Kathleen Oliver review - March 11

Columbia Journal – Tom Sandborn article/ review – April

Common Ground – Datebook - March

Courier – Lisa Smedman advance preview with photo – February 15

Discorder – Penelope Mulligan preview – March

Globe and Mail – Alexandra Gill feature with photo - March 4

National Post – Ian Bailey news article - March 6, 2003

The Other Press (SFU) – Carla Elm Clement feature – March 24

Province – Stuart Derdeyn article with photo – March 3

The Republic – Matthew Burrows preview - March 4

- Matthew Burrows review - March 18

Shared Vision – Preview – February

Terminal City – Alan Hindle advance preview- January 16

- Alan Hindle opening preview - March 4
- Mia Perry feature with photo - March 11

Vancouver Sun – Peter Birnie profile - January 28

- Queue listing with colour photo - February 26

The Voice (Langara College) – John Kusruc article - March 18

Westender – Hype Arts – December 24, 2003

- Hot Tickets preview with photo – February 5
- Tom Zillich feature with photo - March 11

Articles also appeared through late February in; Lusitania (Portuguese),

Contacto Directo (Spanish), Milenio (Spanish), and La Prensa (Spanish)

Radio

600 AM – Interview, Rafe Mair with David - March 4

96.1 FM - Latino Soy – Spanish Radio - March 4

CBC – B.C. Almanac - February 28, 2003

- Early Edition – “690 to Go” with Margaret Gallagher - March 4
- News item by Paul Grant - March 21

CBC Radio-Canada (French) – News item by Annie Bourgault – March 24

CJSF – SFU Radio, Arts and Entertainment review, March

CKNW – News item, interview with Jen - February 24

CO-OP - Red Eye, interview with David - January 17

- Wake Up with Co-op, interview with Jen - March 1
- Sponsorship, 30-second promo spot played a minimum of 20 times

Television

BC CTV – News item - March 3, 11pm

Channel M – Spanish-language interview with Jandreet on Hola Que Tal - March 11, 10am, repeating March 13, 3pm

Fairchild – Cantonese What’s On - March 7

ICTV – East Side story, interview with David and Sandra - February 28, 10pm

Shaw - Urban Rush, interview with David, March 5, repeated 4 times

- L’Express news magazine, feature

Web

- reviewvancouver.org
- indymedia.org
- bravo.ca
- rabble.ca
- vcn.bc.ca
- Canada.com (highlighted as staff pick)

Listings

- Community Links – MLA Newsletter Feb/ March issue
- Carnegie Newsletter
- Xtra West
- Buy and Sell
- All local print publications and their web counterparts

Display Ads

- Westender
- Georgia Straight
- Terminal City
- Vancouver Courier
- One month slide projection at Fifth Avenue and Park Cinemas

Program Ads

- Vancouver Playhouse, One Last Kiss
- Vancouver East Cultural Centre, Ali& Ali (NeWorld) and The Suicide (Boca del Lupo)
- Performance Works, Cloud Tectonics (Pi Theatre)