

Hamilton's Media Camp: Quick, Fun and Powerful

This story describes a community-based initiative designed by members and groups affiliated with the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction (HRPR), a Vibrant Communities convener organization. There are more than 150 such initiatives linked to the Roundtable. HRPR is a cross-sectoral community problem-solving table with a strategic focus on poverty and the aspiration of "making Hamilton the best place to raise a child."

Introduction

In the space of six hours, Hamilton's Media Relations Summer Camp taught nonprofit organizations how to tell people-centered, community-focused stories that convey their mission and purpose – and get published.

Inspired by an annual Chicago conference¹ that brings together nonprofits and media, representatives from Mohawk College of Applied Art and Technology, the Hamilton Roundtable for Poverty Reduction (HRPR) and the *Hamilton Spectator* worked quickly. In four weeks, they drew up three learning sessions: one to teach the basics of message packaging and approaching media, a second to practice story pitches with local public relations professionals, and a third to tour the *Spectator* pressroom and meet with senior editors, reporters and columnists. The three classes were offered free of charge for two hours each on a Monday, Wednesday and Friday in July 2008.

Jay Robb is Director of Media Relations, Internal Communications, Community Projects and Special Events at Mohawk College. Says Jay: "There's no shortage of success stories when it comes to nonprofit organizations that are making Hamilton the best place to raise a child. The challenge is to turn those success stories into news stories that inspire others to get involved. Yet many nonprofits don't tell their best stories and instead pitch ribbon-cuttings, groundbreakings and grip-and-grin cheque presentations. The key to getting great press coverage is to answer the one question every reporter, editor

and producer will ask: Why should our community care? So we offered a media relations camp that would help nonprofits answer that question in a very clear and compelling way.”²

The HRPR ran a community event in June 2008 where more than 60 posters from community partners were displayed. “The posters were full of success stories that had yet to be told in our community,” notes Jay. Offering HRPR partners the opportunity to get involved in the first Media Camp was one way to thank them for their involvement in the Roundtable’s poverty reduction efforts. Thirty-two people from 20 community HRPR partner organizations signed up and stayed for all three sessions. Jay continues: “Meeting with editors, reporters and columnists face-to-face and one-on-one was the big draw. It gave nonprofits a chance to hear first-hand how to make it easier for the *Spectator* to tell their stories.”

Rave review and future plans

Participants gave Media Camp extremely high marks. A post-camp online survey found that 93 percent of respondents said it exceeded their expectations and inspired them to pitch a story to the press. All participants said the experience changed the way they thought about what stories to tell and that they would encourage others to attend a media relations summer camp. Best of all, some ‘campers’ have already seen their stories picked up by media outlets. They were also encouraged to set goals for how many stories, op eds and other types of coverage they would like to see published within the next year.

Media Camp participant Donna Jean Forster is the Executive Director of the Welcome Inn Community Centre, a faith-based charity dedicated to the eradication of poverty. Donna Jean observes: “Media Camp was a really good chance to put names to media faces and hear directly from them exactly the kinds of information they want in order to run a story. Because of its relatively small size, our organization has been a well-kept secret, so making the one-on-one contacts has been very helpful. We also learned about framing our work by describing selected program participants. Readers are interested in other people’s stories and the camp reminded us of that.”

For an example of how Media Camp’s lessons translate from community organization to publication, see the *Spectator* story about the Welcome Inn Community Centre’s BizPLAN (www.thespec.com/article/424957). Says Donna Jean: “We got 75 telephone inquiries about BizPLAN after the article ran – and it didn’t even include our contact information!”

By its very name, Media Relations Summer Camp communicated its short duration and light-hearted approach. “Bootcamp would have been a non-starter,” notes Jay. Running the camp in July meant empty rooms at the college, and the generally more relaxed summer pace made it easier for media and nonprofits to sign on. Operating the workshops in two-day intervals gave participants the chance to mull over new ideas with colleagues in between sessions and return with suggestions from their community groups.

Jay Robb and his HRPR and *Spectator* partners will offer a bigger and better Media Camp in 2009. Plans include increasing the number of available spaces, inviting local television and radio stations to

take part, designing small group workshops and case studies, and providing more hands-on experience (e.g., practice interview sessions). Says Jay: “I’d love to have community builders like Donna Jean get up at the front of the classroom and tell their nonprofit peers how their organizations got great press and what happened because of the news coverage.”

The Media Camp model is easily transferable to other communities that have access to postsecondary institutions and media outlets. Local public relations experts can be invited to help nonprofits tell their stories. Summer camp and Media Camp have a lot in common: Both are brief, action-packed experiences whose lessons last a lifetime. S’mores, anyone?

Anne Makhoul

Endnotes

1. For more information on the Chicago Community Media Workshop, visit <http://www.newstips.org/index.php>
2. See Media Camp’s online media relations summer camp presentation and handbook on slideshare.net (<http://www.slideshare.net/JayRobb>). Jay Robb encourages others to use the material; he recommends groups replace the first title page with their own.

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