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How one nonprofit is fighting a PR battle

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A nonprofit Chicago TV station uses media relations and advocacy in its battle for survival against heavyweight AT&T

A recent *Chicago Tribune* [article](#) profiled the city's largest cable TV providers, Comcast and AT&T—two heavyweights in a battle for cable supremacy.

Reporter Eric Gwinn didn't mention that AT&T treats public access channels, like Chicago's CAN TV, different than Comcast or any other cable provider does—a notion deeply troubling many public access supporters, who call the treatment unfair and unprecedented.

"[The article] focused on what we thought a typical reader would care about most," Gwinn told Ragan.com. "CAN TV and [public access] channels are important and necessary viewing options, but they aren't as popular as sports or movies, so our article didn't mention them."

Ensuring the public and media care about its message is the struggle CAN TV, a nonprofit organization with only one full-time communicator, has faced since early 2007. It's also one of countless examples of PR battles nonprofits face as they try to communicate their story in the shadow of large companies.

Here's how CAN TV is trying to even the playing field and communicate its message to the press and the public.

Communicating a thorny topic

The Gwinn article wasn't a total wash for CAN TV.

"As soon as that article came out many [other readers] and I contacted [Gwinn] saying we want to make sure you're aware that one critical part of this comparison is lacking," explained CAN TV executive director Barbara Popovic.

Sure enough, about a day or two later, Gwinn contacted Popovic about writing a story covering the public access controversy. To date, the piece has not been published.

This example of reaching out to a reporter illustrates CAN TV's traditional media relations approach. The problem, however, is that CAN TV's battle against AT&T is a story mired in detail—difficult to explain in a sound bite.

The conflict stems from a bill Illinois lawmakers passed in June 2007 allowing AT&T to offer cable TV in the state. That law said cable providers must ensure PEG channels have signal quality and functionality—closed captioning, Second Audio Program, access to DVR—equal to every other station. For instance, a viewer's ability to access PEG channels must be as easy as changing the channel from NBC to CAN TV, and be the same viewing experience.

AT&T cable consolidates all public access stations onto one channel that requires loading, much like a Web site, and lacks most functionality, such as closed captioning and the like. "Suffice it to say the channels will be buried [and] hard to find ... It doesn't take a brain to say out of sight, out of mind," Popovic said.

AT&T insists its cable TV service offers increased exposure to PEG programming. "By using an Internet Protocol-based technology, more people have more access to more PEG programming than ever before," AT&T spokesperson Andrew Ross said in an e-mail. "All PEG content is easily found on [one channel]."

PEG advocates, including local government officials, insist this treatment of public access channels violates the law; AT&T disputes this claim.

So have your eyes glazed over yet? That's the challenge Popovic faces. How to communicate this thorny topic as AT&T advertises lower rates and increased competition for Illinois consumers.

Helping the media understand

Popovic helps the media understand CAN TV's side of the story by meetings with newspaper editorial boards and reporters to discuss the issue and provide prepared materials that explain the issue in simple terms.

"Sometimes there's a need to take a step back and clarify if the [editorial] board or a reporter has had a conversation with the company, and the company has attempted to frame the issue in its interest as a no-brainer," she explained.

So far only letters to the editor supporting CAN TV have run in both *The Chicago Tribune* and *Chicago Sun-Times*; a smattering of articles has appeared in [suburban newspapers](#).

How does she manage to meet with editorial boards? Well, part of it has to do with her communication style. Popovic swears by one-on-one communications.

What's PEG programming?

Public access channels, known as PEG (public-education-government) programming, offer federally-mandated local and cultural content, free of commercials. Communities nationwide have PEG centers, of which CAN TV is one.



See what happens behind the scenes at CAN TV.

"Personal contact is still my way; to the extent that I can pick up the phone and make that pitch," she explained, adding that an e-mail with background information might follow the phone call. "Personal contact, I think, shows your seriousness about the issue, your accessibility on the issue, and that you're not taking this passive stance of expecting someone to just read your e-mail of the thousands they receive and get back to you."

Targeted media pitches

Popovic said targeted pitches to smaller media outlets have proved effective.

"We've found that there is interest in more narrowly defined media targets," she said. This includes ethnic media; for example, an African-American radio station in Chicago has taken an interest in the story, due to CAN TV's numerous programs on diversity.

"Some of the business publications take an early interest, because there is a business aspect to this story," she added. "You have to think about audience all the time when doing communication work and say, who needs to know, and push toward that, [and] who wants to know and address that."

There is also what Popovic calls "serendipitous PR": weekly listings in Chicago legal publications—numerous bar associations use CAN TV—which are generated by the associations' PR people.

This acts as an insurance policy for CAN TV, Popovic explained. If a group attempts to paint the station as one dimensional, CAN TV can point to those publications to show the station's varied programming.

Bloggers have also helped spread their message. The Alliance for Community Media, a nationwide group supporting PEG, performed a survey the results of which demonstrated harm to the public due to consolidation of PEG channels. Popovic, a member of the alliance's public policy committee, said various bloggers noticed the survey and wrote about it.

The alliance didn't pitch these bloggers, Popovic said. They simply noticed the survey on various Web sites.

"The challenge now is how do you get that to the next level [of media attention for the survey]," she explained. "We're in the process of re-releasing it to the public and then framing it in local terms."

Meanwhile, nearly all media attention this issue has received is stored on the organization's Web site for visitors to easily view.

Survival-based advocacy

In addition to traditional media relations, Popovic has also embraced more nontraditional means of PR—namely, public advocacy.

"Advocacy has become a bigger and bigger part of what we do—and I mean real, survival-based advocacy," Popovic said. "We've done that very holistically here as an organization so when it comes to advocacy the duties are spread more widely than in conventional PR work."

When a conflict strikes—for instance, if a cable provider fails to fund CAN TV—one employee is designated as the point person for public outreach and advocacy. Other employees at CAN TV then fill the positions temporarily left empty.

A grassroots effort then begins as the point person mobilizes groups of people CAN TV has designated as advocates for the station. He or she makes contact and continues with follow-up phone calls. CAN TV has packed city meetings through these efforts.

"Here's the thing," Popovic said, "people want to act but they may not respond to passively conveyed information and therefore follow-up is so important."

The conflict with AT&T required a new approach to advocacy, she noted. When PEG providers and supporters got wind of AT&T's action in other states, they started mobilizing statewide. For example, they launched a local coalition titled [Keep Us Connected](#) to raise awareness of the issue.

One result: A crowd of CAN TV supporters attended the January 2007 press conference in Springfield, Ill. (which is a three-hour drive from Chicago), announcing the cable TV bill.

"We saw [the bill] coming; we organized; when the law was introduced we were there," Popovic said.

Nonprofit communicators: Take it seriously!

The outcome of this public awareness battle, which Popovic called a fight for survival, remains uncertain. But from her vantage point, she has this advice for other nonprofits facing similar challenges.

"If a nonprofit is facing a major conflict—a David-and-Goliath struggle—then early on do a power analysis and say, 'Who's really involved in this, who're the stakeholders, who do I need to be talking to?'" she said. "Resources will be limited ... [but] you really can't get off with no investment; if you don't take it seriously ... then the issue is gone and you've lost."