

4. COMMUNICATION AND PUBLIC AT LARGE

Communication excellence and the public at large

American Red Cross

by Ann Stingle and Bud Good

Henry Dunant very clearly understood the value of good communications or he never would have written *A Memory of Solferino*—a book that moved the conscience of nations to action. In the United States, Clara Barton, founder of the American Red Cross, was also a communicator. Unlike many of her time, she maintained good rapport with the press because she recognized the value of timeliness, human interest and repetition. What she conveyed to the public was an image of consistency and devotion to humanitarian ideals.

Today, communicating well is both a practical necessity and a moral obligation for those of us involved in the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Without communication, we cannot gather the resources necessary to help the victims of conflict and disaster, nor can we assure donors that their contributed money has been wisely used to help those in need; without communication we cannot mobilize the attention of the world on behalf of those who otherwise would suffer unnoticed.

Accelerated change, conflict, innovation, and political turbulence crowd the environment with important messages of increasing number and complexity. Our audiences, whether they are the general public, school children or government officials, will not wait for us to make ourselves known, and will not make the effort to grasp precisely who we are and what we do. It is up to us to ensure that those facts are obvious to them the instant they open the envelope, pick up the brochure, see the ad, or read the article. It is up to each individual in the Movement—because we are all communicators on its behalf—to use whatever channels are at his or her disposal, to make the Movement known.

But the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement is not the only organization to recognize the value of communication excellence. Today, many worthy organizations compete for attention and contributors. And the cold, hard truth is that members of our intended audience will choose others, no matter how good our services are, unless we are absolutely clear and consistent about who we are and what we do.

The need for absolute clarity in image is paramount, and is the essence of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement Identity Program, approved by the Council of Delegates in October 1989. That program is the centerpiece for a new communication strategy that has the potential to breathe new life into every element of the Movement.

The American Red Cross experience

Everything we do as American Red Cross communicators is intended to equip our National Society to better serve the public. The advertising campaigns, promotional events and the steady flow of news are designed to acquaint the public with our services and our needs. Our internal communication efforts—our print periodicals, our major meetings, and our business television broadcasts—are designed to keep our field informed and unified in their efforts to serve. The thousands of educational and informative products that we produce each year are intended to enable our branches to reach out to the public with effective appeals and service programs.

Reaching the public with our messages is becoming a more competitive business as more and more organizations develop the ability to compete for the public's attention. The evolution of our information society will continue to demand the best that we can offer in our communication efforts with the public.

To meet challenges, the American Red Cross launched its *Identity Program* in 1987 after extensive study and market research. A key finding in the research was that, while the majority of people in the United States were aware of the American Red Cross and thought highly of our work, it was not an organization in which Americans would invest sufficient time or money to enable us to do all that was asked for us. In other words, as effective and well known as our programs were, we had not established the sort of relationship or dialogue with Americans that would ensure their support.

Part of our difficulty was our image. We were perceived as too large, often bureaucratic, somewhat untouchable. We gave our audience the impression that (1) we didn't need them, and (2) if they came to us they would find an institution, not *people* who care about them.

The essence of the American Red Cross Identity Program therefore focuses on developing a positive relationship between the people who represent the organization and the people for whom we exist. It also encourages those already involved in the Red Cross to have pride (without arrogance) in who we are and what we do.

The program, which has been operational for two years, has proven essential in forging a strong communications strategy for building public trust in the American Red Cross. It is available in both Spanish and English.

Already, significant results are being reported by our branches. For example, most branches have implemented the program, taking first steps in a long-term effort to focus precisely the American Red Cross image. This is true regardless of branch size or sophistication. The majority of those that have adopted the program are reporting tangible benefits. Many branches that have implemented the program are reporting evidence of a stronger public image. Many report that morale is up because Red Cross members know more about their organization and have a greater sense of pride in the organization. A significant number of the chapters are reporting greater success in recruiting volunteers and raising funds. All of this occurred in the first two years of a long-term program. Such quick results underscore the benefits of an identity program to our Movement.

Bringing the International Identity closer to home

Because the American Red Cross currently has an identity program underway, our implementation of the International Identity Program may vary slightly from those of other National Societies, the League or the International Committee of the Red Cross. For those sectors of the Movement, the Movement's program should provide a framework for image-related objectives and lay the groundwork for all communication activities. In the United States, the international identity must be integrated into the program already in progress. Therefore, we are presenting it as an expansion or elaboration of the international aspects of our domestic identity program.

In addition to the audiences outlined in the Movement's Identity Program, the American Red Cross has further segmented the general public into the following three groups for purposes of building a

supportable image before the public. These audiences will be important to the effective communication of our international identity.

1. *Minorities* — By the year 2032, it is projected that minorities will represent a majority of the US population. Often, the unique language and culture of racial and ethnic minority groups require that we initiate special efforts to communicate with, serve, and involve minorities in the American Red Cross.

2. *Young Adults* (Ages 18-34) — Demographically, this group represents the future of the Red Cross. They are currently our blood donors and our course takers. We need to maintain their commitment to the American Red Cross and generate their financial and volunteer support.

3. *Prime-Age Workers* (Ages 35-50) — The prime-age worker group is growing the fastest and will soon be the largest age group in the US. Research has also shown that this is also the audience most likely to act on information they receive. To reach our objectives, we must offer needed programs and create a climate that encourages them to become involved in the Red Cross.

How are these audiences reflected in our communication activities? Here are a few examples:

- Greater use of minorities in campaigns which use advertising, media and promotion.
- Use of celebrity musicians who appeal to the two age groups for “March is Red Cross Month” promotion.
- Development of ethnic media lists.
- Continued expansion of national media relationships, concentrating on those media and approaches that will give us the greatest impact on our targeted audiences.
- Reinforcement of branch capacity to strengthen local media relationships and generate donations of time and print space, as well as positive press, in support of American Red Cross work.
- A promotional contest which showcased “young adults” already playing a part in the American Red Cross.
- Distribution of advertising and media components to “targeted” minority media.
- The development of promotion and advertising campaigns that feature Red Cross services of particular use to our target audiences.

It is within this context that international messages, including the International Identity Program, are being woven into American Red Cross communication strategies. The approach is audience specific, event specific and part of a multi-dimensional approach to communicating the Movement in the United States.

As with other National Societies this requires a two-prong approach to implementation: internally to American Red Cross volunteer and paid staff at the headquarters and branch levels, and externally to media, government, other agencies and the public at large.

Internal communication

An estimated 75 percent of all American Red Cross information to external audiences takes place at the local level. Therefore, communication with our 2,800 branches in communities throughout the United States is important to solidifying our public communication activities. Steps in internal distribution of the International Identity Program include:

- Placement of articles in the national grassroots newsletter and other communication vehicles targeted to management and other internal audiences.
- Inclusion in all presentations on the Red Cross identity at national, regional, and branch meetings.
- Distribution to chapters of the Identity Statement and support documents.
- Provision to branches of suggestions and guidelines for the use of the International Identity Statement and how to integrate it into communications activities and channels.
- Continuing evaluation of feedback from Red Cross units on their usage of the International Identity Program.

External communication

While awareness of the work of the International Movement among the American public is already high, most people are unsure about specifics. The image of the Movement lacks form and clarity. We believe, therefore, that all communication activities to external audiences must be sharply focused on the competence of the people of the Movement in providing the necessary assistance to people in need worldwide. In order to integrate the International Identity into American Red Cross communications we will:

- Design a communication plan targeted to external audiences which includes objectives and messages that reinforce the Movement identity.
- Incorporate into all press releases about the Movement a strong emphasis on people-to-people action, including the victims and the people of the Movement who act to protect human life and dignity and assist those victims. Because it is important to show an American linkage in communicating international messages to an American audience, American Red Cross participation is stressed in press coverage on Movement activities wherever possible.
- Take every opportunity, particularly through the media, to show international humanitarian law and the principles of the Movement as people-oriented, action-based and relevant to current issues of public interest.
- Ensure that photos on all brochures, posters and other print materials that communicate about the International Red Cross are of people in action, not of things, buildings or vehicles.
- Make sure that all leaders and other spokespersons are adequately trained for media interviews so that they project the image of compassion and commitment of the Movement.
- Because the best way to educate is through action, utilize all opportunities involving current events and Movement activity to demonstrate who the people of the Movement are, what they do and what they stand for.

Our plans also call for the International Identity Program closely to be woven into the messages and activities for the *Campaign for the Protection of War Victims* and other Movement communication and information efforts.

To summarize, we view the International Identity Program as a means of expanding and strengthening our own communication objectives with the American public as to who we are as a Movement and what we do to protect human life and dignity throughout the world.

Disaster communication

While health, nutrition, safety and youth programs are important parts of Movement work, its real purpose is to help victims of conflict and natural disaster. Communications in such emergency situations offer excellent opportunities for highly visible coverage. But we must

never forget that disaster communication is a highly specialized field and one in which Movement expertise must be “state of the art”.

Communications played an important role for the American Red Cross in the fall of 1989 when the United States was hit by the worst series of disasters in American Red Cross history: Hurricane Hugo and the Northern California earthquake. Within 10 days an advertising campaign was designed, produced and distributed to Red Cross branches and media outlets. A press conference was conducted quickly in the midst of the hurricane wreckage which reached not only local press, but was also distributed by satellite to downlinks at broadcast stations across the country. Press officers were on duty 24 hours a day to take calls from the media.

Because we were able to communicate immediately and forcefully about American Red Cross activities to meet victim needs, we were able to capture the attention and support of media and the public, alike, at unparalleled levels. Thanks to the millions of contributed dollars, our Society has been able to help more American families victimized by disaster than in any single year in our history. This year has proven conclusively the unquestionable dependence of the Red Cross on effective communication with the public.

Conclusion

Communication is the process by which our Movement tells the people of the world—be they government officials, earthquake victims, or a mother seeking a life-saving vaccination for her child—that we of the Red Cross and Red Crescent are here to help. Communication establishes with our audiences those particular principles of our mandate which set us apart from all other organizations, making us worthy of their trust.

As presented in the Identity Statement of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement:

“The people of the Movement help anyone in urgent need. No regard is paid to political, racial, religious or ideological differences. No point of view or person is favoured over another. Neither influence nor pressure will ever alter these facts... This unique network has spanned generations, linking people around the world who share a commitment to prevent suffering and a readiness to protect human life and dignity—no matter whose, no matter where, no matter when”.

Recent global events testify to the fact that our Movement will continue to keep pace with emerging needs and to mobilize the public to supportive action. Everyone in the Movement—National Societies,

League, and ICRC—must sharpen their ability to position the Movement in the forefront of humanitarian concern and action. As events unfold, our mission as members of the Movement is to ensure that human life and dignity are not trampled underfoot and forgotten, and that an important weapon in achieving our goal is our ability to communicate with excellence.

Ann Stingle
Bud Good

Ann Stingle is the International Communication Associate at the American Red Cross where she has worked in a number of capacities since 1966. She holds a Master of Arts Degree in International Communication from the American University in Washington. She was staff-on-loan to the International Committee of the Red Cross in 1985, and to the League of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in 1989.

Bud Good is the General Manager of Corporate Communication for the American Red Cross. He earned a bachelor's degree in journalism from George Washington University and did graduate work at Boston University School of Public Relations and Communications, Northwestern University, the University of Virginia, and the University of Texas. He has given leadership to a variety of American Red Cross communication activities throughout his 23-year Red Cross career. Under his guidance, American Red Cross communication staff have won numerous awards for outstanding achievement in the communication field.