

How a PR Firm Executed the Alar Scare

WST

After this year's stir over use of the chemical Alar on apples, political publicist David Fenton celebrated the work of his firm in a lengthy memo to interested parties. He wrote of a "sea change in public opinion" that has "taken place because of a carefully planned media campaign, conceived and implemented by Fenton Communications with the Natural Resources Defense Council." Extracts are reprinted below:

In the past two months, the American public's knowledge of the dangers of pesticides in food has been greatly increased. Overnight, suppliers of organic produce cannot keep up with demand. Traditional supermarkets are opening pesticide-free produce sections. . . .

The campaign was based on NRDC's report "Intolerable Risk: Pesticides in Our Children's Food." Participation by the actress Meryl Streep was another essential element.

Usually, public interest groups release similar reports by holding a news conference, and the result is a few print stories. Television coverage is rarely sought or achieved. The intensity of exposure created by design for the NRDC pesticide story is uncommon in the non-profit world.

Our goal was to create so many repetitions of NRDC's message that average American consumers (not just the policy elite in Washington) could not avoid hearing it—from many different media outlets within a short period of time. The idea was for the "story" to achieve a life of its own, and continue for weeks and months to affect policy and consumer habits. Of course, this had to be achieved with extremely limited resources.

In most regards, this goal was met. A modest investment by NRDC re-paid itself many-fold in tremendous media exposure (and substantial, immediate revenue for future pesticide work). In this sense, we submit this campaign as a model for other non-profit organizations.

Media coverage included two segments on CBS 60 Minutes, the covers of Time and Newsweek (two stories in each magazine), the Phil Donahue show, multiple appearances on Today, Good Morning America and CBS This Morning, several stories on each of the network evening newscasts, MacNeil/Lehrer, multiple stories in the N.Y. Times, Washington Post, L.A. Times and newspapers around the country, three cover stories in USA Today, People, four women's magazines with a combined circulation of 17 million (Redbook, Family Circle, Women's Day and New Woman), and thousands of repeat stories in local media around the nation and the world. . . .

Consumer feedback devices were built into the campaign, including self-published book sales and the first use of a 900 phone number by a non-profit group. . . .

Planning the Campaign

In October of 1988 NRDC hired Fenton Communications to undertake the media campaign for its report. . . . The report marked the first time anyone—inside government or out—had calculated children's actual exposure levels to carcinogenic and neurotoxic pesticides. The study showed one of the worst pesticides to be damno-

zide, or Alar, used primarily on apples and peanuts. . . .

[L]ast fall, Meryl Streep contacted NRDC, asking if she could assist with some environmental projects. Ms. Streep read the preliminary results of the study and agreed to serve as a spokesperson for it. . . .

It was agreed that one week after the study's release, Streep and other prominent citizens would announce the formation of NRDC's new project, Mothers and Others for Pesticide Limits. This group would direct citizen action at changing the pesticide laws, and help consumers lobby for pesticide-free produce at their grocery stores.

The separation of these two events was important in ensuring that the media would have two stories, not one, about this project. Thereby, more repetition of NRDC's message was guaranteed.

As the report was being finalized, Fenton Communications began contacting various media. An agreement was made with 60 Minutes to "break" the story of the report in late February. Interviews were also arranged several months in advance with major women's magazines like Family Circle, Women's Day and Redbook (to appear in mid-March). Appearance dates were set with the Donahue Show, ABC's Home Show, double appearances on NBC's Today show and other programs.

Releasing the Report

On February 26th CBS 60 Minutes broke the story to an audience of 40 million viewers. . . . The next morning, NRDC held a news conference attended by more than 70 journalists and 12 camera crews.

Concurrently, NRDC coordinated local news conferences in 12 cities around the country also releasing the report. . . .

Announcing Mothers and Others

On March 7 Meryl Streep held a Washington news conference to announce the formation of NRDC's Mothers and Others for Pesticide Limits. She was joined by board members including pediatrician Dr. T. Berry Brazelton, National PTA President Manya Unger and Wendy Gordon Rockefeller of NRDC.

Coverage of Mothers and Others that week included USA Today (cover); The Today Show on NBC; The Phil Donahue Show (10 million viewers); Women's Day (6 million copies sold); Redbook (4 million); Family Circle (6 million); Organic Gardening (1.5 million); New Woman (1.7 million); People Magazine; USA TODAY Television (200 markets); Entertainment Tonight (18 million viewers); ABC's HOME Show (3 million viewers); Cable News Network and numerous radio networks, newspaper chains, broadcast chains, wire services and other media around the nation.

In addition, we arranged for Meryl Streep and Janet Hathaway of NRDC to grant 16 interviews by satellite with local tv major market anchors. . . .

In the ensuing weeks, the controversy kept building. Articles appeared in food sections of newspapers around the country. Columnists and cartoonists took up the story. MacNeil/Lehrer, the New York Times and Washington Post did follow-up stories, as did the three network evening programs and morning shows. Celebrities from the casts of L.A. Law and thirty-

something joined NRDC for a Los Angeles news conference.

Soon school systems began banning apples (which is not what NRDC intended or recommended). Three federal agencies (EPA, USDA and FDA) issued an unusual joint statement assuring the public that apples were safe (although to children who consume a great deal, these assurances are not entirely true).

Then, by coincidence, two Chilean grapes were found laced with cyanide, and a story which had been building anyway went further. Newsweek and Time did additional stories—on both covers the same week—about the safety of the food system, with more coverage of the NRDC report.

And the industry struck back. NRDC's credibility was, as expected, questioned by industry "front groups" such as the American Council on Science and Health. A major corporate pr firm, Hill and Knowlton, was hired for \$700,000 by the apple growers, which also put forward a \$2 million advertising budget. Stories began appearing (including a Washington Post cover piece) saying that the levels of Alar in apples were below federal standards, and charging the media with exaggerating the story. This missed the whole point of the study—that children ingest so many apples for their size that the legal federal standard is unsafe. . . .

Usually, it takes a significant natural disaster to create this much sustained news attention for an environmental problem. We believe this experience proves there are other ways to raise public awareness for the purpose of moving the Congress and policymakers.