

From Your Servant Leader

July 13, 2017

William Randolph Hearst would certainly enjoy these present times.

A century ago the Hearst newspaper chain delighted in simply making up news stories, influencing local and national elections, mixing editorials with news, and otherwise creating what was termed “yellow journalism” back in the day. His story was famously fictionalized in the movie “Citizen Kane” with Orson Welles.



Nowadays this would all be considered just another competitor strategy in the crowded news market, trying to stand out, advance narratives, create fake news and all the other terms we use in our increasingly skeptical view of today’s media. This includes not just newspapers with their declining readership but broadcast and social media as well. Want to know what really happened? Look at three different news pages and triangulate. In other words, good luck.

In this new world of journalism-slash-entertainment, how does a legitimate organization such as the Society of St. Vincent de Paul establish and maintain credibility? If people no longer trust the media, view websites with a cautious eye and are more prone than ever to distrust institutions, how can we ask anyone to respect us, much less join us or provide financial and material support?

I have a few ideas.

First, draw a bullseye diagram of concentric circles. In the center “bullseye” write SVdP. In increasingly larger circles, I suggest writing “donors/volunteers,” then “the parish,” then “my local community” and finally “everyone else.” These represent the basic groups that are SVdP Conference stakeholders, and who need communications with us and about us to advance their support. Each circle needs its own strategy and communication tools. And each one has a different cost/benefit attached to it. For example, you wouldn’t use television ads to reach people in your own parish because you would waste money reaching so many others.

I suggest a few overall strategies that can help on the Conference level. Councils may have different groups, and therefore different strategies that make economic and messaging sense. But let’s begin with local efforts first, because nothing is more powerful than a direct, personal communications strategy.

First, take the bushel basket off of the light of your Conference! You don’t need to brag, but it is fine to demonstrate and talk about your good works. Invite people into your meetings. With proper clearances, invite someone on a home visit with your team. Invite groups, from a local employer’s workers to the parish down the road without a SVdP Conference to visit your operations. Ask someone to help in even a small way at your food pantry or other special work. We learn, and then appreciate, through our active participation.

Second, re-consider the parish bulletin and other parish and diocesan publications. Most Society messages are about what the Conference needs. This is fine, but how about also relating the results

of your work? We tend to focus on the immediate need and not the long-term building of our reputation through communication of your results. How many people did you feed? How many payments for rent or utility assistance? While these are outputs rather than true results, it is what we can easily measure and what people understand.

Third, take a look at your thank-you messages and your donor communications. They may not always result in another gift, but they are always an educational tool. Advance your work and again, show your results. People support winners. Show them you are a winner, working for God and our neighbors in need.

Fourth, include your Society work and relationships in those social media messages such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Instagram. Photos are great (just don't invade the privacy of our friends in need, and avoid children pics) to show your Conference's activities. They usually express a sense of fun! Avoid those shots of everyone standing together posed in front of a table. Have a penchant for action shots! Think of the ridiculous things your friends and family post. Wouldn't your Conference work be an improvement?

Branding and communications are a skill set. Some people excel in them while others don't. Perhaps someone in your Conference can take on a regular communications role. We often ask accounting pros to be our treasurers. Why don't we ask if anyone is marketer or public relations person, and then ask likewise for their skilled help?

I wish that the efforts above could be done just a few times a year and have positive impact. Not so. Only through repeated communications do people learn and later change behaviors. A year-round communications strategy is called for to advance our reputation as the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. The actual messages can change frequently but they need to be tied together over weeks and months. Does this work? The Church seems to think so. We call it the Gospel.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Dave B.", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Dave