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STANFORD SOCIAL INNOVATION *review*

Upfront

Off the Sidelines and into the Headlines Foundations should do their own media outreach

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Stanford Social Innovation Review
Fall 2004

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PUBLIC RELATIONS

Off the Sidelines and into the Headlines

Foundations should do their own media outreach

It's no secret that over the past few years the nonprofit world has suffered from a barrage of bad PR. Scandals involving the United Way, the Nature Conservancy, and even the Catholic Church have made headlines. A general mistrust about corporate management, touched off by Enron and other scandals, has bled into public perceptions about nonprofit management. Federal and state legislators have increasingly scrutinized the salaries of charity executives, and Congress is considering legislation to force foundations to give away a percentage of their endowments every year.

With all this bad news swirling, you might expect nonprofits to be stepping up their public relations work, trying harder to counter the negativity with a positive image. It's true that many nonprofits have robust public relations operations, some of which have been working overtime in recent months. But for at least one segment of the nonprofit world – foundations – the idea of proactively stepping into the media spotlight is often considered unseemly.

Leery of overshadowing their grantees and the issues they work on, foundations have historically been pretty modest when it comes to media outreach. They've often sat on the sidelines while their grantees talk to the media. According to a recent report, foundations' modesty could be hurting them.

"Any organization has to define itself and its own image, especially when it's getting beat up," said Dou-

glas Gould, who runs a nonprofit-oriented PR firm based in Larchmont, N.Y. "Foundations are no exception." In a recent study, "Truth on the Sidelines: Philanthropy and Foundations in the Media," Gould examined stories about philanthropy in leading newspapers, and on the Internet, national television, and radio during two six-month periods – the second halves of 1997 and 2002, respectively. Analyzing the stories, Gould and

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his colleagues found "a dramatic decrease in positive coverage of philanthropy" between the two time periods, with more pieces focused on fraud and fewer with positive spins about major individual donors or funding campaigns.

Zeroing in on foundation-related stories published or aired during the 2002 time frame, Gould reported that foundations were quoted in only 14 percent. More than twice as often, 32 percent of the time, the stories quoted grantees.

"I would argue that foundations have different agendas that go beyond what the grantees are doing," Gould

said. "Sometimes foundations have objectives that are global. They may fund groups around the world, but those groups may not be seen back in the United States."

There's some evidence that foundations are recognizing the importance of doing their own media outreach. According to Jeff Martin, director of media relations for the Council on Foundations, there's been a "tremendous increase" in recent years in foundation-based media work. He said the change is partly a response to heightened interest from journalists.

"Foundations sometimes will say, 'It's not about us, it's about the grantee,'" Martin said. "That's good, it's noble. But a lot of reporters now are taking it a step past that, and asking foundations how they're funding and why they're funding. They're treating foundations like a business and want to know how they operate. It's 'follow the money.'"

Some foundations view increased media outreach as a potential win-win for themselves and their grantees. "We're not averse to harnessing our name and our organization if that'll help get coverage for the issue," said Paul Tarini, senior communications officer for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. "For us it's not about chest-thumping. It's a recognition that we have a profile out in the world that frequently many of our grantees don't have and that it will be easier to get attention [for the cause] if we help get attention for it."

–Vinay Jain