

Beyond First Love: Catching and Keeping Media Attention

The Model of the United Nations, World Food Programme

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1. Introduction

The World Food Programme (WFP) is an organ of the United Nations set up to address worldwide problems of hunger. It works by providing food aid in times of natural or man-made crisis and even after the cessation of the acute stage of the crisis, it assists in development operations to aid recovery in the areas affected. Its headquarters is in Rome.

An International Humanitarian Agency and the Catholic Church, different identities, similar needs: non-profit attention to their often converging-publics. Both need the help of the media to amplify their message and beyond that, remain news-worthy while always being faithful to their respective missions.

The WFP depends on individual and corporate donations to procure and distribute food aid. In the heat of the moment, when the crisis situation is still fresh in the world press, it is relatively easy to convince donors to help. However, as time passes or when another crisis situation diverts media attention, the victims of the earlier crisis are forgotten, and in the same token, humanitarian aid stops coming in. It is then the task of agencies like the WFP to maintain media attention, keep interest alive, in order to sustain aid to those recovering from the crisis.

But the very nature of the media calls for an immediacy that unfortunately often goes along with sensationalism. Media deregulation has also meant that there are more and more media options available to a declining public, for whose attention a waging battle is daily fought. One only needs to look to see that journalists are employed by ‘businessmen’ who are usually more interested in the bottom-line. An immediate consequence of this trend is that focus is shifted from the veracity of information, and media as service to society, to a “scoop” mentality, where each media outlet aims to be ahead of the others in both inventiveness and originality. Alas, most media then play into the hands of the maxim which says that “if it bleeds, it leads”.

Nevertheless, a not-for-profit organization such as the WFP has an identity to protect, which is often at odds with this frenzy. The Church on its part cannot deviate from its stated supernatural identity. It cannot falsify information so as to make it more sensational and hence more appealing to an ever “news fatigued” audience. Yet, it ought to; it has an obligation to remain in the news, which is the market place for those it has received a divine mandate to serve.

To overcome this “fatigue” and remain “news worthy”, while respecting the human dignity of disaster victims the WFP has become adept at ingenious ways of communicating itself. For instance, it makes extensive use of Third Party Advocacy; uses Multimedia technology in an

innovative way and tries to accurately Segment its publics in order to better target the communication. The Church can learn a few things from this experience.

2. The Marketplace of Communication

I make bold to presume that Church communicators are now getting less uncomfortable with applying the term “marketing” to Church communication. If that is correct, let us attempt an application of these concepts.

2.1 Market/Public Segmentation

There are many possible audiences for the communication products that non-profits have to offer, in our case the WFP and consequently, also the Catholic Church. Each public has its characteristic features and needs. To communicate effectively, it is obvious that one cannot possibly address all of these needs, in an equal way, at the same time and with equal satisfaction to the consumer. Choice is necessary.

For profit-making enterprises, the reaction to this limitation would be to determine a niche that one can dominate through specialization, leaving aside the other possibilities as opportunity cost.

The World Food Programme has a much wider audience than the typical profit oriented enterprise, because of the worldwide nature of its operations. In the same way, the Catholic Church does not have the luxury of choosing a specific audience, nor does it have the luxury of specialization, even less of ignoring some publics. It does however need to understand the different parties it deals with in order to adapt its “language” to them, and hence “speak intelligibly and effectively” to each one according to specific needs. This is where Public (or market) segmentation comes in.

The thesis I would like to propose is that ‘catching’ the attention of the public through the media (itself an important target public), is a function of how minutely the public segmentation has been done.

Market Segmentation identifies and profiles distinct groups of potential customers, by examining demographic, psychographic and behavioral differences among them¹. The end result of this profiling will be some distinct categories. The institution would then have to design product offerings suited to the characteristics of each category, and then position it in (make it visible to) the minds of the consumer as offering a specific and desired benefit.

2.2 Defining Marketing

The American Marketing Association (AMA) gives another definition, one preferred for our present purposes. It defines it as “the process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promotion, and distribution of ideas, goods, and services to create exchanges that satisfy individual and organizational goals”²

Let us consider some of the terms in the definition.

2.2.1 Process: Marketing is a process, which means that it is ongoing and continuous. There are

¹ Cf. Marketing Management Millennium Edition, Tenth Edition, by Philip Kotler, 2000 by Prentice-Hall, Inc

² Cf. Marketing Management Millennium Edition, Tenth Edition, by Philip Kotler Copyright © 2000 by Prentice-Hall, Inc

many parts and many stages involved, each with a beginning and an end, and it is a process that can be improved upon to be more effective.

2.2.2 Conception, Pricing, Promotion and Distribution: Like “marketing”, “Pricing” may make someone uneasy if applied to the Church. We only need to point out that the target audience of Church communication always ‘pays’ for the “products” offered by the Church. In order to listen to any message, people pay with their time, their attention, their interest, all of which could have been channeled to other competing “products”. Therefore, nothing is really free, because when we chose one (product or service) we forgo others, even if they are both intangible. And of course, the Church has to “promote” its products if it intends to widen its target audience or “market”.

2.2.3 Ideas, Goods and Services: Whenever it communicates, the World Food Programme creates exchanges, so does the Catholic Church. In return for its communication, its publics give something in return: attention, faith, commitment, money, time, honor and in some cases their lives in accomplishing the humanitarian aims of this agency.

2.3 *The Publics of the World Food Programme*

Though not exhaustive, we can list the following as the publics of the WFP.

- National Governments, such as the United States of America, Japan and the European Union (for example Italy, France, Germany, Spain and Britain)
- Legislators and Policy makers in major donor countries, in order to have them influence legislations, bills and government allocation of funds.
- Private companies such as the Courier company TNT, United Colors of Benetton
- The Media: Television, Radio, Cinema, Print, Internet, Individual Journalists and Public Relations Professionals, Talk Show Hosts, etc
- Influential people such as Heads of Governments, Ambassadors, former ambassadors, former government officials, Celebrities in Music, Movies and Sports
- Hunger Victims
- Growing children through Education in Schools, because these are the decision – makers of tomorrow

2.4 *The Publics of the Catholic Church*

In a general sense, it is not much different from those of the World Food Programme, with the following additions: at the top of the list, we would put:

- Practicing Catholics
- Lapse Catholics
- Christians and non-Catholics
- Non-Christians and Atheists
- The Media: Television, Radio, Cinema, Print, Internet, Individual Journalists and Public Relations Professionals, Talk Show Hosts, etc

3. “News Fatigue” and its Causes

Many theories have been proposed as to why the media and their audiences easily get tired of a news item. It is said that unless a new angle crops up, media attention on a situation does not last longer than three days, an experience shared by many journalists who work in an increasingly excitable world and audience.

News that retains the same ‘color’ becomes familiar, monotonous and boring, so people stop responding. Consequently the media drops it. Why? I thought that the news media existed at the service of truth and information? Why then do they drop a news item simply because its readers are no longer interested in it, or because it is no longer ‘bleeding’?

Let me venture some reasons.

3.1 The marketplace drives coverage.

Evidence may suggest that it is the audience that dictates what the editors chose for publication. The need to keep selling and possibly outsell the competitor has meant that the media unfortunately has become more business than service, losing any remnants of being a guardian of societal morals.

3.2 Stereotyping or Formulaic coverage of crisis in the media

To satisfy a public that is wary of the unusual, the media reports events according to moulds: good guy-bad guy dichotomy, without going deep into what makes each case unique and distinct.

3.3 Remoteness of Events and Ignorance

People are more interested in news which affects them directly. Any news item that is considered far, mysterious and with little impact on their daily lives does not keep the attention for too long.

4. Trends and Creativity

To overcome this “News Fatigue” barrier therefore, new ways to communicate the same old message have become necessary. We will now consider how the WFP does it.

4.1 Third-Party Advocacy

The WFP wants to keep hungry people and nations in the news and in people’s consciences, to increase its visibility. It also wants to influence decisions about priorities for allocation of funds.

To this end, it seeks the help of individuals, public and private companies who themselves need an avenue to exercise corporate social responsibility. The WFP also takes advantage of the popularity of famous people (who it designates “hunger ambassadors”) whom it asks to donate a bit of their time and talent to promote a cause that is easily understood as worthwhile.

4.1.1 The Friends of the World Food Programme

The Friends of the World Food Programme (FWFP) is a Washington DC based non-for-profit organization that helps the WFP in fund raising. Its Board of Directors comprises 13 people, among whom are one former US presidential aspirant and Senator, one former governor, a former US ambassador, businessmen and women and public relations veterans. One does not need a long stretch of the imagination to see how these “friends” help to influence budgetary decisions in their governments on behalf of the WFP.

The core concern of the FWFP is to campaign to make the WFP more visible to important publics and in so doing, obtain for it funds needed to finance its operations. Its major field of operations is the United States, from where the WFP gets the bulk of its donations. The FWFP tries to influence

law and policy makers to pass or support bills in favor of channeling funds to humanitarian needs of the WFP.

4.1.2 Corporate Partners

TNT, one of the largest courier companies in the world has helped organize fund-raising campaigns for the WFP, the most notable being by initiating the “Walk the World” campaign. To help raise money for the WFP and increase media spotlight on its activities, TNT in June 2004 initiated the annual “Walk the World” event whereby TNT and WFP employees, families and friends in “200 locations, 72 countries and 24 time zones came together to walk a total distance of 200,000 km, the equivalent of walking five times around the world” At the end, the event raised over US\$1 million to benefit a WFP feeding project, and was extensively covered in the global media, including CNN, national and local press. The success of that first “Walk the World” has made the WFP adopt it as an annual activity worldwide.

Other corporations that collaborate with WFP includes World Vision and United Colors of Benetton.

4.1.3 The Partnership with Leargas Delaney

In November 2005, WFP partnered with the London office of Leargas Delaney and the film production company Partizan to produce three video Public Service Announcements (PSA) or commercials called “Donate a dessert”, “Boiling Stones” and “Pinstripe Suit”.

The three commercials were conceived to bring the reality of hunger closer home to Western sensitivities and background, so as to help them imagine what it is like to be hungry in Africa. They were all shot on location in Kenya with British Airways donating the plane trip from London and back.

4.2 Internet

The World Food Programme has a website at www.wfp.org. The domain which was created in 1994 is currently edited by Chris Endean.

The site has downloadable short 30 seconds video clips, called Video News Releases (VNR), explaining aspects of the work of the agency, in different parts of the world. These VNRs can be freely downloaded for re-use for individuals and news organizations. There are photographs as well for liberal use and there are lots of downloadable official PDF (portable document format). The only requirement of the WFP in the free use of these images is that the source be acknowledged, and in the case of photographs, that the author be credited.

The site is designed to satisfy the need of the average journalist in search of resources to research or complement a news story. Keeping in mind that journalists often have little time and with plenty of deadlines to meet, the idea seems to have been to speed up the news creation process for the journalist. The Video News Releases prepared in-house by the Video Unit led by Jonathan Dumont, do not require any post-editing, neither in quality nor in length.

4.3 *Celebrity Video Clips and Music Videos*

The World Food Programme has a fully equipped Video Production Unit headed by Jonathan Dumont, a former reporter for the CNN.

They produce in-house raw footage of humanitarian situations all over the world, which are ready to be used in news reports by any interested person. They also produce PSAs of celebrities in the world of sports, music, film and literary industry speaking on behalf of the WFP, advocating support for the agency and/or for concrete humanitarian situations, as well as Corporate Videos. The WFP afterwards tries to get donated air time on television to air these videos. They have also produced an in-house music video seeking to highlight the world hunger situation.

The Sean Connery PSA: For example, the famous actor appears in a 34 second PSA showing the WFP in action, making food air-drops and images of African children, towards the end of which he says, “*There is no greater gift and no better way to give it, than to the World Food Programme*”. Others are the Italian Formula One racing champion Jarno Trulli, the Kenyan Marathon Champion Paul Tergat.

4.4 *Feature Film: “All the Invisible Children”*

Another communication initiative, to increase awareness about world campaign and to call attention to its needs, the World Food Programme has collaborated with UNICEF and the Italian Government to produce a feature film entitled, “All the Invisible Children”. This movie was produced with the “donation” of talent and time by prominent movie directors Ridley Scott, John Woo and Mehdi Charef. Other directors were Spike Lee, Emir Kusturica, Katia Luno, Jordan Scott and Stefano Veneruso.

4.5 *WFP Video Game: “Food Force”*

In April 2005, the WFP launched a free video game called Food Force at a book fair in Bologna, Italy. Within six months of launch, the game was downloaded three million times³, and within that same time it was translated into Japanese and Chinese.

It is a cheaper means of advertising, because while 30 seconds prime-time slot on popular television can cost about half a million dollars, it takes much less (in the case of Food Force, \$475,000) to develop a video game that has a longer “life-time” than a TV ad.

Food Force was produced by an Italian game developer called “Depend” who donated part of their time and expertise. It is an unusually non-violent game designed as a race against time resolving a food crisis situation in an imaginary country called *Sheylan*. The launch and subsequent growth of the Food Force video game also earned the WFP several key mentions in popular news media.⁴

5. **Conclusions and Communication Principles Extrapolated**

Beyond some already inferred conclusions, let us draw particular attention to a few.

³ Cf. International Herald Tribune (& The New York Times), December 31, 2005.

⁴ Cf. International Herald Tribune, 31 Dec. 2005; The New York Times, 17 April 2005; USATODAY, 21 Dec. 2005; The Economist, 11 June 2005; Time, 6 June 2005; Financial Times, 4-5 June 2005; The Independent, 20 April 2005; BBC News, 14 April 2005; The Wall Street Journal Europe, 14 April 2005.

5.1 *Create News*

Any event can be managed to become news. Just like the effect achieved by a ‘sponsored’ Op-Ed, all it takes is ingenuity to make an otherwise ordinary affair newsworthy. One way the WFP does this is to take advantage of current issues in the news, to highlight its own messages. Another sure way to make news is to get a celebrity “to read the news”. This they have done with the PSAs featuring stars such as Sean Connery, Brazilian footballer Kaka and Italian Formula One driver Jarno Trulli.

5.2 *Producing the News in-house*

Since the WFP produces most of its videos in-house and provides them for free to media outlets, it obviates the need for further editing of the materials provided. The journalists who receive them are only too happy to “get on” with the other tasks of news gathering, since the supporting are already well prepared and ready for use. This means that the WFP has control over the message transmitted.

Knowing the rules and limitation set by the media industry these news video and audio are produced to media standards, using media “language” in short “soundbites” that ensure the core message is given within this time frame.

WFP communication has also perfected the act of coining catch phrases to support campaigns: Coins4kids; Smart Schools, Smart Kids, Walk the World, etc.

5.3 *And the Catholic Church?*

Hopefully this brief study on WFP communications was accompanied by at least a mental comparison with the Catholic Church. We cannot copy all of the form and much less the content of the WFP’s public relations but we certainly can copy the creativity, the modern way of thinking, the fearlessness to take on the media on its own terms and not shying away from the world.

In the face of the intimidating nature of the task, we cannot fall back to relying solely on “Church-media”. We need to make use of the mainstream media because we are interested in the whole world. This is the only approach consonant with the command we have received from Christ.

It is a challenging market-place where the tools of the trade are professional ones that require competent and qualified professionals.

One year after the death of John Paul II, the best way to conclude this media challenge is to employ one of his favorite exhortations: ***Be Not Afraid!***

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VERSIONE PROVVISORIA
IN ATTESA DELLA
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