

Making it Better - Effective Public Health Advocacy Conference
Parramatta; 29-30 Aug 05
Copyright Melissa Sweet 2005

A MESSAGE FROM LOIS, CLARK AND SALLY

I thought I'd borrow a tactic from the broadcaster Phillip Adams who helps himself to connect with his audience by imagining that he's talking a single person. I think he calls her Dorothy (Correction: she is Gladys).

So this morning, I am going to introduce you to three people and would like you to try and imagine them and their lives.

The first we shall call Lois. She is a reporter at a daily newspaper where working conditions have changed significantly in recent years. Once her routine in the morning was to open the mail, check the faxes and chat to her chief of staff about the stories she was working on. On some days she might have to sift through up to 100 pieces of information - letters, press releases, journals etc. She thought herself overwhelmed by information.

But then along came the internet and e-mail, and these days she feels the the information flood has turned into a tsunami.

Some days she gets so overwhelmed by the demands on her time and attention that she finds herself getting very snappy with the PR people who ring to check whether she has received their latest press release. Other things have changed too about her working environment.

When she first started at the paper a decade ago, she regularly escaped the office to interview real people, attend conferences, and to research stories. There's been a noticeable change however; these days she and her colleagues are under far greater pressure to do more with less - produce more stories with less time. She rarely leaves the office and now does much of her work over the phone.

She is less willing and able to invest her time and energy in ideas for stories which might not come together at the last moment - she is less likely to take risks. Her working environment encourages her to select stories which at the end of the day will live up to the promises she made her chief of staff in the morning.

She is also pulled a hundred different ways by her organisation's internal demands - there are so many different bosses wanting her stories; the editor of the Saturday news section of the paper starts hassling her on Monday morning about what story she will have for the Saturday paper; not to mention all the other sections of the paper who are keen to have her copy. They are also trying to do more - fill more space - with less resources.

The next person I would like you to meet is one of Lois' many bosses, Clark. He is the paper's news editor. Clark has come up through the ranks of journalism - working in state parliament, doing general rounds; years ago, he even did Lois' round, covering health, for a while. It drives her crazy because he thinks he knows what the angle should be on her stories and is always suggesting stupid story ideas.

More than once she has had to drop a really good story to follow up some idea of Clark's, usually prompted by something he heard at a dinner party about some weird disease or whacky cure for cancer, but has no evidence to back up.

But the real reason for Clark's meteoric rise through newspaper management is his natural affinity with the world of marketing. In another sign of the changing times, the marketers rule these days at *The Daily Blather* and they have decided there is one audience that matters above all others.

These are the so-called AB readers - the affluent professionals beloved by cashed-up advertisers. The theory goes that media outlets which attract audiences at the AB end of the socio-economic status scale are more likely to win advertisers or, even better, to get away with charging them premium rates.

In other words, the allocation of scarce resources in ever-more stretched newsrooms is driven, at least in part, by what market researchers tell Clark and his fellow media managers about what AB audiences want to know about. This influences not only the selection of stories, but also how they are presented and packaged. The focus groups even influence what photographs are run in the paper.

This drives Lois and her colleagues absolutely crazy. Old-fashioned news values are being distorted by consideration of whether a story has relevance or interest to AB audiences. Lois can't remember the last time she managed to get a story about Aboriginal health on page one. If she can successfully shepherd such a story through the tortuous news processes - convincing news conference and several news managers that such a story has to run, it is almost certain to be buried in the back pages of the paper or in a buried position on the page.

But life isn't all rosy for Clark, despite his intuitive understanding of AB audiences. Readership figures were down yet again in the latest readership survey and he knows he is going to be under even greater pressure from his bosses in months to come.

Which brings us to the third person, I want you to meet. Her name is Sally. She has two children who go to private schools, she works in the city and lives in the eastern suburbs. She is classic AB material. Her household income is well over \$200,000 a year and she has no concept of not having enough money to pay the electricity bill, or not being able to take the family overseas each year. She is the person Clark pictures every morning at news conference when he's running through the news list.

The trouble is that Sally is too busy to read the newspapers most days. They still subscribe, of course, but she rarely gets the paper out of its wrapper before 9 o'clock at night, when she gets a few overdue minutes to herself. Then she is too tired to give it more than a cursory flick - she has already heard the headlines of most stories on radio and TV anyway - although the story about Kylie Minogue's breast cancer did catch her eye and she actively sought out all the stories

about Kylie. She is terrified of getting breast cancer.

Sally is sick of all the doom and gloom in the world, can't bear to look at another horrific photo from Iraq, and prefers the lifestyle stories in the paper's glossy colour magazine.

It might help you to keep Lois, Clark and Sally in mind if you want to harness the media in your advocacy efforts. They are trying to tell you a few things.

First of all, be clear about your goals, who you are trying to reach and whether the media can help you to do this. People speak of the media as an homogenous entity. The media in all its diversity may share an overall goal - of connecting and engaging its audiences - but how this is done varies between different brands and types of media. Try to think of the Loises, Clarks and Sallys when considering which brand and type of media might be useful to your goal and when framing your message.

Lois, Clark and Sally also highlight another important point - that to engage with the media requires a realistic and pragmatic understanding of what we are and how we work.

We are not in the business of doing good works or promoting your particular message, no matter how worthy it may be.

The media business - and here it is important to draw a distinction between the professional imperatives of the individual journalist and the commercial imperatives of the media industry - is intensely competitive. Your story will be competing against many others that are striving to be heard, and some which will be backed by far bigger, slicker PR dollars.

But despite the growing role of market research, the sort of story that makes a journalist walk around the news room grinning "I've got a great story" will still be more likely to see the light of day than one which has the journalist walking around with a worried look as they wonder about how they will sell their story to the news editor.

So understand what makes a “great story” for a journalist. These tend to be sensational, involve scandal or conflict, have weird or quirky elements, or a strong human interest - the sort of story that even an exhausted Sally can't go past. So you have to think of the story behind the issue or angle you are trying to raise. How can you turn this issue into a story that will capture the attention of busy commuters, frazzled parents, and other overloaded minds?

On this point, journalists are much more interested in the N of one than anything else. Politicians and others making decisions about health funding might want evidence of the population-based impact of your work but journalists know that it is the story of the individual that their audiences will relate to, rather than the population-based study involving anonymous hundreds of thousands. A shark attack will trump tobacco-related deaths every time. So think, who is the N of one behind your issue?

And, finally, you can't afford to be too precious when dealing with the media beast. Inevitably in chaotic, pressured news business, glitches will occur. You may not like how you have been quoted, or how your story has been framed. It doesn't mean you shouldn't try again next time.

You might know the work of US newspaper columnist Maureen Dowd - her columns appear regularly in Australia. She once said: Wooing the press is an exercise roughly akin to picnicking with a tiger. You might enjoy the meal, but the tiger always eats last.

That said, there are plenty of examples of constructive engagement with the media. Think thalidomide, tobacco, HIV, Live AID, asbestos and the list goes on.

I would be the first to acknowledge, however, that effective engagement with the media is easier said than done and involves potential risks.

One of the risks for advocates is the risk of losing the integrity of your

message when trying to work within the constraints of the media's appetite for sensation. How to frame your message in a way that engages the media and its audiences without, for example, provoking unnecessary public fear and alarm or unrealistic hope?

I don't think it's a coincidence that Sally is petrified about getting breast cancer. Breast cancer advocates have been so successful at garnering media attention that perhaps it has come at a cost.

But don't be too wary of taking risks in your advocacy works. Don't be frightened of upsetting powerful interests, if that will help your cause. In recent years it has seemed to me that many advocates are becoming much more cautious of what they will say publicly in case they upset health departments or other funders. Governments are exerting tighter control than ever on the information flow, and this is not good news for advocates.

Like any intervention, engagement with media as part of your advocacy work involves potential risks and benefits. You have to assess these and weigh them up, before you pick up the phone to Lois.

And - please - don't ring her five minutes before her deadline, if you really want to have a hope of her paying attention to what you are saying.

END