

Surgical (PR) Skill Required to Take on Medical Lobby

Case Study

It's a typical lament among medical specialists operating in the thorny world of American healthcare: The **Louisiana Physical Therapy Association (LPTA)** wanted "direct access" – that is, the right of patients to see physical therapists directly, without referrals from their primary care docs. Yet the mainstream medical establishment opposed direct access for a number of reasons, mainly the fear that direct access would hurt the bottom line of primary care providers.

For two decades Louisiana's 1,800 physical therapists have fought a losing battle against a medical establishment that has the clout to bend legislators' ears and the funding to bankroll political campaigns. "They have very strong lobbyists, very strong PACs. Also, they were able to support legislators in a financial manner that we just could not compete with," says Dave Pariser, a former president of the LPTA.

John Deveney, whose New Orleans-based PR firm **Deveney Communication (www.deveney.com)** took on the task of promoting direct access on behalf of the LPTA, adds: "It was a modern-day David and Goliath." Deveney's agency soon launched a two-pronged strategy that combined strategic media outreach with a broad-based Internet campaign.

Winning headlines

Historically, the LPTA hasn't had much of a public profile. No one knew (or cared) what the group stood for, which, in turn, made it tough to generate headlines. Deveney's team sought to raise the stakes with an innovative awards program.

The **Fleur de Lis Health Care Leadership Award** honored legislators who had championed patient access issues. Deveney crafted the award as a partnership between LPTA and better-known groups including the **March of Dimes** and the **American Cancer Society**, while a sponsor, the **Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America**, bank-

rolled things.

The awards gave LPTA clout with key legislatures, but also helped to associate the group with more highly recognized organizations, creating a new level of credibility in the minds of journalists. To capitalize on the newfound credibility, the PR team developed a detailed media strategy. Dividing the state into eight regions, Deveney's team targeted specific publications and individual writers at each publication.

Attack the PACs

No clout? Slim budget? You can still take on a big-time political lobby and win. Here's how John Deveney made it happen:

>> **Make friends:** Deveney formed partnerships with large, well-known groups in order to build legitimacy for the Louisiana Physical Therapy Association.

>> **Make news:** To attract media, the PR team created an award honoring legislators who had shown a commitment to greater access to healthcare.

>> **Make lists:** The PR team sent widespread e-mail messages, then crafted new lists and refined subsequent messages according to recipient responses.

To back up their pitches, the PR team lined up small business execs who could discuss the social and economic impact of the issue within their local communities. Media coverage included stories in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* and TV station **KLFY-CBS** in Lafayette.

By taking the case to the local level, the PR team won support of the public and, equally important, many lawmakers. "When their constituents are calling them because they have a child in need of physical therapy, that gets their attention" more than a visit from a political lobbyist, Pariser says.

The broad base

Throughout the campaign, Deveney read relevant newsletters and watched public statements carefully. When he saw that opponents of direct access were about to launch a massive television-advertising campaign, he knew

something would have to give, but his team had a limited budget to counteract such an effort.

To respond to the blow Deveney proposed a mass e-mail campaign. The PR team began by e-mailing everyone with a connection to LPTA: patients, contributors, and friends of the organization. But the real key lay in the tracking. PR managers kept a sharp eye on who was opening the e-mails, who was clicking through for more information, who was forwarding the messages onto friends and who was taking action by forwarding the e-mail messages to their legislators.

Garnering this information allowed the PR team to fine-tune its efforts. "Once we saw what messages resonated with different audiences members, we could then go back and create new groups based on who responded to which messages," Deveney says.

Getting results

Bottom line: Direct access made it into law. But getting there is half the fun, as they say. So how did we get here?

The **Fleur de Lis Health Care Leadership Awards** recognized 36 legislators and established the LPTA as a highly recognized patient advocate. The PR campaign generated an estimated \$313,000 in media coverage in markets large and small throughout the state.

The direct e-mail campaign drove a 70% increase in the number of voters writing their legislators in support of direct access. Each of 12 different e-mail solicitations drew a 44% to 56% response rate. With a budget of around \$75,000, the PR team reversed a 20-year losing streak for LPTA. A medical miracle? Perhaps. Or maybe it's just the power of good PR. "It was great to see that in the end, smaller, smarter and more strategic PR won out over superior clout, bettering funding and a good-old-boy network," Deveney says.

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