

## MESSAGE DEVELOPMENT: THE CORE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

BY AL RICKARD, CAE

What's a public relations program without the right messages? Not much.

As associations look to raise their profiles in the media, it's important that they spend time defining their core messages. Easy? Not always.

Many associations have distinct segments of their membership, each with its own ideas about messages. The best way to define core messages is to hold a half-day or full-day message development workshop including seven to 10 people representing the major association membership segments. The group should include the chief staff executive, top volunteer leaders, a few regular members, and one or two additional senior-level staff if desired.

ACP International, a global association representing career professionals, recently held a workshop with its top leaders and stakeholders to develop three core messages for its new public relations program. The session began by reviewing current industry messages already in the media. They found a lack of consistency and visibility for their organization in this coverage.

Results of an e-mail survey to board members asking for their opinions on key messages also were reviewed. Next, a brainstorming session was facilitated to determine where the positive attributes of what career professionals provide to their customers were voiced and analyzed. ACP International leaders then considered these in the context of how they wanted to be perceived by the media and the public.

The following three core messages emerged from this exercise, representing desired positioning of both the organization and the profession:

- ACP International is a global organization with members in more than 30 countries who provide life-long career related services.
- Career professionals help individuals and businesses assess and leverage skills and talents to achieve success.
- ACP International offers training and professional certification. Our members are bound by a defined set of ethical standards. Additional sub-messages and storylines will be added to these messages in public relations efforts to provide context for the media.

"This message development workshop brought remarkable focus to our thinking about public relations," says ACP International Executive Director Annette Summers. "It also allowed us to think about our profession from a new angle, which will help our thinking in other areas of association programming."

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