

MAKING SENSE OF MEDIA

When telling your association's story, how do you determine which media strategies will work best? **By Barbara Lezotte APR**

Just as three television networks of the 1970s morphed into hundreds of cable channels and programs today, so have media channels and strategies expanded for associations striving to deliver their message to target audiences. Earned media, paid media, social media, and owned media all intersect and overlap, offering a myriad of communication options and perhaps a confusing palette of media strategies.

Associations are challenged to choose the most effective strategies to reach specific audiences within certain budgets, but which is the right choice?

QUESTION: Which is the most effective communication strategy for an association to reach its key audiences?

- A. Earned media
- B. Paid media
- C. Social media
- D. Owned media

EARNED MEDIA

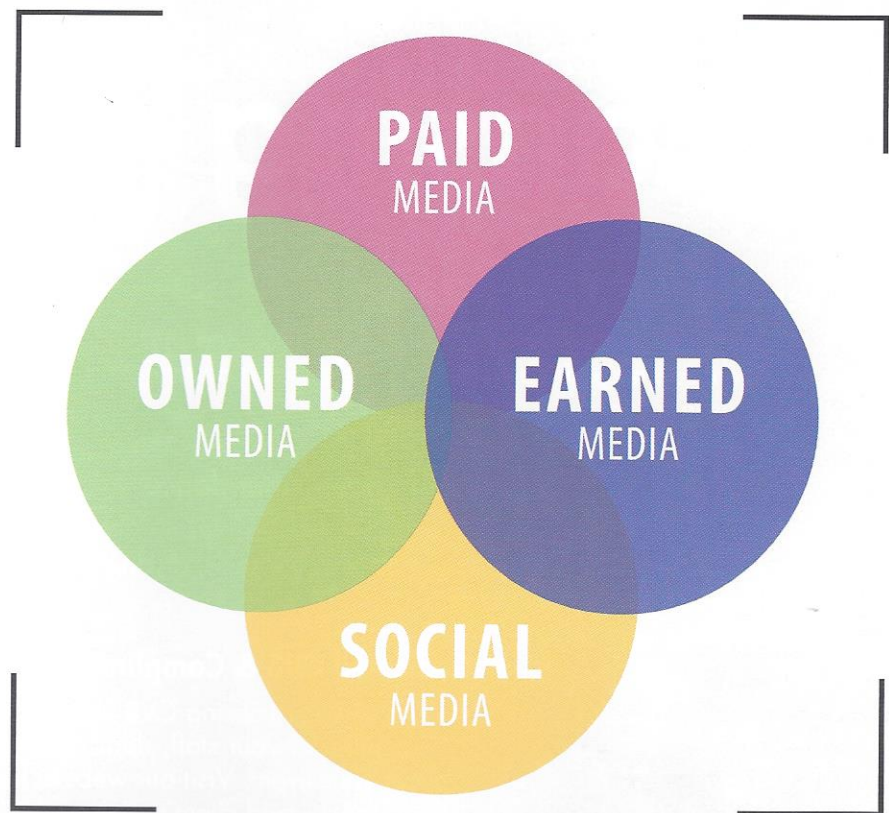
Earned Media is a term coined by the public relations profession to distinguish it from the more easily understood "paid media," which is simply good, old-fashioned advertising. Earned media is news coverage in print newspapers, magazines, broadcast news shows, or even blog space, which those entities have deemed newsworthy or worthy of attention. It is normally not for purchase (although there are some entities that entice advertisers with offers to provide news coverage) — unlike ad space, which allows the buyer to put out an unfiltered, unfettered message.

Earned media examples include news articles in which the company or association is mentioned or the CEO is quoted; opinion columns in which the news organizations publish from non-staff writers, such as an association executive; or editorials in which the news entity supports the association's position on legislation or a public policy issue. Earned media carries the greatest credibility because it has been filtered by media editors and published on the merit of the information, message, or organization. News coverage value is sometimes measured by comparing it to the cost the organization would

have had to expend to obtain the same visibility in a print or broadcast advertisement.

PAID MEDIA/ADVERTISING

Paid media/advertising in any form — be it print, broadcast, outdoor or the annoying ad that invariably pops up when one tries to view a YouTube video — gives the purchaser the ability to control the message to sell a product or service and target it to specific audiences who are already paying attention to the particular media format. Whether in newspapers, on television and radio, on web pages, or billboards, the advertising



outlet delivers an audience, who may or may not accept the ad's claims. As the most expensive communication option, advertising requires special care to select the medium that will reach the desired groups, so as not to squander a budget on scattershot ads to unintended audiences. The public knows the difference between news coverage and advertising, and is more likely to dismiss the claims made in ads than those contained in a news article or TV report.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Social Media is the newest communication frontier and is still in its Wild West stage, with new platforms frequently emerging and marketplace confusion over the pros and cons of each one. Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and others offer associations a speedy, low-cost option to reach members, potential members, legislators, and even the news media. Although the organization initially determines its social media message, once it releases it into cyberspace it has essentially lost control of it. The message may not travel much beyond its initial posting, or it could go viral, expanding far beyond its own networks. Social media is somewhat of a hybrid media in that it has elements of earned media — as when an organization's message has been shared or by others who thought it merited attention — and paid media, as in the ability to buy visibility on search engine websites such as Google and Bing. Social media's tremendous potential for reaching new and sizable audiences is constantly expanding, and its uses for associations continue to evolve.

OWNED MEDIA

Owned media are communication channels in which the organization controls the content, selects the audiences with which it engages, and determines the timing of its message. It is the organization's website, electronic or print publications, conferences, brochures, videos, or podcasts. Although the organization controls owned media, an audience is not guaranteed. An association must promote its own media

channels and drive traffic to them, perhaps employing earned media, paid media, and social media to do so. It is not unusual for organizations to become so focused on other media channels that they neglect their own, putting out news releases and buying ads, but neglecting to update their own websites or share an announcement at their own conference.

SO BACK TO OUR ORIGINAL QUESTION

So, which is the most effective communication strategy for an association to reach its key audiences? The correct answer for most associations is quite possibly, "all of the above." The challenge, of course, is to select the best mix of options based on budget and long-term organizational objectives. Each of the four media strategies offers opportunity, along with costs and risks.

When an association meets the test of newsworthiness, it should take advantage of earned media opportunities to increase its credibility and visibility as an industry authority. The cost to do so accrues from staff time to nurture news media attention, prepare for interviews, and develop relevant and credible information the media outlet might not find on its own. Unfortunately, as media outlets struggle to remain viable in a new era of ever-increasing information sources, the definition of newsworthiness becomes more narrow and can vary markedly from newspaper to magazine to broadcast station. News media gatekeepers gauge their decisions about which issues warrant coverage based on their particular audience's interests, geography, and perhaps

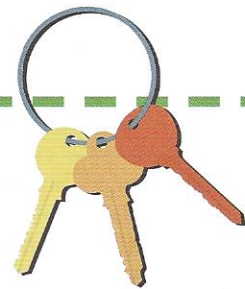
political makeup. Issues that contain a controversial or sensational element may make the grade, even though they don't meet the criteria in other ways.

Along with its tremendous potential to reach key audiences instantly and at little cost, social media can easily become irrelevant, ineffective, and even disastrous in the hands of someone who does not understand the organization's desired identity, message, goals, and objectives and inadvertently delivers misinformation or misperceptions. Effective social media communication requires more than just frequency and ubiquity. It should carry a consistent message that aligns with the organization's other communication efforts, always keeping the desired audience in mind and positioning the organization appropriately for its market.

Organizations have invested considerable resources in recent decades to develop their own media channels and connect more directly with important audiences. The responsibility to make their channels relevant and informative is ongoing. No matter the media strategy mix an association decides to use, it should converge at an intersection of message consistency. ♦

Barbara Lezotte (barbl@lezottemiller.com) is president of Lezotte Miller Public Relations Inc., a full-service public relations consulting and marketing communication firm in Lansing serving associations, corporations, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies.

5 KEY MEASURES OF NEWSWORTHINESS



- ◆ Size of population/number of people impacted by the issue
- ◆ Controversial or polarizing element
- ◆ Current or potential impact on the economy or job
- ◆ Sensational aspect
- ◆ Local impact on a community