

Don't Say a Word

Publicity Report

Prepared by Jen Cressey, Publicist

April 10, 2003

Strategy Overview

To reach the target audience - families, parents, educators, policy-makers, and traditional theatre-goers - a broad-based, multi-pronged campaign was employed. A traditional campaign aimed at arts, news, and education media was launched in tandem with a more community-based approach that took advantage of various specialized networks and publications. Both were effectively executed, complimenting one another.

Second to media releases and communications, the bulk of the campaign's allotted time was spent on reaching teachers, with the idea that they would not only provide a direct line to both students and parents, but would be instrumental in rallying groups to come to the show. A great deal of energy was put into developing and maintaining contacts through the Vancouver School Board, which created a broad awareness of the project. This awareness was reinforced with an article that appeared in "the Teacher", a monthly publication of the teacher's union that is sent to every teacher in the province.

When we heard back from teachers regarding the project, their response enthusiastic and supportive. But our assumptions about their power to put bums in seats was over-estimated. Already over-worked, they enthusiastically promoted Don't Say a Word, including details of the show in announcements, newsletters, and in classroom discussions on bullying wherever possible. The promotion they were able to provide ended with the school day.

Fortunately, other facets of the campaign picked up where communications with the teachers left off. Youth-driven publications and student networks proved instrumental, and naturally so, it was a play by and for them.

Youth-Driven Publicity

Considering the mandate of Headlines' work, i.e. to create a forum for a community's true voice, it is advisable to seek support and guidance from workshop participants on publicizing their work. Those directly involved will best know how to reach their peers. This was proven true with *Don't Say a Word*: collaboration with youth on publicity was highly effective.

For the first workshop at Gladstone Secondary, students were invited to sign up as apprentices in stage management, design, and crew. The drama teacher, one of our main liaisons, suggested that including publicity apprentices as well. A great idea.

Six students signed up to be publicity apprentices, and we met on a weekly basis, with student team-leader/ point-person acting as the contact between meetings.

The process began with an overview of a publicist's tasks and concerns. The students were then invited to participate in whatever aspect most interested them, with my support and guidance. Their advice was also requested, and we spent one of our meetings discussing how to create campaign that appeals to students.

The most successful initiatives were the simplest. One student collaborated with the creative writing class to create a poster that included student-written poetry. The same poems were then read on the P.A. system. The initiative required a minimum of labour but activated a large number of students, and created awareness of the project throughout the school.

Research proved to be a less appealing task for those who took it on. Two students were excited by the idea of creating a multi-cultural press list, and agreed that working together would boost their efficiency. Despite regular contact, suggestions, and prodding, the list never materialized. It should not have come as a surprise: database work can be tedious. The lesson here is to more carefully gauge the interest level and aptitudes of the participants. Perhaps a preliminary questionnaire regarding past experience, current pursuits, etc, could be used to get a better picture of a group's capabilities.

Student Journalists

Two students wrote about *Don't Say a Word* for student publications; Gladstone's Marina Tomlinson did a piece for YouThink, and Tony Paisana of Sir Charles Tupper wrote for a high school supplement in the Vancouver Courier. Both were grade 12 students with a proven aptitude for writing, and delivered polished products with minimal supervision.

The Subtitle

The phrase “interactive theatre about how *not* to get your ass kicked” was used in all the promotional material, and garnered attention from youth and adults alike. The message is serious, but the way it is delivered indicates that the show will be fun, irreverent, and most importantly, speak the language of those “living the issue”.

The phrase was first spoken by one of the workshop participants in response to the question: how would you sell this to high school students? One student laughed and said, “just don’t say it’s good for you!” Quickly followed by another who said “how not to get your ass kicked”. They all laughed, then said, “I’d go to see that.” Something adults would not have come up with.

Poster Competition

Vancouver high school students were invited to take part in a competition to create the image for the publicity campaign; posters, flyers, ads, etc. The prize was \$200 for the work, and the opportunity to take part in the design process with Five Stones Creative. An excellent reward.

The response was impressive, if last minute: most of the entries rolled in on the day of the deadline, causing a bit of nail-biting. All of the submissions were interesting, exhibiting a variety of insights, perspectives, and styles. One was a stand-out, and ended up being the final selection. While this sort of competition is risky – what does one do if there is no clear winner – it gave us an image that could not be manufactured. However, it was necessary to tailor the image a bit, to better convey the complicity of various groups in bullying situations. This collaboration between Headlines and the artist was possible only because she was a very proficient illustrator, capable of making alterations quickly.

The Flyer Brigade

Part of the publicity campaign was to get flyers to students where they hang out. Initially, the idea was for Headlines staff - publicity and outreach – to go to those places and do the flyering. Not practical, and unlikely to appeal to students. A better idea: hire students to do the work, and deliver the message from their point-of-view. Three students handed out 500 flyers at the Metrotown mall and Playdium arcade on the Saturday before opening. While we were unable to gauge the results of the experiment in terms of attendance, I spoke with one of the flyer brigade afterward and she conveyed that the response was generally positive, and that her peers appreciated that the issue was being examined. If nothing else, it can safely be said that the exercise raised awareness of the project and Headlines in a new context.

Traditional Publicity Concerns

Sponsorship

The Westender was the only media sponsor. They provided a discount of 40% on advertising. The Georgia Straight initially granted sponsorship, then revoked it when they discovered that we aimed to have both papers sponsor the show. We were negotiating a potential compromise when the deadline to get graphic materials to the printers arrived, and the discussion was cut short. In the future, it is more economical to go with the Straight. For their offer, see *appendix*.

Other sponsorship opportunities were pursued, most notably CityTV/ MuchMusic and the Beat, a popular radio station. Neither resulted in sponsorship. Conversations with the Promotions coordinator at the Beat were going very well, but the contact was replaced by an unsympathetic staff person who did not reply to communications.

CityTV ended up covering the show with two separate news items, but the original aim was to have broadcast on the youth-oriented MuchMusic. Again, the reception to proposals was cold, and eventually deferred to the news team at City.

Printed Materials

20, 000 postcards were printed, essential tools in spreading word about the show far and wide. It is an unusually high number of postcards (or flyers) for a show of this scale, but the ability to reach as many teachers, and subsequently students, through the school board distribution system, made the order an economical one.

On the other hand, 2,000 posters were ordered with the same rationale. Only 1,000 were actually needed, and the rest were struggled with, albatross -like.

The posters and flyers were eye-catching due to the strong illustration, and also the unconventional shape. Five Stones Creative did an excellent job creating a design with very high impact.

Photos

Most photographic needs were readily fulfilled with single shoot at the beginning of the rehearsal process. Coming up with an image was a challenge, and the final result was impressionistic rather than expository. The picture was printed in several publications, and was used on the Headlines web site to great effect. A second shoot at the preview provided production stills.

Reviews

Theatre reviews in mainstream print publications are a primary source of publicity, especially amongst peers in the theatre community. Unfortunately, *Don't Say a Word* received no reviews, in spite of Headlines' extraordinary track record, the dramatic nature of the subject, and the high calibre of the production team. Therefore, the editorial decision to exclude *DSAW* can be construed as anti-Forum Theatre bias.

One critic termed the show "unreviewable" due to the fact that interventions make each show different. I dispute that there are standards and conventions by which to measure the success of the production. And the play itself, the core of the show, is the same every performance.

That the actors were students was another rationalization for not reviewing. There are many holes to this logic; child actors are commonly reviewed in other productions, the production was operated as a professional show with professional standards, and ultimately, the kids delivered solid performances. Besides the fact that acting is only one aspect of a production.

There were many discussions and debates attempting to sway reviewers, but in the end, the results were nil. Overcoming this hurdle is a difficult challenge and will involve changing the entrenched attitude of local arts journalists, persuading them to expand their ideas of what theatre is. How this could be accomplished a question worth considering.

Print

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| BC Parent | - preview short, January issue |
| Common Ground | - paid listing, February issue |
| Community Links, MLA Newsletter | - free listing, January/ February issue |
| Courier | - High School Confidential, by Tony Paisana, February 9 - "Seven Days", February 12 - "Spring Arts", February 16 - free listing |
| El Contacto Directo (Spanish) | - preview short, February 7 |
| Georgia Straight | - "Students Get Real in Battle Against Bullies", by Janet Smith, February 6 - 13 - Straight Choices, February 13 - 20 - free listing |
| Millenio (Italian) | - preview short, February 6 |
| Oops! (Japanese) | - free listing, with photo, February 6 |
| Shared Vision | - preview short, February issue |
| The Teacher | - "Bullies R Us" by Tim McGeer, February issue |
| Terminal City | - "Kick Their Ass", review by Alan Hindle, February 21 |
| Vancouver Sun | - Preview feature by Tim Carlson, Queue, appeared with photo, February 13 - Free listing |
| Vancouver Shinpo (Japanese) | - free listing, with photo, February 6 |
| Vietnamese Times | - free listing |
| West Coast Families | - sidebar to cover feature, "When Girls are Bullies", by Doris Pfister Murphy, January issue |
| Westender | - "Unusual Venues" – preview by Tom Zillich, December 24, 2002 - "Hot Tickets" February 6 – 12 - free listing |
| Xtra West | - free listing |

YouThink - "Don't Say a Word", by Marina Tomlinson, with photo, February issue

Radio

- CBC
- NXNW, Sheryl Mackay, interview with David Diamond, Patricia Alducin, and John Walker February 7
 - the Early Edition, Margaret Gallagher interview with John Walker and Patricia Alducin, February 17
 - The Afternoon Show, Kathryn Gretsinger live interview with John Walker
 - Artbeat, PSA, first two weeks February
- CKNW
- Rafe Mair interview with David Diamond, Patricia Alducin, and John Walker, February 7
- CO-OP
- Latina al Dia, interview in Spanish with Iliana Bonilla, February 8

Television

- CityTV
- News, profile by Education Reporter Mike Bothwell
 - CityPulse, February 11
- Fairchild
- News, Frances Chan interview in Cantonese with Qing Jian Zeng "Elvis"
- Shaw
- News, interview with Shaun Omaid and Iliana Bonilla, February 12
 - "Generation Y" Mini Gill interview with John Walker and Patricia Alducin, February 21
 - "Video Bulletin Board" PSA

Arts

Alliance for the Arts - Faxnet
Slide ads for one month at Fifth Avenue & Park Cinemas
Vancouver Theatre Guide, paid listing

World Wide Web

- Bullying.org
- Canada.com, Around Town, Vancouver Sun article
- City of Vancouver, Community Calendar, listing
- CityTV - Community Calendar, listing
- Community Arts Network, listing
- Government of British Columbia, Ministry of Community, Aboriginal, and Women's Services, listing
- Indymedia, listing
- Review Vancouver, preview and listing
- Tickets Tonight/ Alliance for the Arts, listing
- Tourism Vancouver, listing
- Urban Cultures, Vancouver Multicultural Society, listing
- Vancouver Community Network, listing
- YouThink, tie-in with print article

Conclusion

No single publicity outlet delivered more audience members than any other: each yielded a some attendees. This was proven anecdotally, and also through the absence of predicted attendance spikes after major media outlets covered the show. In the end, an interview on CKNW yielded the same number of attendees as a blurb in the Courier or a month's worth of contact with the school board. I believe that the lesson here is that no strategy can be sacrificed for any other, rather as many as possible should be – in fact, are – assiduously sought and maintained.

Truly, there is a potential Headlines audience behind most every contact, newsletter, media outlet, and community group.

William Belsey, Creator / Facilitator, www.bullying.org

If you would like to send me a press release, then I will promise to post it among our list serves which include thousands of people of all ages.

I hope that this will prove helpful to you and your theatre group.

I would be very grateful if you would let your audiences know about www.bullying.org, which is now the number one Web site about bullying in the world!

If someone is shooting digital video of these performances, perhaps you might like to create a short "trailer" in QuickTime and share it as an archived resource in the "Your Submissions -Multimedia" and the "Helpful Resources -Multimedia" sections of www.bullying.org. You can even upload the QuickTime movies into the Web site yourself, thanks to the recent upgrade of www.bullying.org.

This would be a great way to have your message reach over 500,000 people from around the world every month, as well as promoting the talents of everyone involved with Headlines Theatre. What do you think of this idea?

Please feel free to contact me at your earliest convenience.

Cheryl Jeffs, Director of Programs and Research, BC Council for Families

Thanks for letting us know about the anti-bullying play, Don't Say a Word. Our next newsletter deadline is this spring so if you would like to send us some of the information (postcards and posters) we will put something in about this project and we will also display the poster/postcards in our reception area.

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Colin Thomas, Georgia Straight

In general, the difficulty of reviewing Headlines' Theatre for Living shows is similar to reviewing TheatreSports' shows. The performances are different every night so the only thing to talk about is the basic theatrical vocabulary that's being used. If that's not significantly different from previous productions, then there's not a lot of sense in reviewing the show itself.

I think Headlines' work is better covered in the preview format, because it's so much about process. And we have done at least a couple of previews of Headlines' work. Unfortunately, the paper was booked too far ahead to interview the young actors in "Don't Say a Word", which would have been the way to go; there are only so many times we can interview David.

Kate Taylor, Globe and Mail

The project sounds interesting, but unfortunately I have got too much on my plate here to get out to Vancouver.

That said, this is a show Alex might have been able to write a feature about if she had been around, but we would never review something being performed by students. Basically, our policy is that if isn't being performed by professionals, it can't be subjected to professional criticism.

Jenny Dhaliwal-Heer, Promotions Coordinator Z95.3

Thanks for your call and e-mail. I apologize for taking so long to get back to you.

Unfortunately, we are in ratings during the time you are looking for sponsorship which means we have no air-time available to offer you in support of your bullying project.

If you are at all interested in having our Community Cruiser come by during one of your productions, please feel free to contact Becky Maxwell at 604-241-0953.