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## Helping the Red Cross help people

Jeanine Moss and Nicole DeMeo PR Week USA Oct 19 2005 15:28

### Many marketing and communication professionals believe all they can do is give money after a disaster like Hurricane Katrina.

But our firm's experience with The September 11th Fund taught us that communication and public affairs are some of the most important operational functions for recovery and relief efforts. That's why both of us volunteered after Hurricane Katrina for two weeks at the national headquarters of the American Red Cross.

We work for a communications strategy firm, Turning Point Solutions. We don't usually have two weeks to give to charity, but at the end of summer we were taking a much-needed breather before starting new projects in the fall.

Then Hurricane Katrina ploughed into the Gulf region. We had both worked with the Red Cross during our September 11th experience. We knew that they'd be our first choice for volunteering. What we quickly learned is that the Red Cross culture of volunteerism combined with worldwide awareness of its disaster relief charter is what keeps us safer at home.

#### Being deployed

A day or two after Hurricane Katrina hit we decided to give up our vacation and called Red Cross headquarters to offer help. Realizing that they would be flooded with calls and tasks, we didn't wait for a return call and phoned repeatedly until we got through. We explained our experience and what we could offer. A few days later, we were given a DSHR number (Disaster Services Human Resources – like every place else the Red Cross is laden with acronyms), and were off to Washington DC.

#### Orientation

We arrived Friday night at the Public Affairs desk in the disaster operations center (DOC) at national headquarters. The staff needed relief. They had been working 18-hour days for nearly two weeks. Of the eight people in the public affairs area, about five were volunteers.

Because of our 9/11 experience we were immediately able to work with the media. We opened the public affairs desk in the morning and started watching TV to get a feel for the day's news, surfed the Web to gauge hot issues, and spoke with communicators who called in about pending events and concerns from the field. We digested and distributed key messages, gathered and shared facts, identified messaging needs, and started writing statements and responses for management to approve and share across the Red Cross network. This was in real-time.

By 9:00 am, Red Cross staffers Renita, Stephanie, and Tara were handling major media and setting up conference calls, meetings, and field support, and it was time for us to focus on special projects. Because the Red Cross is 96% volunteers, the paid staff has learned to evaluate you in a snap, figure out what you can offer, point you in the right direction, and empower you to get things done. No one worries about who gets the credit.

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## **Setting priorities**

It is tremendously rewarding to directly help people. At times, we wrote simple and friendly phone scripts and pieced together information sheets. It was immediately clear, however, that by protecting the reputation of the organization we could help even more people. If the public didn't believe in the efficacy of the Red Cross it would be difficult to recruit volunteers and raise money. Though there are many volunteers in the field now, more are needed (especially with the addition of the wildfires in California and Hurricane Rita). And while the Red Cross has raised \$1 billion to date, it estimates that \$2 billion will be needed to meet emergency needs. Most of our time became relentlessly focused on learning about and explaining the value of the organization to the public.

## **Keep them busy or the media will keep you busy**

When you're responding to a huge volume of press requests it's very difficult to be proactive. While Red Cross volunteers and staff fielded questions in the DOC, another team carved out part of every day to determine key issues and topics, identify and correct misperceptions, control rumors, and help the public affairs folks in the field.

As we answered media calls we were also writing. As we listened to press questions and analyzed the news to anticipate what would happen next, we shared our observations with management and offered talking points for consideration.

## **In the field**

In the field was where the Red Cross shone brightest. From a Mississippi shelter housing thousands in Hattiesburg to a service center in Bay St. Louis serving hundreds, from 24-hour disaster centers directing client services, health services, and spiritual care to emergency response vehicles (ERVs) delivering food door-to-door – almost everything is run by trained volunteers. These people are smart, organized, and tremendously patient and compassionate. Nearly 200,000 people have volunteered to care for others, and by god, they're going to do it no matter what obstacles are placed in their path. Volunteers have guidelines, resources, and oversight, but the Red Cross empowers them to get things done.

In the field, we met shelter directors who stood up to politically motivated mayors to protect victims' privacy. They avoided grandstanding in front of cameras and said, "Not in a Red Cross shelter, you won't." We met American Red Cross managers who motivated tired volunteers to stay up all night writing 9,000 checks for evacuees. We met a pre-med student from University of Chicago who had been volunteering for Red Cross for three years. He drove an ERV in Louisiana for one week, coordinated all the ERVs during the second and managed a service center in his third. He was good, experienced, and well used.

## **Awareness translates into helping people**

The Red Cross is the first organization that comes to mind after a disaster. That's the power of awareness. Immediately after Hurricane Katrina people began giving to the Red Cross, and not a moment too soon. Red Cross maintains a Disaster Relief Fund to take care of initial needs, but at \$45 million it was just a drop in the bucket for a disaster like Katrina. Almost the entire \$1 billion the Red Cross has collected has been spent on food, blankets, cots, facilities, nurses, medicine, toiletries, security, cleaning supplies, and plucking people out of their cozy beds and flying them from all over the country to sleep on cots in grass-floored tents. The number of people affected, the total devastation, and the geographic scale is enormous.

It takes more than a village. It takes a whole army to help as many people as were affected by Hurricane Katrina. And the Red Cross has a volunteer army that's trained and can assemble within hours, anywhere. Right now they're helping displaced people in 48 states. Based on systems, procedures and experience developed over 125 years, Red Cross empowers volunteers to do heavy lifting. And thankfully the public knows that and is willing to pay the freight.

Volunteering for communications during a crisis is demanding and exhausting, but fun. It tests your mettle publicly in real-time. But it's tremendously satisfying to know that you can help people, and the people who help people.

Public relations professionals who have the time to share (a minimum of two weeks) can volunteer by contacting Sharon Alfred in the Communication and Marketing Department of American Red Cross national headquarters at [AlfredS@usa.redcross.org](mailto:AlfredS@usa.redcross.org).

To donate to the American Red Cross disaster relief fund go to [www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org) or call 1-800-HELPNOW.

Jeanine Moss and Nicole DeMeo run marketing strategy firm Turning Point Solutions with offices in New York and San Francisco. They can be found on the web at [www.tpsmarketing.com](http://www.tpsmarketing.com)

## Tips for Communications Volunteers

- Fast learners only! You're there to help, not to make more work for others. Find someone who knows how to use the equipment -- phones, faxes, copiers, email, and computer systems – then read everything upside down and soak everything up like a sponge.
- Handling vast volumes of media inquiries requires materials that are simple, clear, and consistent. Key messages, topic sheets, statements, talking points, contact lists, content specialists, and sources for questions are essential tools. Help make them happen.
- Proactive is something you do every minute while reacting to crisis. It doesn't just mean "feel good" stories. Being proactive is to anticipate questions, concerns and issues, and prepare and distribute the right messages and information to the right people at the right time.
- It's tempting to focus on the biggest national outlets during a crisis. Be sure to plan ahead and pay attention to trade publications. They act as sources for national media when they're looking for experts and can act as a validator.
- Don't let the media frame the discussion. Immediately outline your story, explain it, and prove it.
- Education is a primary goal during crises. You need facts and examples that illustrate your point. Make it visual.
- Feed the media. Answer their immediate questions, but also try to learn where their next meal is coming from. Ask reporters what they're thinking. Look for patterns and gather background in advance of the next wave. Then empower the rest of your team with your findings.
- Don't be defensive. Defensiveness can make you reluctant to respond when you should, and miss opportunities because you're afraid. As a volunteer you're less likely to take things personally, but as you become more invested, it's easy to forget.
- Bring objectivity and distance. You may have new ideas or ones the organization thought of but was too busy to act on. Bring them up but don't get your feelings hurt if they've already been considered or if the team doesn't have time to act on them.
- Volunteer for crisis communications especially if you like improvisation. It's experience plus intuition plus creativity – with a troupe that wants you to succeed.
- Don't defend your territory or worry too much about someone else's (just walk softly).

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