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The Aids Epidemic Book: National Media Tour – Simplifying the Message

Situation

Because of the fact that this was the first book on the AIDS Epidemic written by an American doctor – and because of the extremely intensive national and global media coverage of the epidemic, when the book came out, Dr. Slaff and I had a huge media tour, scheduled by a Warner Books publicist. We had a combined total of approximately 100 media appearances to take place over approximately a month – television, radio and print. This gave us an unprecedented opportunity to educate the country about the epidemic, and in doing so of course promote our book.

Early in the process, we realized that we had two pretty big challenges:

- The first was that the media interviewers often asked irrelevant questions – usually involving sensationalism or speculation - the answers to which were not helpful to the audience in understanding the complexities of the epidemic, or what they could do to protect themselves and their families.
- The second, related problem was that in answering these questions we were burning up precious air time or interview time talking about issues that involved the “5%” of the epidemic, and not the 95%. If we couldn’t reverse this trend, the media appearances would not do what we wanted and needed them to do.

Task

To quickly improve our ability to be effective in media appearances. To improve quality of the questions. To have a “failsafe” communications strategy which would ‘get through the noise’ and communicate/educate effectively with our audiences – in effect “going over the heads of the questioner.” Finally we wanted a solution that would work in any scenario – whether it was a two-minute section on CNN or major New York City television (which Dr. Slaff did) or whether it was a two hour call-in radio program (which I did for a 50,000 watt radio station in Denver).

Action

We realized that while the subject itself was immensely complex, our core message could be boiled down into three relatively simple concepts. We refined language to explain those concepts in a short amount of time. We went back to the publicist and encouraged her – in preparing other media hosts – by giving a “suggested question sheet” – which was comprised of questions that would provide an opportunity to educate about important issues. Developed three “Must Airs” and used them in all media appearances.

Results

Immediate and sustained improvement in media appearance effectiveness. Formula became a major help in later career in job search.