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**Marketing Community Policing in the News:
A Missed Opportunity?**

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The full study, "Identifying Strategies to Market Police in the News" (final report submitted to the National Institute of Justice, 2001), is available at <http://www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/nij/grants/194130.pdf>. The study was supported by NIJ grant 96-IJ-CX-0078 with funds from the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services.

Findings and conclusions of the research reported here are those of the authors and do not reflect the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

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ABOUT THIS REPORT

The police and the media need each other: The police know that most people form their impression of the justice system through media accounts, while the media often report on crime.

Police departments often seek to use the media to involve community members in crime prevention and problem solving. But publicizing community policing strategies is different from producing traditional crime reports. The research described here investigated how the relationship between the police and the media affects coverage of community policing.

What the researchers found

Coverage of community policing is favorable, and in general, media access to the police is not a problem. Most police department public information officers (PIOs) and reporters contacted for the study believe police-media relations are good.

A major barrier to better media handling of community policing is the monopoly of the crime story. PIOs spend most of their time respond-

ing to requests for crime information so they have little time for community policing.

To develop a winning approach, the police could go beyond the conventional means they now use and explore the possibility of using the news media as one—but not the sole—component of a broad outreach strategy. Some departments already do this, and others could use their ideas. Police departments might also consider assigning some PIO responsibilities to other departmental staff, even to nonsworn personnel.

What were the study's limitations?

Television stations and newspapers were contacted for the study; radio stations were not. Only police departments in very large cities were studied.

Who should read this report?

PIOs and police chiefs, especially those in departments where community policing has been adopted; reporters who cover criminal justice issues; city desk editors; and television station news managers.

Steven Chermak and Alexander Weiss

Marketing Community Policing in the News: A Missed Opportunity?

In community policing, it's essential to gain citizen support and involvement. The news media can play a key role in this effort through their wide dissemination of information. The police know that most people form their impressions of crime and the justice system from newspapers, television, and radio rather than from direct exposure (as crime victims, for example).¹ For the police, the media convey their message to the public; for the media, the police are an indispensable information source.

But "marketing" community policing through the media is not easy, because stories about long-range strategies lack the human drama and immediacy of crime stories.

Researchers sought to find out how the police use the media to promote community policing, and with what result. The study's goals were to assess the quality of police-media relations, examine the receptiveness of the media to community policing, identify the promotional methods police use, and

measure the amount and quality of press coverage community policing receives. (See "Study Design and Method.")

The researchers found that police-media relations are mutually supportive, that media representatives see the police as accessible, and that the media are accommodating when public information officers (PIOs) ask for coverage of community policing. Yet crime stories take precedence over community policing stories, and coverage of community policing tends to be narrow—devoid of any discussion of goals or philosophy. The researchers concluded that an effective marketing strategy might call for broader outreach and the possibility of sharing some PIO responsibilities among other staff.

Police and media rate their relationship as good

Developing and maintaining favorable media relations is basic to securing adequate



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STUDY DESIGN AND METHOD

Information about police promotional efforts came from a survey conducted among agencies in cities with populations greater than 100,000. Of the 239 agencies contacted, 203 (85 percent) responded. Questions included what promotional strategies are used, how receptive the media are, and how the agency views the quality of media coverage.

Media managers and reporters at the major newspaper and the two top television stations in the metropolitan statistical area of the police departments were also surveyed. Of the 969 managers and reporters contacted, 442 (46 percent) responded. Questions included what police sources are used, how the media perceive their relationship to the police, and the amount and type of coverage given to community policing.

To measure the number and quality of articles about community policing, the researchers reviewed newspapers in four cities. Police-media relations were good in two cities and considerably unsatisfactory in the other two. Articles appearing in a 1-year period (1997) were reviewed. Articles about crime were also reviewed during a 2-week period constructed to represent a year's worth of coverage.

and impartial press coverage. The researchers who conducted the study found that, for the most part, police-media relations are productive.

Accessibility is a key to effective relations, and in general, the reporters and other media representatives contacted for the study gave the police high marks on this measure.

Almost all the PIOs contacted for the study see their relationship with the media as good, and they view the

media as accommodating. (See "The Public Information Officer.") When they ask the press to cover a new community policing activity, they say their requests are met.

Despite favorable police-media relations, community policing has not generated a stronger partnership between the police and the media, according to the researchers. Few representatives of either the media or the police said their relationship was enhanced because of community policing.

Constraints in using the media

No matter how good the working relationship with the media might be, it cannot overcome the constraints PIOs face. They must spend more time handling media inquiries about crime than doing anything else, which leaves them little time to invest in marketing community policing and similar initiatives.

PIOs face other constraints as well. Just over 10 percent of the departments contacted for the study have a budget to publicize innovative programs. In addition, some PIOs don't feel well-prepared

for their job. These constraints may help explain why, from the media's perspective, police departments don't keep them well-informed about community policing.

Crime makes headlines; community policing does not

Community policing attracts a certain amount of coverage. The vast majority of the reporters contacted for the study said they had run at least one story about community policing in the past year—some reported 10 or more stories. Moreover, newspaper articles about community policing tend to be far longer than crime stories. Yet as measured by number of articles, community policing comes in a distant second behind crime.

Of more than 1,000 articles on crime and community policing found by the researchers, the overwhelming majority dealt with crime. In terms of substance, the community policing articles were thin, with the topic treated outside any context of its history or philosophy. The goals of community policing were treated similarly; achievements were rarely noted.

THE PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER

The departments contacted for this study are large, so they assign at least one full-time official as a public information officer (PIO). PIOs have access to top department officials; the study revealed that more than half the PIOs meet with the police chief every day or even several times a day. PIOs appear to be experienced and well-prepared: On average they've been in their job more than 4 years and have had at least 50 hours of formal training in police-media relations.

Traditionally, PIOs function as "organizational smoke detectors," who in times of crisis become "fire extinguishers."^{*} In other words, they largely react to crime rather than work proactively to build the department's image. The advent of community policing has done little to change this.

The PIO functions as an information broker. Media representatives contacted for the study say the PIO is their main source of information about community policing.

Note

^{*} Surette, Ray, and Richard Alfredo, "Public Information Officers: A Descriptive Study of Crime News Gatekeepers," *Journal of Criminal Justice* 23, 4 (1995):325–336.

Most police use conventional media methods

The departments contacted for the study most commonly use press releases and direct communication (phone calls to media representatives) to promote community policing and other innovative programs. PIOs generally consider press conferences too time-consuming.

Although the methods of choice are conventional, they are the easiest and most efficient ways to maximize coverage, they reach several kinds of media outlets, and they can convey large amounts of information.

PIOs prefer television and newspapers to radio: television because it reaches so many people and newspapers because they can convey a great deal of information.

Toward an effective strategy

On the whole, the research indicates that police have not

been exceptionally successful at promoting community policing in the news and are not taking full advantage of their access to the media. The researchers identified other marketing strategies, however, that can inspire citizen involvement. A community policing strategy can benefit from a well-thought-out marketing strategy.

Beyond the news media.

Community outreach need not be confined to the media. Presuming sufficient resources, police departments could develop a broad outreach approach that includes the media and other tools. Some departments already do this. (For methods agencies use to

CREATIVE OUTREACH

If law enforcement agencies want to complement and supplement media coverage of community policing, they can borrow from an array of methods used by departments throughout the country.

- Chicago mounted an innovative campaign intended to heighten awareness of community policing among its linguistically diverse citizens, using multimedia and multilingual information initiatives.^a Brochures, newsletters, billboards, television and radio ads, and information hotlines were some of the components. Partly as a result of the aggressive marketing, awareness increased, though not as much among Spanish-speaking Latinos.
- New Haven, Connecticut, has a widely acclaimed and award-winning community policing program whose outreach components include a public cable TV program aimed to increase awareness and access, a series of workshops for residents on various aspects of community policing, and production of a documentary film profiling the city's police and community policing.^b
- To reach out to the many Latino residents of Corcoran, California, the police department created Amigos de la Comunidad, a Spanish-language citizen police academy.

reach their communities, see “Creative Outreach.”)

The PIOs contacted for this study said they publish newsletters, work with neighborhood groups, operate student or citizen police academies, conduct citizen seminars, and are in touch with business and civic leaders. In some cases PIOs appear on television programs or radio talk shows. Several departments have their own cable TV programs or Web sites.

Maximizing in-house

resources. Especially where resources are scarce, PIOs could share responsibilities. Reporters often have cultivat-

ed relationships with particular police officers, whom they tend to contact more than the PIOs when they seek crime information. Given these relationships, marketing need not be the exclusive preserve of the PIO. Pooling responsibility might help smaller departments, most of which probably do not even have one full-time, dedicated PIO.

Police departments may also consider whether more nonsworn staff could handle public information tasks. The study revealed that these staffers typically have backgrounds in areas like journalism and public relations. Some

One outcome was the formation, by several academy graduates, of a Spanish-language unit in the department’s volunteer community patrol.^c

Creative ways to reach the community can also be borrowed from programs other than community policing. After recognizing that newspapers, fliers, and radio spots were not enough to motivate people to attend community meetings, the New Britain, Connecticut, Weed and Seed site organized a street parade. The event was intended as a means to recruit people to participate in focus groups that would target specific neighborhood problems.^d

Notes

- a. *CAPS at 5: A Report on the Progress of Community Policing in Chicago*, Chicago: Chicago Police Department, 1998; *Community Policing and “The New Immigrants”: Latinos in Chicago*, by W.G. Skogan et al., Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, National Institute of Justice, July 2002:14–16 (NCJ 189908).
- b. *Weed & Seed In-Sites IX*, 5 (November–December 2001):17; Web site of the city of New Haven, Connecticut (<http://www.cityofnewhaven.com>).
- c. *Community Policing Exchange VII*, 30 (January–February 2000).
- d. *Weed & Seed In-Sites IX*, 5 (November–December 2001):20.

staff may thus have a better grasp of media operations, needs, and expectations.

Evaluating outreach strategies

After launching a broader marketing strategy, police departments will want to find out whether it is working. If citizen involvement is a major aspect of community policing, then key questions in an evaluation could include whether citizens better understand community

policing, whether their support is stronger, and whether they have become involved as partners with the police.

By evaluating the effectiveness of specific outreach methods, a police department can target its resources toward the best strategies.

Note

1. Chermak, Steven M., *Victims in the News: Crime and the American News Media*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995:3.

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