

Guerrilla PR: Taking It to the Streets

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(The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the board or members of the Colorado Chiropractic Association.)

The AMA recently announced that it will be spending 17 million dollars over the next few years to enhance the public image of its member MDs.

That's 17 million dollars. That's \$378 for every practicing DC in the United States, and more than double the annual budget of the entire American Chiropractic Association. It's more than the annual budgets of every single state chiropractic association in the union combined. That's a lot of money and it will buy a lot of PR.

Unfortunately for non-conventional health care (i.e., chiropractic), the medical establishment will not be starting from scratch with this program. It already enjoys widespread public acceptance. It already has a very substantial base of professionally-done private advertising, including billions of dollars of national advertising for the pharmaceutical industry, and locally for various medical care facilities. It will reinforce the positive feelings that Americans already have for their medical heroes -- from the idolized family doctor of old, on through Marcus Welby, M.D., and C. Everett Koop, M.D., former surgeon general.

In contrast, I'm sure I don't have to tell you how much "catch up" the chiropractic profession will have to play to get past our share of 5-7 percent of the population. The task seems overwhelming and is guaranteed to be phenomenally expensive. Different state chiropractic associations have initiated formal advertising/PR programs with varying degrees of success. But even the wealthiest of those PR programs are staring straight into economic oblivion. This is not to say that enthusiastic economic support of state and national chiropractic PR programs isn't critically important: it is. But it's not enough. Dr. Wilk is right. The chiropractic profession can't hope to compete with the medical profession in an advertising war, declared or otherwise. Instead, our hope lies in scientifically-based research and outcome studies -- and guerrilla PR.

Like the resistance forces during World War II, the chiropractic profession must take stock of its resources, and prepare to do battle in the streets. What chiropractic lacks in money, it has historically made up in energy and organization. The same passion and tenacity that brought licensing laws into all 50 states against sometimes enormous odds is what will bring chiropractic to the media. Doctors -- you, you, and you -- are the guerrillas. Your weapons are documented facts, and there is no shortage of those now. The outcome study recently published in the British Medical Journal, the various workers' compensation studies done over the years in a number of different states, and most recently, the RAND study are all strong, positive support for your position.

Your tactics are availability, reliability, and persistence. If you know media people (television, radio, newspaper, or magazine), or if they are your patients, talk to them about health issues and chiropractic as a solution. Let them know that you are ready, willing and able to talk to them whenever they need you. Get them to call you first when issues affecting your patients or you, as a health care provider, arise. Make sure they know you are available for articles and talk shows or

programs on health care. If you don't know any media people, meet some. Take an editor to lunch. Have coffee with a health reporter/columnist or a newscaster.

Make it easy for them to talk to you by making yourself available, knowledgeable, and articulate. Speak their language. (Not many people speak "chiropractic.") Talk in terms they understand about issues they are concerned with. The rising cost of health care is on everyone's mind. (Remember -- chiropractic does it in half the time at half the cost.) As America's population redefines health as a state of being as opposed to merely the absence of active disease processes, natural, effective alternatives to conventional medicine become more in demand. It's your job to be there to tell them about the chiropractic alternative. Only a small percentage of the population has any concept at all of what chiropractic is or what it is that chiropractors do. Give them the information they need.

How does the news media get its "news"? It is no accident that we read nearly every day of some new drug or surgical treatment for yet another of the ills of mankind. This "news" is the result of a commitment to PR on the part of drug companies -- a commitment that includes massive amounts of time and money to produce the "news," get it to the appropriate media outlets, and to follow it up so that it doesn't get lost in the shuffle.

Can chiropractic do that? I believe we can, but, realistically, we will do it on the local level, interfacing with local newspapers, television, and radio stations, rather than hoping for nationally syndicated coverage. (Have you taken your local reporter to lunch yet?) Your state and national associations can help with subject matter, as can the various research journals. Treatments and success stories that chiropractors may take for granted are novel ideas to the general public. For example, how many times have you been asked why adjusting the spine can help a headache? Or, how adjusting the spine can possibly help an asthma sufferer or a child with recurring ear infections? This is news to most people.

Finally, and this is basic training, consider what kind of source you are. Would you listen to you? Look at your image -- from your grooming, to your advertising, and to the way you talk to your patients. You owe it to yourself and to every other chiropractor to make a positive statement for the profession with every message you send. Credibility is essential in the information game, and if you want to be perceived as an educated, professional person, you cannot afford to lose points on the non-verbal level. Remember that you are playing an "away game" in the PR arena and that you have to play by (or at least learn) their rules to win.

The key to all this is you. It means that every doctor must contribute time and energy on their own without waiting for someone else to do it for them. Guerrilla warfare is hand-to-hand combat. It is being everywhere the enemy is, with enough ammunition and a predetermined battle plan to come out ahead.

We can't hope to win the money war. But we have the soldiers and the savvy to take it to the streets.

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FEBRUARY 1992