Roadmaps
A Guide for Intellectual Entrepreneurs

A Think Tank Case Study on Communicating with the Media: The Impact of Libertad y Desarrollo in Chile

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Introduction

In a letter to Atlas founder Antony Fisher, Nobel laureate Friedrich Hayek said, “The future of civilization may really depend on whether we can catch the ear of a large enough part of the upcoming generation of intellectuals all over the world fast enough.” In a later portion of that letter he mentions that it is only through journalists, teachers and literary people that we will be able to reverse the trend of policies and ideas that run counter to free enterprise, rule of law and individual liberty.

In this case study we will illustrate the relevance of this argument by highlighting the importance of working with one of the most influential groups in civil society, the media. Think tanks have often used the media to promote their research, advocate for certain policies and promote their activities. Reaching the media is one of the most important parts of a think tank’s work. If one wants to reach a wider audience and explain the ideas of free enterprise and individual liberty, the media is one of the best outlets that think tanks can utilize to successfully accomplish those goal.

This case study will present the best practices on how to reach the media and to make the think tank’s work known to a wider audience. We will focus on the example of Libertad y Desarrollo in Chile.

Background

For the topic at hand we will use one of the most successful organizations in Latin America with regards to prestige and media outreach, Libertad y Desarrollo (LyD).

LyD was founded in 1990, by three Chilean academics and former policymakers: Hernan Buchi, Christian Larroulet and Luis Larrain. The mission of the institute is to promote individual freedom, placing the focus of public policy on the individual, covering a broad area of policies: social policy, environment, democracy, market economy, rule of law, and limited government, among others. This is accomplished by identifying problems and designing policies that contribute to national development in the broadest sense of the word, based on sound technical knowledge. This involves having an exceptionally knowledgeable group of experts able to face this task with the speed and rigor required in the ever-changing context of public policy debates.

Their work is aided by building relationships with the institutions involved in formulating public policy without losing independence. This is based on the recognition that in order to influence public policy, it is necessary to build direct relationships with government, congress, the judiciary, political parties, media, universities, and any other institution relevant to civil society.

Through this case study we will analyze how LyD works with the media. For the purposes of this article, we consider the media to encompass television, radio, newspapers as well as other types of publications.

When LyD was first founded, the organization chose not to form a relationship with media outlets. The influence on public policy would be focused solely on those who were directly involved in the policy making process i.e. Congress and government. But it didn’t take long to realize that without having a voice in the media, the influence the think tank could exert was very limited. Even though in private many people would agree with LyD’s proposals, they were rarely willing to defend those policies in public. After a couple of months, LyD started to work on constructing a very strong relationship with the media; this remains one of their top priorities. The influence that Libertad y Desarrollo has today on the public policy process in Chile relies on the fact that it is an independent voice in the media.
Now, after 21 years of existence, LyD has a very strong presence in the media. Last year alone LyD was cited over 2,200 times in the press, averaging 6 or more citations a day. Newspapers included LyD’s name on 74 front page articles and in 180 columns. On average it had 130,000 monthly visits to its webpage and over 8,000 followers on twitter. Over the years, it has been voted in different local surveys as the most influential think tank in Chile. Recently at “The Global Go To Think Tanks Report” (2011) Libertad y Desarrollo ranked #2 in the category “Top think tanks with an annual operating budget of less than US$5,000,000” and #25 in the category “Think Tanks with the best use of the media (print or electronic) to communicate Programs and Research”.

While LyD has had exceptional performance over the last decades, there is no golden rule for how to get the message out. What is described in the following pages is an overview of what LyD has been doing over the past years, with no intention to establish what is necessary for other institutes to have similar success.

The media and the product

Libertad y Desarrollo wouldn’t have its prominence in regional politics if it didn’t have a strong presence in the media. Based on their experience, in order to influence public policy it is crucial to have a voice in the media. Otherwise the impact of a think tank will be very limited. In order to be successful in getting your message out through the media a think tank needs to have a strong product. One of the 3 pillars on which LyD was founded was to have strong public policy expertise. That means good and accurate research. Also, one of the key elements for Libertad y Desarrollo’s success is the reliability of its information. Every time the media turns to LyD, they know what they will get: an answer-on time with a solid argument, an accurate and good public policy analysis and proposal.

A think tank needs the media. But in many cases the media also might need the work produced by a think tank. In order to understand why the media might need the work done by a think tank, you have to understand how the media operates. Each day, the media is required to fill a set amount of space on the paper, or minutes on the airways. When they call you or when you try to get something into the media, you need to be a reliable source for them. They do not have time to check your facts or to go through a very complicated study or graph. Most of the journalists will not be an expert on public policy. They need information that helps them to cover a certain issue, but it has to be something that can be understood by a layman.

Typically the media tries to cover issues from different angles. They always know that when they call LyD they will get something valuable. Sometimes they call off the record in order to clarify something that has been discussed or for information given out at a press conference, or even to gather more information. Many times they call because they need LyD’s unique perspective on an issue. Interaction with the media can serve multiple purposes, but it will only occur because the media sees Libertad y Desarrollo as a reliable and trustworthy think tank.

How to build the relationship

First of all you need to know who is who in the media. For that you will need a regularly updated database with editors and journalists in different newspapers, TV channels, radio, etc. But you don’t want to have just a close relationship with the media; you also need to have personal contact with them. Invite them to events such as a breakfast or to your annual dinner. This is an easy way to start a relationship. Also, encourage a personal and direct relationship between your researchers and the journalists who cover their issues.

It is crucial to build a close relationship with the media by always responding to their requests. For example, always returning a phone call helps to build a reliable relationship.
Sometimes you might have some very attractive research for the media and you have decided not to do a press conference. Negotiating exclusivity for one newspaper helps you to increase the coverage in that medium and also helps you to strengthen the relationship with them. It could be access to interesting figures, poll results, an index, the coverage of a seminar, an interview to a special international guest that you brought to one of your conferences etc.

Having a close relationship with the media will help you find out what interests them, and what issues they want to cover. That gives you the opportunity to offer them help with statistics or analysis that can be cited in their publications.

But your relationship with the media doesn’t have to be only on a day to day basis and about specific issues. Many journalists are not public policy experts which, on many occasions, makes it more difficult for a think tank to get out their message. Under this assumption, some years ago Libertad y Desarrollo started different types of workshops for journalists, and last year started a program for journalism students.

Workshops for current journalists are held by a specialist in one sector in conjunction with the person who specializes in that issue at LyD. The workshops for journalism students are conducted by a well known journalist, in conjunction with the relevant LyD expert. The workshops are held once a month over a period of several months. By the end of last year, LyD had educated more than 180 current and future journalists. In both cases the people who attend these workshops do so by invitation. In 2012 LyD will also hold a specific workshop for journalists about taxes, since it is highly likely that there will be an important debate about tax reform in the media. Also for the first time this year, LyD will hold a workshop for journalists who cover Congress. The focus will be on how a bill becomes a law and everything related Congress’s work.

**Think about today and tomorrow**

The media maintains a very fast pace. What is very important today might not be newsworthy tomorrow. That is why it is so important to try to anticipate what the issues will be, so you can prepare material and be ready for the time when you have the opportunity to get your message out.

Keep an eye on the press and social media to stay up to date on the day’s issues. You also need to know day by day what is being discussed in Congress. It is very useful to discuss what will be in the news at least once a week with the entire staff. It happens every time; whenever you are late to a discussion you will not be able to be part of it. The media will not publish your best column if it is old history. You have to be on time.

There always will be some events or dates you can anticipate such as: Tax day, freedom day, family day, native peoples New Year, start of the school year, air contamination peak day, budget, and state of the union presidential speeches. It is very useful to plan ahead of time what you will be doing and keep a record of how these issues have been covered in the past.

Libertad y Desarrollo has always used different mediums to get the message out. Depending on the audience you want to address you have to use different forms to communicate: workshops, seminars, documents (weekly and monthly), books, a monthly magazine, webpage, mailings, Facebook, Twitter, and blogs etc.

In the case of LyD, documents are published on a weekly and a monthly basis. The monthly documents are primarily two research papers. These types of publications help you to publish public policy research/proposals not necessarily attached to current events. It not only helps you to promote your ideas in the long run but also helps you to facilitate an agenda of your own. Weekly publications are short papers which address two current issues, with a diagnosis of the problem and a public policy proposal. In terms of getting the message out through your publications, it is very important to always respect your schedule. Libertad y Desarrollo has never skipped a single publication on our calendar, and they are always published on time. That makes our work predictable and reliable.
Be creative and simple

The media will not cover a topic that they do not understand. That is why it is so important to keep it simple. You have to be able to translate the most complicated public policy research into a short paper that can be easily understood. You need to be creative as well. On many occasions, a statistic or graph represents more than a thousand words. For example, when discussing concerns of raising the minimum wage, don’t just repeat what the textbook says about setting a price in an economy. Calculate how many people will be unemployed because of the increase in the minimum wage. What type of people will be more affected by the minimum wage increase? Or compare how your country will be affected because it will be a less competitive place for people to be employed and cause companies to relocate.

Libertad y Desarrollo has always been very eager to find new ways to communicate. For example, corruption is always a very important issue. Every year LyD publishes an index that measures corruption. This index makes it possible for LyD to put this issue on the agenda every year.

Unemployment, for example, is always an important issue in any country. A couple of years ago LyD began to publicize an unemployment poll four times a year, one or two days before the monthly figures would come out. The main issue of the poll is not about measuring the exact unemployment rate, but, to reflect the opinions of ordinary citizens concerning their perception of becoming unemployed, or getting a new job if they are currently unemployed. Thanks to this poll, LyD has the opportunity to get their message in the media.

Who will deliver your message

It cannot be random who delivers your message. You have to define who within your organization will speak about what, when and where. You must avoid over exposure, the public does not want to always see the same faces. At Libertad y Desarrollo everyone has specific issues assigned to them. This includes covering that issue in the media. This has different advantages. First of all, the media will know exactly who to ask regarding a specific public policy issue. The staff becomes known in the sector by the people who care about those issues. If everyone talked about everything, it would be very hard for the audience to perceive them as an expert; nobody can be an expert on everything.

Libertad y Desarrollo always has had many faces speaking to the media. This has helped media figures to identify each person on staff with particular issues.

And last but not least ... measure how you are doing

You need to know how you are doing. You have to measure the number of mentions in the media, globally and per person. Measure Facebook, Twitter, and participants at your events. A little bit more complicated but very useful, know how many of your public policy proposals have been implemented.

Libertad y Desarrollo works on these types of statistics on a weekly, monthly and annual basis and it is part of an annual evaluation of the staff.

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