Seizing the Spotlight

When your cause is suddenly in the news, here’s how to move fast to capitalize on the burst of attention. By Jim Rendon

RED-HOT GLARE
Wildfires in the Amazon were big news for about 10 days this summer. Coverage has since slowed, even though fires continue to burn.

FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL
The Rainforest Action Network supports indigenous groups, like these Waorani community members, working to protect Amazon rainforests.
Late this summer fires raged in Brazil’s Amazon rainforest, and quickly the story was everywhere in the American press. The staff at the Rainforest Foundation US was caught off-guard. The small nonprofit, which is affiliated with foundations in Britain and Norway, funds indigenous-rights organizations in the Amazon. The group had been aware of the fires, which had already been burning for weeks, but the size and scale of the sudden media coverage was unexpected.

“It took us by surprise — I mean shockingly so,” says Suzanne Pelletier, the organization’s executive director. “The media was taking on this issue, and it got so much coverage, and it really touched on something with the public.”

The organization was one of a half dozen or so groups in the United States and Britain that media outlets and social-media posts identified as organizations to which people could donate. That led to a flood of people contacting Pelletier’s group by email, phone, and social media. Donations poured in. Two weeks later, 300 new monthly donors had signed up.

For the Rainforest Foundation US, with a staff of seven and a budget of $2 million, it was overwhelming. Plus it was August.

“Almost everyone was on vacation,” Pelletier says. But people worked from their vacation spots, and the field staff sent updates and helped whenever they could get a cell or internet signal. Everyone helped out.

“It’s like your heart is racing for two weeks, knowing that if we don’t do something, it is a lost opportunity,” she says. Since then, the organization has hired consultants to help with social media and communications, but Pelletier wishes she could have done more to take advantage of the fleeting opportunity that the crisis and its coverage offered.

“I wish that we had invested more in operations and communications because we could have been communicating with people much more closely. We could have been putting out more messaging, building more of a community,” she says. “We were treading water and being reactive.”

Make a plan.

Environmental groups have faced the fortune, challenge, and tragedy of this most recent crisis, but groups of all kinds can have their issue suddenly rise to prominence in the media. When that happens, they have weeks or just days to take advantage of the attention — and build long-lasting benefits for their organization and its mission.

Today, groups need to act even faster than in the past, says Aaron Eske, senior vice president of the nonprofit consulting firm M+R. He says that the media’s attention span has shrunk considerably.

In 2012, for example, the group found that coverage of earthquakes lasted about three weeks. Today it lasts less than a week. The fires in the Amazon were front-page news for about 10 days before Hurricane Dorian, Brexit, and a number of other stories.

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The media spends less time covering disasters and crises than it has in years past so organizations have less time to take advantage of the media spotlight. Every day counts.

- Make a plan well before your cause is in the limelight. That way all staff members know their jobs and can react quickly and effectively.
- Delegate work to volunteers and board members who are good at speaking for the organization.
- You are the experts. Use your contacts on the ground to get current information out via social media and the press.
- Expand your media contacts to include reporters who write “how-to-help” stories.
- Social media is crucial. Use it to push information out about the crisis, promote and critique media coverage, and raise money. Timely emergency appeals can be particularly effective.
- Communicating with new donors is crucial. At first, all they need is to know that you have received their gift. They understand you are busy. Educate and activate them later.

— JIM RENDON

When every day counts, preparation is key

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of other high-profile stories overshadowed them, though the fires continue to burn. Nonprofits need to be even more effective in a very short period of time to maximize the benefits, he says.

Groups should have plans in place to help them react better. For example, if a nonprofit has a lengthy process to approve public statements, that needs to be truncated so it can respond quickly. Nonprofits should develop a team approach and delegate responsibilities in the event of a crisis, says Kim Klein, a principal at Klein and Roth Consulting, which provides fundraising advice. Staff members who understand what their role is will be better positioned to fill it when the time comes. Smaller groups, in particular, should tap volunteers and board members to help.

“I see a lot of organizations, small ones, where the board members are the main ones interfacing with the media,” says Klein. “They are trained, they stay on message, and they work very well.”

Lay the groundwork to help reporters.

The media did not start covering the crisis the first day of the fires, which had begun more than a week and half earlier. Ginger Cassidy, program director at Rainforest Action Network, says her group began getting the story out on social media soon after the fires started. “The news gained traction only when the smoke reached São Paulo, Brazil’s most populous city. As more people began posting about the smoke and fires on social media, traditional outlets started paying attention.”

The story of the Amazon fires is complex. Much of the Amazon is not wilderness. Indigenous communities are spread throughout and manage the forest in many places. Those groups have been working for decades to obtain legal rights to their land and protections from loggers, miners, and farmers, who often use violence to take away land and cut down and burn the forest.

Indigenous people are the key to protecting the forest, according to advocacy groups. The Amazon rainforest absorbs about 2 billion metric tons of carbon each year, making it a crucial element in fighting climate change. The story is deeply local but also global.

This kind of nuance can be hard for the mass media to get right. But groups have been pleased by the coverage. “We’ve been very encouraged by how much coverage of the fires has included the recognition of indigenous people as being terribly affected by the fires and as the best guardians of the rainforest and the ones who have actively managed and looked after it for millennia,” says Jonathan Mazower, communications director for Survival International, which works with indigenous communities in countries around the world.

That didn’t happen by accident. Where possible, Mazower has connected reporters with indigenous people in the Amazon via WhatsApp and Facebook. He also works to help get journalists in direct contact with indigenous communities so their perspective is better represented in the media. “We are very often an intermediary between the two groups,” he says.

Survival International also policed articles about the fires. It developed a social-media graphic that it uses to mark press stories that fail to mention the impact of the fires on indigenous communities, hoping it will help raise awareness and improve reporting.

Groups should take advantage of the fact that they have staff and contacts on the ground in hard-to-reach places. They can be good sources for reporters and also for getting the most current information out to their members through social media and other platforms, says Eske.

When an issue gets a burst of attention, organizations should try to broaden their list of media contacts. In a crisis, a much broader pool of reporters swoops in to cover the issue. Groups should particularly look for journalists who write the “how-to-help stories” that can land a group on widely circulated lists of nonprofits.

Nigel Sizer, chief program officer at the Rainforest Alliance, did about 30 interviews in two weeks. The blitz of media interest was as strong and sustained as any he has ever seen.

Use social media to get the word out.

The difference for many environmental groups this time around is social media. The last time there was big news on the rainforest, social-media platforms were in their infancy.

This time, Sizer says, information his group tweeted was retweeted by celebrities, which helped it reach tens of millions of people — a vast audience that it never could have reached otherwise.

Conservation International saw a flood of interest from people in countries around the world. Social media became an invaluable tool to help the group communicate with the public about what was happening and about its work.

“Social media was absolutely critical to just keep delivering answers and providing content that was really relevant, that could be a little bit more neutral, that wasn’t saying this is right or wrong but saying: Here’s what we’re seeing; here’s what the science is telling us,” says Kristine Zeigler, the group’s chief development officer.

In one week, the group added 36,000 new social-media followers. The Rainforest Trust’s Instagram followers increased fivefold in just two weeks. Several well-known YouTubers have been engaged with the issue and have donated their own money, driving more interest from a younger generation, says Leslie VanSant, the group’s chief philanthropy officer.

With such an outpouring of interest, many groups used social-media tools to raise money.

Rainforest Alliance launched an Instagram campaign pledging to send 100 percent of the money donated to six Brazilian organizations that advocate for indigenous rights and conservation. Within a week it had raised and transferred $500,000, which meant setting up new systems to facilitate the quick transfer of funds with all of the necessary legal controls.

Rainforest Alliance, like many groups, is also using social media to report back on the situation on the ground and how donations are being used. That is particularly helpful for the campaign that pledged to send funds directly to groups in Brazil.

“We are having regular weekly conversations with our partners in Brazil who are spending that money so we can provide almost real-time updates to people through social media about what we’re spending some of the money on,” says Sizer.

If anything, Sizer says, he has realized the value of these new platforms. “Social media can transform the dynamics around a crisis like this,” he says. “We’ll be investing more in our social-media capacity.”

Keep new donors informed.

Outside of social media, groups have seen a boost in donors and members. Thousands of new
members have joined the Rainforest Alliance. Sizer says that now that things have slowed down, he and his colleagues are taking the time to determine the intent of donors so they understand if the funds can support the Rainforest Alliance or if they should be sent to the groups in Brazil.

Rainforest Trust received hundreds of gifts an hour from a wide range of channels — social media, PayPal, Network for Good, the group’s own website, and even donor-advised funds. The Rainforest Action Network raised almost $400,000 for its program making small grants to indigenous-led organizations in the Amazon.

The Rainforest Foundation’s website gave visitors the option to become monthly donors — which 300 chose to do. It was something that was already up on its site that encouraged people to become more engaged with the group for the long term, Pelletier says.

It can be hard to find the time to communicate with new donors in a crisis, but it’s critical, says Klein. Initially, donors don’t need much. Nonprofits just need to let them know that their money has been received. Then over time, groups should try to keep in touch with updates and calls to action.

“Sometimes these are just little tweets and things, one or two sentences,” Klein says. “Then use that opportunity to push out your larger vision.”

Pelletier is looking forward to engaging with her new members and donors — many of whom may be new to environmental causes entirely. “We need to be reaching out and building this community now,” she says.

While groups have seen an outpouring of interest from the public, most have heard nothing from foundations, which are traditionally slow in their grant making. Only the Rainforest Trust reported interest from foundations that it had not worked with before that were just now discovering its work.

Don’t be afraid to think big.

The rush of interest — and donations — has shown these groups that a much broader swath of society is connecting with rainforest conservation and indigenous rights than they thought was possible. It’s pushing them to think bigger than ever before.

Conservation International is launching a $7 million campaign that will help with immediate needs and help fund prevention efforts in the Amazon. It has already secured $1 million. The Rainforest Foundation, despite its small size, is accelerating an idea it has for a $100 million campaign. Pelletier says that now she wants to push it out as fast possible because the fire crisis has changed how she thinks about her work.

“It’s emboldened us to really think bigger,” she says. “The worst that we can do is fail.”

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