

Let's Communicate Freemasonry!

Robert C. Singer

Excerpts from remarks by Most Worshipful Robert C. Singer, Grand Master of Masons in the State of New York 1986-88, and a professional communicator for over 30 years.

Before I begin, I want to say something! The bedrock of effective Masonic communications is the everyday practical living of a life that is guided by religious, moral and ethical principles. There is no replacement for this triune approach – no public relations program, no slick media campaign, no four-color print matter can be substituted.

However, there is something more that is needed, especially in this modern era. A great communicator once told me that the best definition of public relations is 90 percent performance and 10 percent telling about it. Or, doing a good job and getting credit for it. It is to that second part that we in New York and many other Grand Lodges are devoting time, money and skill in this time period.

We are all familiar with the problems our Fraternity has faced over the past 30 years – declining membership, poor attendance, loss of interest, sloppy ritual work, etc. In New York, we have stopped talking about these problems (I even issued a verbal "edict" to that effect!) and have been concentrating, for the past two years, on a different approach – external or public communication, reaching out to the non-Masonic public.

This was not our first step in this coordinated effort – far from it. My immediate predecessors conducted campaigns to improve Lodge programs and candidate instruction, to develop community service, to increase widow's recognition, to initiate greater efforts to serve our veterans, and to revamp internal communications with our present members. Only then did we "go public". I might add that our recent Grand Masters have worked closely as a team, realizing that continuity of effort was vital to the success of such a program.

Our external communications program involved Masons at the Grand Lodge, district, and Lodge levels, particularly the last. It is the local lodge in a community that is the focal point. And, of course, it is the individual Freemason who is on the front line.

We began nearly two years ago. Our four-point goal:

1. To develop increased and improved recognition of Freemasonry where recognition does not now exist.
2. To expand that awareness where it does exist.
3. To generate interest among potential new members without direct solicitation.
4. To renew interest on the part of inactive Freemasons.

In introducing this program, I said at the time, "There is a need to gain greater public awareness of Freemasonry. Let me stress, however, that this is not a membership program or an attempt to directly solicit prospective members."

Note that I have twice (now thrice) mentioned "solicitation". Even if that were our goal, which it is not, you would still have to solicit them for something, a "something" about which the general public today knows little or nothing. Our purpose, then, is to tell, explain, inform about the "something" called Freemasonry, and to spark an interest in learning more about the world's oldest, largest and most unique fraternity.

Our multi-media program was put together by a small team of professionals, and utilized tried and true communications techniques.

Here are the main elements in this effort:

- A series of eight advertisements carried in 27 major daily newspapers (including the New York Times) in New York State. Each carried a simple message, e.g., "Who are the Masons? "
- Local Lodges were encouraged to run their own versions of these ads in weekly newspapers, which offer inexpensive but well-read space.
- Two 60-second radio spots were aired on 33 radio stations blanketing the State and for concentrated periods.
- A new, colorful Q & A folder was prepared, and some 300,000 copies were requested by local Lodges and Freemasons. Price: one cent per copy.
- A Several 30 second public service television spots were produced, one featuring Right Worshipful and Reverend Norman Vincent Peale, a 60-year Freemason.
- A one-time full-page advertisement was placed in the New York regional edition of TIME magazine. Its theme was the major participation in the creation of the U.S. Constitution, whose Bicentennial was celebrated in September, 1987. The issue was mailed to 400,000 subscribers' homes.
- A new, 15 minute sound-slide show, "Brotherhood and Service – The Freemasons", was produced, and copies were sent to the Worshipful Masters of our 800 Lodges with

instructions to show them to local service clubs, church groups and community organizations. see ed. note pg. 7

- The DeWitt Clinton Masonic Community Service Award was created for local Lodges to present at public meetings to nonMasonic groups and individuals as a recognition of their community service.
- An attractive red, white and blue bumper sticker has just been issued. It says very simply "Freemasonry – Friendship. Morality and Brotherly Love."
- Lodges were urged to hold public Masonic Information Nights, and invite potential members and their wives to these affairs. No "hard sell" permitted.
- We encouraged greater contact with the media (by qualified spokesmen only) to improve understanding of our Fraternity and to dispel the false concept that we are a "secret society". However, there were to be no debates with critics or negative commentary. We simply tell our positive story.
- Individual Freemasons are asked to identify themselves as such by wearing Masonic pins They are also encouraged to carry Q & A folder and Lodge petitions. In other words, to be ready for the time when a prospect shows interest. It does not hurt to talk about Freemasonry at appropriate times with non Masons!

Inevitably, there is a spill-over into internal Communications. We completely revised the format and content of our quarterly Empire State Mason magazine (circ. 135,000), an action which has met with very favorable comment We also began publication of a four-page monthly Newsletter for 2,200 key leaders, including all Worshipful Masters and Secretaries

By now, you are probably wondering about the cost of all this activity No secret, it is about \$250,000, spread over two years and with several one-time large expenditures e.g. the sound-slide show, which will be used over the next several years. Naturally, you do not have to spend at this level to accomplish some good, but we felt that an all-out effort was dictated at this time.

Your second question, how effective? That is tough to measure, but we know that some 1000 inquiries were generated by the newspaper ads alone (they were sent a Q & A folder and there was local Lodge follow-up) and the reaction among our membership has been very positive That, to me, is the critical factor. We wanted to turn around our members pessimistic or negative attitude toward the Craft's prospects today and for the future. From regional meetings and extensive sampling of opinion across the Empire State, every indication we have is that there is a renewed vigor, a stepped-up interest, a greater desire to rebuild.

Well, say the skeptics out there, is your membership increasing? We do not know yet, and it is probably doubtful that we will see a dramatic change in the near term. Remember it is very hard to offset the annual 5,000-member losses, in recent years, from deaths. I will be satisfied if there is even a tiny, tell-tale indication of a turnaround.

One must remember that this type of program does not work miracles or bring about instant results, and it must be continued, even if on a reduced scale (as it will be in New York). It is just one more stone placed on other stones to complete the building.

We have been pleased to share our material with other Masonic bodies, particularly a number of Grand Lodges, and several have adapted the various parts of this program to their particular needs-

Let me conclude by restating my opening thought The most effective Masonic communication is the individual Freemason's good daily behavior, with his family, in his business, in his community. The New York communications program backs up this behavior by explaining to the non-Masonic public how the Freemasons' involvement in his Fraternity can help to develop the moral and ethical basis for this exemplary behavior-

We believe that a modern Masonic communications program is needed today, because of the fast-paced, high-speed environment in which we find ourselves The values espoused by Freemasonry – Friendship, Morality, Brotherly Love – have not changed, but is it not time that we utilized the modern means of communication to help get our important message across to the public? This Freemason thinks so!

ED NOTE

'Brotherhood and Service – The Freemasons' has also been produced in VHS tape format. It is available for rental (fee \$10.00) from The Masonic Service Association-

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