Marketing Community Policing in the News: A Missed Opportunity?
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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 responding 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.
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). 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
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 con-
straints may help explain
why, from the media’s
perspective, police depart-
ments don’t keep them
well-informed about
community policing.

Crime makes head-
lines; community
policing does not

Community policing attracts
a certain amount of cover-
age. The vast majority of the
reporters contacted for the
study said they had run at
least one story about com-
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 sto-
ries. Yet as measured by
number of articles, communi-
ty policing comes in a distant
second behind crime.

Of more than 1,000 articles
on crime and community
policing found by the re-
searchers, the overwhelming
majority dealt with crime. In
terms of substance, the com-
unity policing articles were
thin, with the topic treated
outside any context of its his-
tory or philosophy. The goals
of community policing were
treated similarly; achieve-
ments 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 infor-
mation 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 extinguish-
ers.”* 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 repre-
sentatives 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 Descrip-
tive Study of Crime News Gatekeepers,” Journal of Criminal Justice 23, 4

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 pro-
grams. PIOs generally con-
sider 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

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**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. 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.

- 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 cultivated 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.\(^c\)

**Notes**


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**

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