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**FEATURE CASE STUDY MEDIA CONTACT**

Wednesday, March 24, 2010 Ryley Murray

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**Toronto Rape Crisis Centre/Multicultural Women Against Rape**

Once every minute, a woman in Canada is raped. What makes this statistic even more shocking is that 80 per cent of rape victims know their attackers. Many women are often too ashamed, confused, and afraid to report the crime and 60 per cent of them are assaulted repeatedly. [[1]](#footnote-1) In many communities, especially ones of minorities, women feel stigmatized and are unwilling to speak about the experience, making it nearly impossible for them to heal.

Fortunately, there is an organization in Toronto that seeks to counsel and empower victims of this devastating crime. The Toronto Rape Crisis Centre/ Multicultural Women Against Rape (TRCC/MWAR) is a grassroots, women-run collective that provides support to victims of assault through education, counselling, advocacy and activism.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Founded in 1974, the Toronto Rape Crisis Centre has expanded its mandate over the past few decades to provide a 24-hour crisis line, face-to-face counselling and support groups for survivors. The organization also advocates for women within the legal system regarding pressing charges against their attacker as well as help with housing and immigration. With only seven full-time staff members, the centre relies heavily on its 120 volunteers to fulfil its mission.

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***Key Messages and Communications***

The sensitive nature of the work that TRCC/MWAR does lends itself to a different set of communication objectives and tactics than most organizations. The main goal of the centre is to eradicate violence against women and children. In a city where one out of every four women is sexually assaulted, this is no easy task and leaves TRCC with a lot of ground to cover. [[3]](#footnote-3)

“Our communication objectives change depending on who our audience is and what message we are trying to get across,” says Carlene Moore, a counsellor at the centre.[[4]](#footnote-4) “Our target audience is not just women who have been raped. We are trying to end oppression and violence against women. To do that we have to speak to the men who are, or who could be doing the abusing.”

The TRCC approaches this objective in a reactive way, going into schools, communities or places of work after a violent incident has occurred.

The centre also runs educational seminars on healthy dating at high schools in poorer communities. These seminars inform young women about their right to say “no” at any time during foreplay or intercourse; and inform young men that it is the law to stop when told.

In order to reach its main target audience, women who have been sexually assaulted, TRCC employs many tactics including:

* A website with information about where the centre is located and a number to call if in a crisis
* A 24-hour crisis hotline
* Liaising with doctors whose patients have disclosed they’ve been raped
* A yearly event, Take Back the Night, which consists of an all-day rally that ends in a women- and-children-only march through downtown Toronto in the evening

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* An annual Bowlathon fundraiser
* A TRCC/MWAR Facebook page[[5]](#footnote-5)

Of these tactics, the website has proven the most effective for reaching target audiences. The name of the centre increases the website’s search engine optimization. When a victim is looking for help online and types in “rape” and “Toronto” in a Google search, the TRCC is the first website to appear. [[6]](#footnote-6)

The site is very basic with few links, no pictures and minimal colours. “The reason for this,” explains Moore, “is because the women accessing it are generally doing so from computers with outdated software in community libraries or schools. We have to cater to them when creating the website. If they can’t open it, they can’t access the information needed to help them.”

The Take Back the Night rally is another tactic that provides instant results for those taking part. When speaking about the event Moore becomes impassioned, “It is so amazing to see these women who haven’t gone outside at night for years suddenly become empowered! I’ve seen so many women come back from this march completely transformed.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

The Facebook page is a great way to reach a younger audience; however, it does need to be updated frequently and with interesting posts in order to attract more fans.

***Analysis of Media Coverage***

An extensive search of the database found only two articles published on TRCC/MWAR, both within the last month and from the same publication. The centre held a press conference on Monday March 8, 2010 to protest Canada Border Control raiding women’s shelters to seek out illegal immigrants. [[8]](#footnote-8)Both articles explained in detail what was covered in the press conference.[[9]](#footnote-9) While the message of the articles aligned with the centre’s mission, no one from TRCC was quoted. The centre was mentioned only as the location of the press conference.

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The fact that no other media coverage was found shows that this organization seeks to reach its audiences through different methods.

***Recommendations***

* **Strategy 1- Reach new audiences, for example, men and parents.**
* When trying to reach male audiences, the TRCC could tailor its educational seminars to men in the prison system. Some of these men are more likely to have been abusers and would be in need of counsel.
* To stop the cycle of violence, TRCC should be reaching out to mothers to educate them on preventing sexual assaults against their children. TRCC could make its presence known in daycare centres, hospitals, and pre-natal classes.
* New sponsors can be sourced to pay for advertisements in subways and bus shelters listing the TRCC’s crisis hotline number.
* **Strategy 2** – **Build trust with primary** **audience, rape victims**
* The TRCC’s website is its main resource to reach its audiences, and is the area that needs the most improvement.
* The website can list shelters it partners with so those in immediate need of assistance can easily find a safe haven.
* To maintain its credibility, the centre’s website needs to be updated more frequently. There is currently an outdated invitation to join the volunteer orientation session in spring 2008, which may be confusing to those wanting to help.
* There is currently no link to the Facebook page on the site. This can be added to increase traffic and number of “fans”.
* A capable student volunteer can be enlisted to help update the website and Facebook page. Students are always looking for volunteer work and would be more likely to perform these tasks successfully.
* **Strategy 3- Increase media coverage of special events**

Take Back the Night is a very powerful event for the TRCC but receives no media coverage. Media alerts should be sent out prior to the annual march to generate more awareness.

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* **Strategy 4 – Increase community presence**
* To effectively reach women who have been abused, volunteers can go into shelters, low-income housing complexes and schools to hand out informational flyers about the TRCC.

***Conclusion***

The TRCC does amazing work for women who have suffered sexual abuse. It is constantly trying to better its efforts to help the numerous women in need. By employing the above recommendations of reaching new audiences, building trust with primary audiences, increasing media coverage of special events, and increasing community presence, the TRCC will better achieve its mission of ending oppression and violence against women.

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1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Interview, Carlene Moore, counsellor, TRCC/MWAR, March 2010 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. “Homeless shelter should be safe sanctuary, activists say”, Nicholas Keung, *The Toronto Star*, March 8, 2010 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. “Women’s haven feels a little less safe”, Catherine Porter, *The Toronto Star,* March 8, 2010 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)