Emily Keevil

MADD Case Study

November 12, 2010

One mother who has suffered a loss is a grieving woman. A group of mothers who have either suffered the same loss or have banded together for the same cause is a force to be reckoned with. This is how MADD, or “Mothers Against Drunk Driving,” was created. A small group of women came together to form one of the most influential and powerful organizations in the world. Through the use of passion and excellent public relations techniques, they have had an enormously positive impact on society and continue to garner unwaveringly strong support. Most organizations use public relations to build a mutually beneficial relationship with their publics, but MADD used public relations to build who they are. From the beginning, MADD has been unstoppable, but it would have never existed without the devastating and unfortunate accidents of two young girls.

In 1979, a heartbreaking accident shattered Cindi Lamb’s life. Her five-and-a-half-month-old daughter, Laura Lamb, was involved in a head-on automobile accident by a repeat drunk driving offender going 120 mph and became one of the youngest quadriplegics in the world. Lamb did what any outraged mother would do; she started a war against drunk driving in Maryland, and little did she know that her resilient efforts would eventually land her the position of co-founder for MADD. Months later in California, a 13-year-old girl, Cari Lightner, was killed by a drunk driver who, two days before the accident, was released on bail for his third drunk driving conviction, yet he still carried a valid driver’s license. Lightner and friends needed to take action, and MADD was born during dinner in Sacramento at a steak house. In 1981, Lightner and Lamb united in efforts to take MADD as far as it could go, and by the end of the year, 11 chapters had formed in four states. The donations from victims and concerned citizens started pouring in, and today, donations total almost $43 million annually. MADD rapidly spread throughout the country, gaining more and more supporters. After 30 years, MADD now has more than 600 chapters and Community Action Teams (CAT) in every state with affiliates all over the world, including England, New Zealand, Guam, and Puerto Rico. MADD swept the nation, but it was initially formed as an answer to constant crises that occurred due to drunk driving.

The formation of MADD was not a traditional public relations case. This was not an organization that existed, had a crisis, and needed a solid public relations team to aid them through their difficult time. MADD emerged to help prevent drunk driving and the accidents it caused. We have to examine MADD slightly differently than how we would other cases because MADD is not a crisis; however, it is the answer to a crisis. Because of this, we can still relate the organization to **crisis communication**. During a crisis, there are key elements that are used. The elements that applied to MADD’s campaign and messages are **stressful, disruptive, predictable, escalating, and public.** MADD used the **stressful** element because the women who formed this group were going through the hardest times in their lives. However, through their grief, they had to be at their best in order to make MADD successful. Drunk driving certainly involves the **disruptive** element of a crisis because the act alone causes much physical and emotional strain on the resources of those it affects. Family and friends potentially have to deal with the loss of a loved one, whether they were the drunk driver or the victim. Even if there are no deaths, there a a wide variety of other resources that can be strained, whether it is money to pay for damages or medical bills, the rise of insurance, or the humiliation of a Driving While Impaired ticket. The death of Cari Lightner could have, without a doubt, been avoided, and some could say the accident, maybe not hers exactly, but an accident involving this driver, was **predictable**. The man who hit Lightner already had two drunk driving convictions against him, but he still had a valid California driver’s license. This accident could have been avoided if the man had a more severe punishment taken against him, or at least his license suspended. This is the main reason why Lightner’s mother took such an extreme action against drunk driving. There were not strong enough laws in place to prevent this from happening over and over again. Drunk driving also contains the **public** element of a crisis, especially the accidents that lead to the creation of MADD. These incidents were very known throughout the country, and MADD was formed in response to let all of the public become aware of this very serious issue.

As I said earlier, this is not a traditional case, but it certainly followed **the crises four-phase pattern** that lays out the events of a crisis in a logical manner. The first step, **the prodromal crisis stage**, is the warning stage. This should have been when the drunk drivers were held accountable for their previous offenses. In both cases, the drivers had had previous under-the-influence-while-operating-a-vehicle offenses, and it did not seem like any action was taken to secure these men from another one. **The acute crisis stage** is the point of no return. It is the moment when the crisis is recognized finally. This stage occurred when the accidents happened, when one girl lost her life and when the other was rushed to the emergency room for surgery. **The chronic crisis stage** took place when reports started to leak to the family and media about the accidents being caused by inebriated drivers who were on their fourth and fifth offense for alcohol related accidents. **The crisis resolution stage** is when MADD was formed. During this stage, evaluations are made as to why this happened and steps are taken to prevent such a crisis from happening again, thus MADD falling right into this category.

After forming MADD, the mothers had two **missions**: The first was to provide a support system for those who have experienced the tragedy of a drunk driving accident, and the second is to socially and legislatively advocate against driving while under the influence. The mothers wanted to try to prevent underage drinking because that is age where many of the accidents were occurring, and they made a commitment to reach out to younger drivers. MADD did an excellent job in conveying their messages in one of the most successful public relations campaign I have read about. Their yearly donations surpass $40 million, and the number of chapters in existence continues to rapidly grow. It is a cause that nobody wants to be against. There have been a number of bills passed in support of MADD and their messages. MADD used the **agenda setting theory** in support of their mission. The theory states that the media cannot tell people what to think, but it can tell people what to think about. This was a very effective way to reach the citizens because by the tenth anniversary of MADD, a Gallup survey showed that Americans now believed drunk driving to be the number one problem on the nation’s highways and that the public had become less tolerant of drunk drivers and favor of harsher consequences. The media was able to be a connection between MADD and their publics, and giving the public information about drunk driving steered them to stand behind MADD.

When delivering their messages, MADD used an **open system** of communication. They made their publics aware of what was going on and the importance of ridding the world of drunk driving. MADD used the **peripheral route** of the **elaborated likelihood model**. They influenced people by using repetition in their messages to their publics and by having very credible and influential sponsors, such as Nationwide, State Farm, and the NFL. In order to make sure their messages were being conveyed effectively, MADD had to target audiences that would be affected by MADD’s message and drunk driving.

In MADD’s campaign, they targeted several different audiences to spread their message to. While MADD’s message can be appreciated by anyone because everyone is at risk of being the victim of a drunk driving accident, the **targeted audiences** were singled out due to how much of an impact they have on this situation. The first targeted audience are **teens**. The sister organization, Students Against Drunk Driving (SADD), was created in an effort to educate teenagers of the extremely high dangers of drunk driving. Teens were focused on because this is a group with a high incidence of alcohol-related deaths. Another audience is the **adult driver*.*** After turning 21, many adults go out to bars or clubs where they tend to drink alcohol and then drive home. A major targeted public is the **repeat and reckless drunk driver**. This is one of the most important audiences that MADD needs to target. These are the people who are causing the accidents, and to change human behavior is hard. These people will continue to drink and drive until they hurt somebody. MADD targets this group by hoping to convince the government to pass laws that allow for stronger and harsher penalties. The **public service professionals**, such as the police, paramedics, and physicians,are also targeted by MADD because they are the ones who have to deal with drunk driving incidents on a daily basis. The last group targeted by MADD are the family and friends who have experienced the harsh reality of drunk driving accidents. MADD has created multiple programs to aid these victims through their hard times.

MADD’s mission is to stop drunk driving and support the victims who have been involved, and in order to achieve this mission, the women of MADD have several goals and objectives at the grassroots level to support their mission. The first goal MADD would like to achieve is to curb alcohol advertising for television or live audiences who have a large percentage of less than 21 year-olds. They are strongly fighting for alternate commercials to be advertised in place, and this is certainly something that can be done. All commercials should be directed towards the appropriate age groups. Another goal that MADD is working towards is to encourage sponsors of sporting events to limit alcohol sales too late during the event. This will increase the amount of time the event goers have to sober up and drink water and coffee before the drive home. It will increase their safety and those around them. The last objective MADD is working on is trying to convince Congress to add a victim’s rights amendment to the Constitution. This will give the victims of drunk drivers more power in court proceedings. To help MADD achieve their goals, they have employed a number of activities and tactics.

MADD’s campaigns to end drunk driving are excellent and very effective. They target all of their audiences and have garnered so much support throughout the years. One of MADD’s most successful campaigns was *Project Red Ribbon*. After the 1986 Candlelight Vigil of Remembrance and Hope in San Diego, the attendees took of the red ribbons from around their candles and tied them to the door handle of their car as a reminder not to drink and drive. The ribbons were also used as a sign of solidarity because they showed that the owner was against drinking and driving. Tying the ribbon around any part of the car prevented behavior that caused unnecessary deaths, and promoted calling a cab for someone who had been drinking, or holding onto their keys and pushed the term to its popularity. Today, many restaurant and bar patrons will make sure that a group of people have a designated driver before they leave or serve alcohol. During the 1980s, it was MADD who started the term “designated driver” This is MADD’s most known and longest-running campaign and was so successful because it linked the specific behavior of tying the ribbon to not supporting drunk driving. Today, more than 30 million ribbons are distributed a year, and stores such as 7-11 now carry the ribbons in support of the organization. Similar to the **Blue Jeans public relations campaign** we looked at earlier in the year, MADD received support from well established companies to help build their organization and promote a positive image and use **cause-related marketing.** Welch’s promoted a nonalcoholic cider in support of MADD which gave the organization more exposure and raised the antidrunk driving ideal.

MADD’s second part to their mission statement is to aid victims of drunk driving. In order to do this, MADD’s slogan became “the Voice of the Victim.” Lamb wanted the public to know that MADD’s most important focus was to aid victims through the justice process because in reality, the defendant has all the rights, and the victims will need all of the support they can get. To help even more, a victims’ assistance program was created in 1984 that publishes a magazine called *MADDvocate*. This magazine is a comprehensive guide on how to deal with this situation, and one can complete MADD’s 40 hour advocate education to help thousands of victims nationally by answering questions and comments through toll-free numbers, e-mail, and advocate services. Another way to aid in victim assistance is to take the curriculum at Sam Houston State University that offers a bachelor’s degree in victim studies and a master’s degree in victim services administration. The university has several outreach programs for victim’s to find the support system they need.

MADD has taken it upon themselves to sponsor and support youth programs that host programs such as alcohol-free prom parties, speeches in high schools, and mock crash events. One of MADD’s targeted audiences is underage drivers because a large majority of drunk driving accidents are caused by them. With these successful youth programs, such as Youth In Action, Take the Lead, MADD Youth Power Camps, Student Activist Training, and the MADD National Youth Summit to Prevent Underage Drinking, the youth of the nation are able to be fully educated on the seriousness of this growing epidemic. Kids today need to be aware of the severe risks of drinking while impaired, whether it is with alcohol or drugs. Many teenagers lose their young life to these mistakes or destroy their entire lives by hurting another human. It is extremely important for the youth of America to understand and appreciate their lives and not put themselves and everyone around them in danger.

In order for MADD to carry out its mission and push forward with their campaigns, they used **one-way** and **two-way communication.** Both were used, and both were equally effective. **One-way communication** was used during a **televised message** during a television show. Millions of viewers saw the message “The two don’t mix.” Producers and writers of television shows are encouraged to promote responsible drinking and making sure people have designated drivers. Another use of **one-way communication** was the publication of ***MADDvocate***. **Two-way communication** was strongly used during MADD’s campaigns against drunk driving. A national poster contest allowed 45,000 young adults in a **poster and essay contest** that targeting preventing drunk driving. This allowed the youth to get involved in an important cause through something they were interested in. They were able to express their views on drunk driving through very creative forms of poster making and essay writing. A toll-free Victim’s **Assistance Crisis hotline** opened to the public to provide support to those who had been affected by drunk driving. The hotline was there to answer questions and give support to those who needed it. Panels were formed by victims of drunk driving. These **Victim Impact Panels** were extremely effective in communicating MADD’s messages. They followed the **action assembly theory.** Outsiders were able to fully comprehend the pain that these victims live with every single day of their lives and how ordinary citizens can easily prevent this. People received a first-hand look into the lives of people who were destroyed from this crisis. They were extremely powerful and emotional, and convicted drunk drivers were required to attend one of these panels, forcing them to see what pain they have caused. **Candlelight vigils** and **crisis response teams** were also created in support of victims. One last communication tool that MADD used in their fight was **lobbying for legislation for stricter penalties** and to make sure offenders were not on the road. MADD was extremely successful with this part of their campaign.

In 1980, three U.S. representatives announced the federal Barnes bill that initiated a strike on the national war on drunk driving. This bill was proposed a year earlier; however, it did not gain much attention, but now, it had two women who utilized the **uses and gratification theory** to garner support through the media. They were media savvy and able to use the media to tell their stories and rally support against drunk driving. Since then, thousands of federal and state anti-drunk driving laws were passed due to MADD’s grassroots activism. It was because of MADD that in 1984, federal law required all states to increase the legal drinking age to 21 or else they would lose highway funding. MADD’s aggressive campaign also focused on administrative license revocation, open container laws, a maximum blood alcohol content of .08 percent, Dram Shop laws, Victim Bill of Rights and crime victim compensation. Basically, MADD changed the face of drinking and its consequences. Even though MADD sees every achievement as a strong victory, they still have much to do. They eventually want to rid the streets of drunk driving and make the suffering stop for the 16,000 people who are killed yearly due to drunk driving accidents. They know the rode ahead of them is very long, but they are not willing to give up.

As I said before, MADD’s public relations campaign was brilliant, and it is easy to see why through the statistics of it. Each year, they receive millions of dollars worth of donations, and their support just keeps growing. They used several public relations tactics to help them gain as much support as they did. Based on the **social exchange theory,** there were certainly costs and benefits of the creating of MADD. The unfortunate **costs** are the lives that are lost due to drunk driving that forced MADD into existence. An innocent life is never a reasonable cost, but it was what had to happen for such an effect to take place. The **benefits** of MADD are huge. Accidents and deaths have decreased by 43 percent, and because of MADD, an estimated 138,000 people are alive today. MADD is one of the strongest and most **effective coalitions** ever to exist. I feel as though more people find the organization respectable and credible because it was created out of the despair of a mother losing her child. Nothing can replace that. Nothing can make that mother whole again. All she can do is fight for other mother’s in the world to never go through her pain.