

Media Exposure

LAST OCTOBER, just before the presidential election, the American Academy of Actuaries held a press conference. The Academy doesn't do that very often, but the candidates had just outlined their proposals for Social Security reform in Contingencies and Academy staff thought that might make a good hook for generating some media interest.

They were right. Attendance at the National Press Club event on Oct. 26, featuring Senior Pension Fellow Ron Gebhardt, former HCFA actuary Guy King, and a supporting cast of charts and graphs, was conspicuously high. But that was just the tip of the iceberg. Over the next two days, the Academy message—that neither candidate had all the answers, or even the right questions—was heard on all the major TV network news programs, cable, and radio as well as newspapers all across the country.

Predictably, the Bush and Gore campaigns tried to spin the message to their respective advantages, which surprised no one who has even the most rudimentary idea of how political campaigns work.

What was surprising was how accurately and fairly the media reported the message. Say what you will about how routinely the press distorts and misrepresents the news, this time they got it right.

Some Academy members felt that holding any kind of press conference at all, especially on such a highly charged topic at election time, was overstepping the Academy's role. The idea that even the most carefully crafted message would be out of their control once it hit the airwaves made them uncomfortable. They feared the Academy's carefully cultivated nonpartisanship would be tarnished, perhaps irreparably.

Still, by any standards, the press conference was an unqualified success. Millions of people who had no idea what an actuary was now had some measure of understanding,

mostly because of the media's savvy reporting and cogent explanations. Actuaries had made it onto the national radar screen at last.

In large part to mollify the critics, the Academy staff compiled a 20-minute video of all the most prominent clips—ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN, PBS, Fox News, MSNBC—to show how well the media had relayed the message. Introduced by Academy President Larry Johansen, "In the Public Interest" was sent to actuarial clubs across the country so they could see what all the fuss was about.

That's where Jennifer Rathmell, an Academy member in Waukesha, Wis. saw it.

"I thought the video was great," she said in an e-mail to Academy. "I'm looking forward to showing it to my family and friends so they can see an example of what actuaries do and the real contribution the profession makes to the public."

"The profession was portrayed in a very positive way in the video. The media take the actuaries' work very seriously and believe the work to be unbiased and accurate. It is so difficult for the public to tell what is reality and what is 'spin' during political campaigns, particularly on such complex issues as Social Security. To be able to step in and analyze such an issue and provide a truly unbiased opinion makes the profession extremely valuable. The Academy should definitely continue to look for such opportunities."

Catch the video yourself at an actuarial club near you. For a complete list, check out the Academy web site at www.actuary.org/clubs.htm. ●



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