

Tibet Backers Show China Value of P.R.

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Jim Wilson/The New York Times

Tibet supporters marched along the Embarcadero in San Francisco ahead of the Olympic torch.

Soon after China was awarded the Olympic Games seven years ago, a series of public relations strategy sessions were held. But it wasn't the Chinese government holding the sessions: it was grass-roots Tibet support groups in the United States and abroad.

The protesters quickly established a communications plan, focused their message and ran camps where they taught members interview skills and even rappelling — as they showed off last week in hanging banners on the Golden Gate Bridge.

As a result, the protesters have pulled off a publicity coup. Instead of basking in the glow of the coming games, China has quickly found itself on the defensive, and protesters have turned the subject from athletics in Beijing to the crackdown in Tibet, along with human-rights violations inside China and China's investments in Sudan.

"At first there was a profound sense of despair after the Chinese government was awarded the honor," said Kalaya'an Mendoza, a coordinator for Students for a Free Tibet, an activist group. "But after five minutes passed, we realized this would be a monumental opportunity for the Tibetan people to be put in the international spotlight."

For all its business success and military power, China is still something of a naïf when it comes to Western-style public relations. In many ways, China is facing the same challenge that companies like Philip Morris and Wal-Mart have in recent years as protesters and union activists have grown increasingly sophisticated in delivering their message.

"Our voice cannot be heard," said Wenqi Gao, spokesman for China's consulate in New York. "We have to improve our image."

The Tibet groups, though, have courted the media. "The approach these groups have is spectacular in terms of public relations," said Richard Funness, president of Ruder Finn Americas, a public relations firm.

While China has not mastered the art of the grass-roots publicity campaign, its government — with the Olympics in mind — has been exploring American-style public relations approaches.

According to a recent report in The Financial Times, the Chinese government is now seeking its own public relations representation. Executives from five P.R. firms with a large presence in Beijing said they had not been contacted about the project.

Mr. Gao of the Chinese consulate said that he did not know if the report was true, but that he thought some help was needed. "My personal view is, it is a good idea to talk about this public relations industry, and seek help from the public relations industry to see if we can do better with the media," he said.

After China lost its Olympics bid in 1993, said David Liu, managing director for Weber Shandwick China, Olympic insiders advised it to hire a public relations firm before its next attempt. Weber Shandwick, owned by the Interpublic Group, won the contract, and, Mr. Liu said, his advice was that China separate its human-rights record from its Olympics bid.

What the firm suggested to the Olympic committee, Mr. Liu said, was that if Beijing were allowed to hold the Games, it might lead to some movement on a number of fronts. "If you give China the Olympic hosting rights, then it is like you are engaging China, and naturally they will improve on a lot of things."

Currently, the Beijing Organizing Committee of the Olympic Games is using the public relations firm Hill & Knowlton, owned by the WPP Group, to work on the Games. James B. Heimowitz, Hill & Knowlton North Asia's chief executive, says that its sphere is limited, as the Beijing Organizing Committee is not empowered to comment on Chinese government policy.

Still, he said, his firm's advice has been welcome. "I think increasingly we are seeing Chinese — both private companies and the government sector — increasingly trying to understand how to be more effective in an international environment, and that includes things like understanding and working with international-level communications and P.R. agencies," Mr. Heimowitz said. "They're trying."

On the other side, the protesters use an approach that is one part strategy, one part necessity. The groups, largely financed by individual donations, have little money for advertisements. "Our organizations are relatively small, and the only way to get the word out is through the media," said Wangchuk Shakabpa, a board member of the U.S. Tibet Committee.

To get that word out, the International Tibet Support Network, a London-based group that coordinates pro-Tibet organizations, has been sending press-focused bulletins to its 153 member organizations.

"We've been sending out regular daily summaries," said Alison Reynolds, the group's executive director, "of what's news, what's happening, what are the key political developments, who said what about the situation in Tibet."

Students for a Free Tibet, a member of the international organization, sends out its own talking points, press release templates and protest plans to its 650 chapters. That is supplemented by two Students for a Free Tibet Facebook cause pages, which now have about 37,900 members and a YouTube page where organizers post reports and footage from protests.

Every other month, Students for a Free Tibet holds conferences for members of pro-Tibet groups, where media training is a focus. The sessions cover everything from giving a good sound bite to answering reporters' questions artfully.

"S.F.T. realizes that the media is a very effective tool getting our message across," Mr. Mendoza said. "One way that we ensure that our message stays on point and is disseminated to audiences it's targeted to, is by training our S.F.T.-ers to be the best media spokespeople themselves."

With an eye toward demonstrations that will get coverage, S.F.T. also holds weeklong "action camps" four times a year. Attendees learn to organize protests and deal with the police, and receive training in attention-getting activities like rappelling and guerrilla street theater.

The Tibet groups' approach has, at least in recent weeks, shifted the focus from the Darfur cause. But "more pressure on China to do something is better," said Jill Savitt, executive director of Dream for Darfur. "I have been really impressed with the turnout and the moral fierceness of how they have mobilized."

The focus on the Olympics has brought an unprecedented level of coordination and media focus among the Tibet support groups. From 1951 until the late 1980s, the Tibet issue was largely a political one, said Robert J. Barnett, director of the Modern Tibetan Studies Program at Columbia's Weatherhead East Asian Institute. In 1987, an influential article by onetime Carter adviser Roberta Cohen about China's human-rights record created interest in Tibet among non-Tibetans.

Demonstrations in Lhasa in 1987 and 1989 heightened that interest, leading to the creation of many Tibet support groups. While the different groups occasionally coordinated their work, it was on an ad hoc basis.

The groups decided to coordinate their efforts at a conference in 2000, creating the London group to do that. But the group did not have a staff until after receiving financing in 2005 — by which time the Olympics were already a focus of the Tibet groups. The London group hired a full-time Olympics campaign coordinator last year.

Across the street from the Chinese consulate in New York on Wednesday, about 35 protesters from five Tibet organizations had gathered, summoned by text messages and e-mail messages. They were shouting the same slogans that were being shouted across the country in San Francisco, which had been disseminated through e-mail messages and bulletins. Mr. Shakabpa, his sign leaning against his legs, surveyed his fellow protesters. "You're talking about a handful of people," he said, "but we can really get our message out."

Gene Grabowski, a crisis P.R. specialist at Levick Strategic Communications who worked on the Chinese toy recalls, said he was not surprised that the protesters were winning so far.

"The Chinese government is still new to the challenges and the game of playing on a world stage, and playing on the world stage today doesn't just mean understanding how to control the messages that come out of formal government ministries or the messages that are prepared and disseminated to the global news media," he said. "There are the blogs, there are Web sites; there's a whole world of Internet-based communication that the Chinese government still doesn't seem to understand or appreciate."

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