Improving Public Relations for Your IRB: What Would Don Draper Do?
Ilene Wilets, PhD, CIP
New York State Psychiatric Institute, Columbia University

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Problem Statement: Most IRBs have a long history of public relations challenges, both internal and external to the institutions in which they reside. The power of good public relations cannot be overstated when promoting your IRB and Human Subjects Protections Program (HSPP). IRB professionals know only too well the criticisms that have been launched over the years concerning perceptions of inefficiency, insensitivity to the needs of investigators, and mission creep. Add fallout from less than exemplary IRB metrics, and you have a diminished reputation, one that obscures your good work and achievement.

Description of the Program: Those familiar with the television series "Mad Men," may recall Don Draper’s advice to a colleague regarding staunch criticism: “If you don't like what's being said, change the conversation.” This wisdom applies not only to the world of advertising, but to that of IRBs. Changing the conversation does not mean one ignores criticism or complaints. It suggests that IRBs adopt a strong public relations strategic plan, to deploy proactive messages as opposed to spending time on activities that are reactive. A well thought out strategic plan enables an IRB to foster a good reputation and better manage problems as they arise. Our IRB is beginning to develop such a plan, incorporating marketing strategies such as: 1) setting a schedule and time frame for public relations activities; 2) communication of a clear, uniform message about our mission and process; 3) identification of operational and customer-service problems; 4) selection of metric tools; 5) performance measurement; 6) communication of findings; and 7) effective intervention and reassessment.

Additional Information: Transparency regarding IRB performance and promotion of one's HSPP need not run counter to each other. Rather than let others cite problems related to your IRB, and project them in neon throughout your institution, it is imperative that you be the messenger. On "Mad Men," companies contract the services of Sterling, Cooper, Draper, and Pryce to heighten credibility and promote their products. Although IRBs are not in the business of selling cars or margarine, we do need to promote our expertise and commitment to human subjects research. This self-promotion, if done well, can enhance institutional confidence and public trust. A carefully considered strategic plan can highlight all that your IRB does well and accurately identify areas in need of improvement.