

## **HOW THE LOUISIANA MARS SOCIETY GOT LOCAL MEDIA AND POLITICAL ATTENTION**

**Carl Carlsson**

In September, 2001, four Mars Society members got together in Baton Rouge, Louisiana to form the Louisiana Mars Society. We started out with big ideas and high hopes, and after some initial successes we felt unstoppable. Then reality set in...

### **"BUILD IT AND THEY WILL COME."**

At least that's what we thought would happen. We'd establish a web site, get articles published in a few newspapers (and maybe even get on TV), and before we knew it we'd be beating back hordes of prospective members. After all, we have a great message, right? And every thinking person realizes we should be getting more out of our space program, right? And Mars is the obvious destination, right?

This paper describes some of the early successes and failures (maybe we'll just call them "challenges") encountered by the Louisiana Mars Society (LAMS). It is not intended as a comprehensive guide to building a strong chapter and spreading our vision. Rather, it is meant to be a starting point for a constructive discussion to share what we have learned, and to learn from the experiences of other chapters.

### **PUBLIC OUTREACH - EVENTS**

Our initial public outreach effort involved a display and membership drive at the Palace Theatres in New Orleans coinciding with the release of the movie "Red Planet". Two members manned a booth for the better part of a day and answered questions from moviegoers. The display included technical documents, conceptual drawings and articles. Handouts included membership applications and technical summaries.

#### **Successes:**

This particular effort generated quite a bit of interest and lots of questions. Coordinating the event with a reporter from the Times-Picayune newspaper also resulted in a good on-line article immediately following the event.

#### **Challenges:**

Our efforts, unfortunately, did not translate into new members (although we did get one call from a UFO nut who was a little *too* interested). We subsequently got a good bit of advice from a TV reporter who recommended that we attempt to associate ourselves with *science fact* rather than *science fiction*. He recommended sending business cards to area newspaper and television reporters so that they will seek us out for comment in association with Mars-related stories. We hope this approach will lead to future success.

## **PUBLIC OUTREACH – FORMAL PRESENTATIONS**

Since our initial outreach effort, nearly all LAMS presentations have involved the “Open the New World” PowerPoint presentation. This is an invaluable tool that elicits great audience response. The only missing factor, on occasion, has been an audience.

### **Successes:**

Successful presentations, defined primarily as those which are well attended, are typically those held in conjunction with a fixed monthly meeting for an established organization (e.g. - American Institute of Chemical Engineers, Rotary Club, etc.). Some organizations expressed an initial reluctance to schedule a presentation on this topic, but after the fact have extremely high praise for the presentation. One meeting at Louisiana State University was particularly well attended since a local high school teacher gave extra credit to students attending the presentation.

### **Challenges:**

Meetings not scheduled in conjunction with any other organization, even those which were heavily advertised, resulted in extremely low turnout. People, it seems, have so many commitments these days that it is difficult to get their attention.

## **INTERNET COMMUNICATIONS**

LAMS established a web site at about the same time as our initial public outreach efforts. While it has undergone numerous changes since inception, it is basically intended to provide a central source of information on LAMS activities. For this purpose, it includes a calendar of upcoming chapter events, the latest news on chapter activities, and an archive of chapter news and meeting minutes. Interested visitors can join the LAMS mailing list by submitting a simple online form, and thereby receive email announcements of upcoming events in their area.

### **Successes:**

The LAMS web site has experienced a fairly high number of hits, especially after the

newspaper articles were published (we were careful to ensure that our web address was published). A number of people have joined the mailing list or otherwise inquired about LAMS as a result of a visit to the site. Having a web presence enables LAMS to easily promote itself by passing out the URL for the site. Adding a digital photo to a chapter news article helps make the article, and the site as a whole, more interesting.

### **Challenges:**

The primary challenge is having enough to report. The site is set up to accommodate a lot of chapter activity, but there have not been enough public events to really make use of the site's capabilities -- we simply do not have enough members. Also, with limited active participation and few public events, it is difficult to keep the site fresh and interesting from week to week -- as a result, we have resorted to posting links to recent news stories or other websites with Mars-related content. An attempt to add a simple discussion forum for use by LAMS members (as distinct from the general Mars Society discussion boards) was greeted with yawns, and has never been used. Despite almost monthly overhauls, we still don't have a visually appealing site -- it would be a great help to involve someone with graphic arts abilities to provide input and assistance, whether this person is a member or simply donates their services to the chapter.

## **NEWSPAPER ARTICLES**

One of the early priorities of the Louisiana Mars Society was to spread word of our efforts through the print media.

### **Successes:**

Somewhat to our surprise, getting articles published in local and statewide newspapers has been relatively easy. Of five newspapers approached, four responded eagerly (Southwest Daily News, Lake Charles American Press, Baton Rouge Advocate and the Times-Picayune). All published prominent, positive articles on the front page of their lifestyle sections, on-line articles, or both. All it took was a phone call to the editor. It helped if we had 1) a member local to the newspaper to act as a focal point, and 2) an upcoming event to frame the story.

### **Challenges:**

The one newspaper which did not choose to run a LAMS story despite numerous contacts, the Shreveport Times, has most of its circulation in an area of the state in which we do not currently have an active member to be the focus of the article.

## **TELEVISION COVERAGE**

While we only thought of television coverage as a long term goal, our first opportunity dropped in our lap.

**Successes:**

Following one of our newspaper articles, we were contacted by a reporter from WBRZ in Baton Rouge. We were subsequently interviewed for a piece that was aired in February, 2001. In order to prepare for the interview, and in an attempt to keep the tone positive and appear credible, we prepared a list of approximately 20 suggested questions that were provided to the reporter in advance of the taping.

**Challenges:**

Although we felt the interview went well, and the reporter (for the most part) used the questions we provided, we realized that we had not thought through the answers to our own questions as well as we could have. As a result, our responses were not as concise and compelling as they could have been. To address this, we are working on a detailed Q&A sheet so we are better prepared the next time around.

**ESTABLISHING WORKING AREA CHAPTERS**

After a few months of doing presentations and setting up the LAMS web site, we realized that we needed many more active members to begin showing measurable results. We also realized that in order to attract and keep members we needed to establish "Area" Chapters, located near population centers, so that members could attend periodic meetings and participate in projects without having to travel long distances. The most logical approach to this was to establish Area Chapters at local universities.

**Successes:**

We generated interest from some students, and found that we already had Mars Society members at some Louisiana universities. This provided us with a starting point for establishing a formal presence at four major universities throughout Louisiana.

**Challenges:**

While we have some initial support to build on, it has turned out to be difficult to establish formally recognized campus organization. Most universities require organizations to be formally established on campus before providing easy access to meeting rooms. However, there are minimum requirements, such as having at least 10 student members, which are difficult to meet in some cases. As a result, this effort is still a work in progress.

## **NOT-FOR-PROFIT STATUS**

The Louisiana Mars Society is seeking 501c3 Not-for-Profit status to be eligible for enhanced donations including grant money. Currently our primary source of revenue is membership dues, which are very low. Once we had a few checks and began looking in to checking accounts, we realized that our limited funds would be quickly eaten up by services charges due to our inability to maintain a significant minimum balance. The decision was made to refund dues paid to that point until we could get some additional funding.

### **Successes:**

It turned out we had a local Mars Society with experience completing 501c3 applications. At this time the application is complete and submittal is pending following a final review.

### **Challenges:**

Unfortunately we initially tried to tackle too many projects with too few individuals. As a result, it has taken us a lot longer to prepare the application for submittal than should have been necessary.

## **MEETINGS WITH LOUISIANA ELECTED OFFICIALS**

In order to educate the Louisiana Congressional Delegation regarding the activities of the Mars Society, LAMS members have attempted to schedule meetings with our Senators and Representatives.

### **Successes:**

LAMS conducted informational meetings with representatives of Senator John Breaux and Congressman David Vitter. The meetings were positive, and in each case the staffers seemed receptive and interested.

### **Challenges:**

We have not been successful in scheduling meetings with most Louisiana Congressional Members. In some cases we have been ignored, presumably (at least in part) because the request was not addressed from a particular district. We eventually hope to identify members in all districts, so that they can be the focal point of requests.

With respect to the meetings we have been able to schedule, the concept was well received although neither Senator Breaux's nor Representative Vitter's office indicated a

commitment to eventually putting humans on Mars. In fact, Senator Breaux's office made it clear that the Senator's focus was going to be on education, and other issues perceived as more "local". This led us to the conclusion that we need to update the Legislative Briefing Booklet, perhaps making it specific to our state and highlighting the tremendous economic and social benefits of a robust space program.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Recent accomplishments of the Mars Society, including publicity associated with the Arctic and Desert Research Stations, has been astounding. This has been done without a huge groundswell of support that many of us at the local level hope to be able to eventually deliver. If a strong political commitment to Mars is eventually required for success, it seems that local chapters need to be well organized and prepared to exert pressure on our respective Congressmen. The Louisiana chapter has quite a way to go before we are prepared for such an effort.

The last several months have taught us several lessons, as described above. In order to move forward, and maximize the efforts of members at the local level, the Louisiana Mars Society recommends that the International Mars Society consider the following changes:

- Establish a Chapter Liaison position at the National level - Our efforts would benefit tremendously from a full-time position at the National level to actively assist with the formation and growth of individual chapters.
- Greater emphasis on outreach – Relatively few of the Conference Sessions deal with outreach. Given the importance of this topic, perhaps more emphasis is justified.
- Enhance the Legislative Briefing Booklet – In order to increase the impact of the booklet, we recommend modification to highlight economic and social benefits of a humans-to-Mars program. The Louisiana chapter intends to modify the booklet to include state specific data, but would like to gage interest in modifying the booklet at the National level before we make our changes.
- Update the "Open the New World" PowerPoint Presentation - This is a wonderful tool that would benefit from an update. Not only do a few recent developments need to be addressed (update on recent Mars missions and research station construction), but technological enhancements could be added to make the presentation more powerful (e.g. - introduction of video clips and animation).
- Conduct a future workshop in the Washington, D.C. - Such a meeting could focus on political outreach efforts, including member training in effective strategies, and provide an opportunity to directly contact numerous elected officials in a short period of time.

Eventually, this could be similar in form to the very successful AIAA Congressional Visits Day program.