



Using Marketing to Catch a Cold Case Killer

Just as DNA has been a game-changer in helping to solve cold cases, marketing is proving to be a secret ingredient in the pursuit to solve Iowa native Laura Van Wyhe's 25-year-old death.

January 3, 2022 - Nationally recognized attorney Anne Champion, whose clients include Mary Trump and CNN's Jim Acosta, was running out of options to get law enforcement and the legal world to pay attention to her childhood friend's cold case.

A litigation partner in the New York law office of Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher, Champion knew what avenues to pursue: she had tried going directly to law enforcement and engaging legal experts to get the FBI's attention. It didn't work. "This is a personal pursuit for me, not a professional one," said Champion. "I couldn't get enough attention back on the case. Honestly, reaching out to a marketing agency was really the last option on my list."



For those not familiar with the case: Laura Van Wyhe died in 1996, just hours after her 21st birthday party. In the last 24 hours of her life, she traversed four cities in three states, including Iowa City, Iowa; Bonaparte, Iowa; Kahoka, Missouri; and ultimately Quincy, Illinois, where she died of massive blood loss due to blunt force trauma to her head and legs.



The events that led to Laura's death—and the identity of those responsible—have remained unclear for 25 years. Champion wanted to get to the root of what happened and bring closure to Laura's family and friends, and herself. What she didn't anticipate was needing to engage a marketing agency to do it.

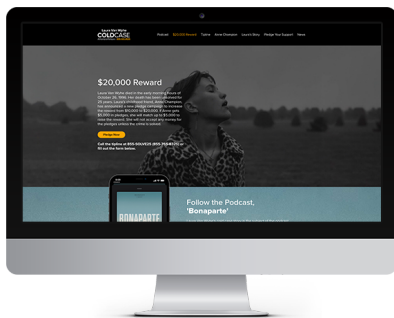
After attempting to push the case forward through local legal channels resulted in a dead end, Champion called CEO Melinda Pradarelli who owns Meld Marketing in Iowa City, Iowa.

Meld is located in Champion's hometown and was within a few hours of where Laura's death occurred. "I've worked with a lot of national agencies, but I needed someone local for this, a group with strong public relations and digital marketing skills," she said. "Many of the people

who are at the heart of this case still live in Iowa so it's important to know the culture and the context."

Champion asked Pradarelli if this is something an agency could do or even be interested in. She also wanted to know if Meld had the capabilities to get the attention of journalists and crime reporters. "We had seen a few articles over the years," she said. "But most of them were from circa 1996 and many didn't have accurate facts or the full story. That's partly because there was not much released about Laura's case. I needed a team that could help put a spotlight back on this case to heighten awareness and bring this back to the forefront of people's minds."

Pradarelli remembers the first time she spoke with Champion. A former journalist for *The New York Times* group, Pradarelli said that after hearing the story and understanding what the limitations had been in bringing attention to the case, she knew Meld's team could help.



"The world has changed dramatically since 1996, and cold case game changers such as DNA testing and the power of social media to get directly to audiences are just two examples," Pradarelli said. "In the past, you had to rely on the media to decide to write an article. Today, you can tell the story on a website, through social media, and in many other ways. You have the opportunity to interact directly with people who might know about the case or have information to help solve it."

What attracted Pradarelli to the project was the opportunity to help find justice for Laura, and to do it in a way that was backed by facts and a clear mission. Meld recognized immediately that adding Champion's name and clout to the case would help bring visibility. "That was one of our first conversations actually," Pradarelli said. "I asked if she was okay with us talking about her, the reward, the cold case, and her goals. We knew that was the key to renewing widespread interest. She had just finished representing Mary Trump and Jim Acosta—two names that were very much in the news. Anne said that if it would help solve the case, she was happy to do it."

With Champion's blessing, Meld went to work creating a campaign strategy. "We think about marketing almost like an octopus that has eight arms," Pradarelli said. "The center of the octopus is the website where we want to drive all of the audiences and inquiries. Once on the website someone can read about Laura's story, call or email the tipline, read past articles, or click on the Facebook page. But we know that people may enter into the campaign from any number of places (or arms). One might start their journey on Facebook or Twitter or simply Google Laura Van Wyhe. Our strategies are set up to ensure wherever someone starts that they can get to the campaign and to the tip line with as little friction as possible."

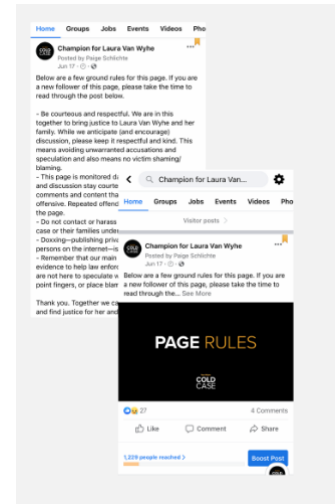
Meld started by creating a campaign name and logo, "Champion for Laura," building a website and setting up a Facebook page. Facebook gave Meld the greatest ability to reach key

audiences: specifically people in Iowa City and Bonaparte, Iowa as well as Kahoka, Missouri. It also allowed Meld to connect with people who were in Laura's high school graduating class (Laura didn't graduate but she was still very connected to this group, along with her sister Sarah) and those who identified themselves as having once lived in the area during the mid 1990s.

Meld and Champion worked together to outline rules for the Facebook page. Those who didn't follow the rules of courtesy and respect would have their comments hidden or they would be banned if they were a repeat offender.

"We knew it was critical to set expectations on the Facebook page immediately so that it did not turn into the Wild West of comments and accusations," Pradarelli said. "Our team and Anne were systematic about the way we introduced the page, the rules, and the first posts."

The Meld team mapped out how the Facebook posts could be used to share Laura's story, one post at a time. Champion and Meld worked to create posts that provided accurate information directly from the police reports, inquests, and witness statements. The team also helped Champion discuss a strategy to promote the reward and how to connect the new Champion for Laura tip line to the website and Facebook pages. All of this happened before any media releases were sent out. "We knew if we wanted accurate information to get out there, we had to spend time building that foundation and rooting it in fact," Pradarelli said.



Because of Champion's legal expertise, she carried the weight of ensuring any content that was shared was appropriate and accurate. The Meld team continues to monitor the comments seven days a week. Within the first month, Facebook page followers grew to more than 500 people. And, more than 35 people reached out via the campaigns' Facebook messenger inbox and the email tipline. With the permission of the tipster, potential leads are passed onto law enforcement by Champion. Within the first two months, people from 49 states plus Washington, D.C. visited the website.

"I think the reason the strategy is working so well is because we have an expert marketing team working alongside Anne, who is extraordinary in her depth of knowledge of this case and her ability to drive this type of project forward," Pradarelli said. "She is also a dream client in terms of being comfortable and experienced at addressing the media."

Fast forward a few months. Meld reached out to Iowa's largest newspaper, *The Des Moines Register*, and they wrote a story that landed on the front page. In short order, *The Daily Beast* also covered the cold case, pushing it nationwide. Then Mary Trump retweeted the article from *The Daily Beast*.

"All of that happened within the first few weeks," Champion said. "It was great to have it back in front of people, so that was a big win for us."

But that was just the beginning. Early in the project there had been discussions about other ways to gain attention. What no one could have anticipated is that former lawyer and journalist, Jason Stavers, who had worked with Champion at Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher, would emerge to ask the question: "What if I created a podcast to tell this story? What if I went back and interviewed a lot of the people who were there or were mentioned in the crime reports? What if I talked to Anne herself and Laura's family?"



Stavers pitched the independent project to Imperative Entertainment and Vespucci. They recognized how compelling the story was. Bonaparte—named after Laura's destination the last night of her life—became a 10-episode podcast. It recounts Laura's story through the eyes of Champion and other friends and family of Laura.

"The launch of the podcast became a huge piece of ongoing content for us to share on Facebook, Twitter, and on the website," Pradarelli said. "It started to get a strong following and that just added to the hundreds of people who were already engaging on the Facebook page."

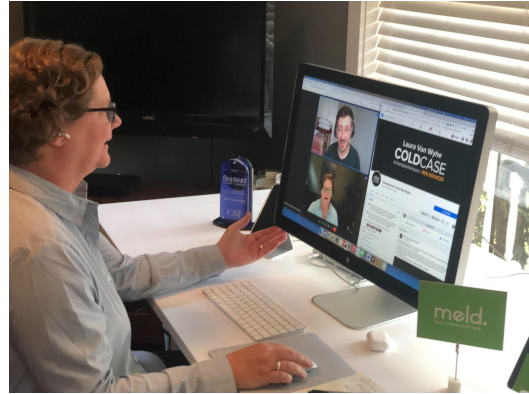
Within the first four episodes Bonaparte hit the Top 15 on Apple Podcasts. "I did not anticipate what an impact the podcast would have," Champion said.

"We had started to get attention with the reward and website and 'championforlaura' Facebook page, but the podcast took it to another level. I am hearing from people from all walks of life who had some contact with Laura or her path in the last days of her life. I am amazed at how productive the conversation has been."

People began to reach out to ask if they could help support an increased reward. In December, Champion decided to match pledges up to \$5,000, raising the reward from \$10,000 to \$20,000. Within the first day of crowdfunding, Champion received \$2,500 in pledges.

The reward will go to the first person who provides new information leading to an arrest and conviction of persons responsible for Laura's death. Those who make a pledge will only be asked to fulfill their pledge if an individual comes forward with information that meets the criteria for earning the reward.

On December 14, 2021, Bonaparte's eighth episode focused on two critical strategies: the DNA testing and the ongoing marketing efforts by Meld. Vespucci Head of Podcasts Thomas Curry, who has produced stories for the BBC, Audible, Spotify, Imperative, Blumhouse, Love + Radio and Criminal, interviewed Pradarelli for the podcast. "It was interesting to see them pair the DNA and the marketing together," Pradarelli said. "They are both underlying but critical pieces in Anne's quest to solve this."



The journey to solve the case continues. "We aren't there yet, but each day we become more hopeful that one of the interactions from the website or Facebook or the podcast will lead to the new evidence that is needed to find peace for Anne and the family," Pradarelli said.

Media Contact and Information

Melinda Pradarelli | 319-621-8479