

Generating Better Media Coverage

Every district has a number of good stories to tell, but few maximize the opportunities that are available. How can you move from reactive to proactive?

For many school leaders, working with reporters ranks right up there with root canals and kidney stones. They're just glad when it's over.

Surviving a tough interview unscathed may seem like success, but most school leaders can—and should—expect a better return on their investment of time and district resources.

Since press coverage often plays a disproportionate role in shaping public perception about a community's public schools, taking a more proactive approach to media relations can pay off. For many press offices, simply

ramping up activity will yield some results. Few school districts truly maximize the media opportunities they have available.

As a small business complete with a chief executive officer, an executive team, dozens of employees, and hundreds of clients, every school has multiple stories to tell. The job of the public relations team is to find these stories, and then package and sell them to reporters.

From editor to creator

For many public relations professionals, moving from reactive to proactive

media relations requires a fundamental shift in attitude. Rather than waiting for reporters to call, they need to identify and develop news sources at schools and departments who will feed information to them.

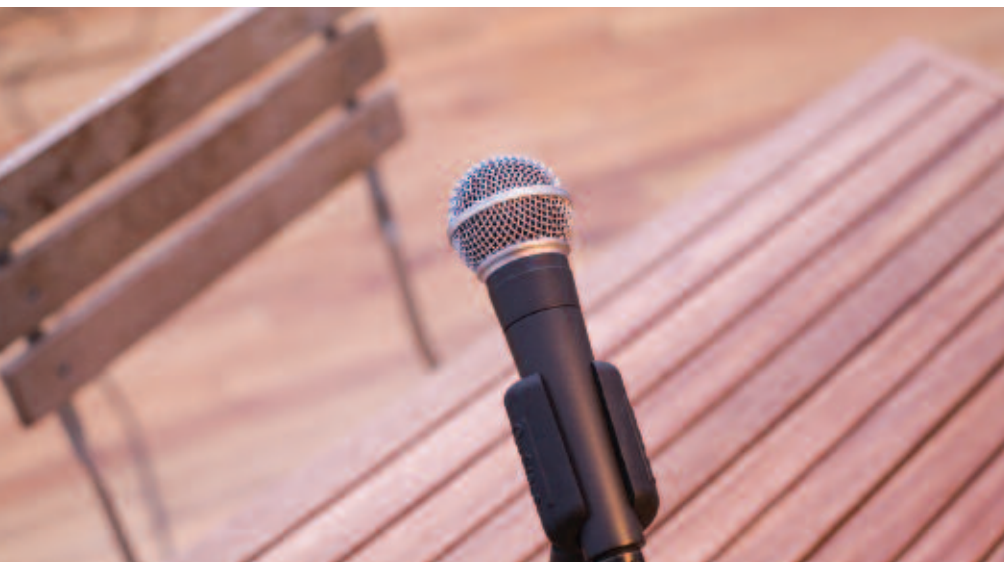
Key communicator programs help, but public relations professionals know they can't solely rely on employee volunteers or official memos and edicts. The real gems, such as the Ivy League scholarship winner who arrived as a refugee without knowing English, or the volunteer crossing guard who never misses a school day, often are found during impromptu school visits or chats after ball games.

When the tips come in, the news value may seem scant. Here's where the second attitude shift comes in—from editor/reporter to public relations account representative.

Editors and reporters decide what news is. They sift through the mud and muck of press releases, e-mails, and tips to find the news gold that will attract readers and advertisers. Many district public information officers use the same approach, sifting through their inboxes and deciding what is and isn't worth sending to the media or covering in district publications.

PR agency account representatives—at least the good ones—find a way to make the mud and the muck newsworthy. They don't discard news tips about drug-free balloon launchings or special guests on campus. Instead, they dig deeper to find out if the client—in this case, a school or district department—has missed a newsworthy story or angle.

If they can't find a news hook, they



create one, by tying the school event to recently released research, a new trend, or a compelling student or teacher story.

Viewed from the perspective of “it’s my job to make this newsworthy,” it’s amazing how many good stories turn up. School plays, classroom projects, special events, employee promotions, and district initiatives can all generate positive publicity.

The effective pitch

As in advertising, frequency matters. Typically, it’s more effective to regularly place small news stories, even if those column inches are buried in the local section, than to try to strike it big on the front page once or twice a year. The key is not flooding reporters’ inboxes with news releases, but finding or creating a hook and wrapping the story around it.

Rather than push out yet another press release on Ms. Thoroughgood’s annual third-grade Thanksgiving parade, a savvy account rep drops off student-made pumpkin pies at a radio station at 6:30 a.m. with a half-dozen costumed children who will sing the national anthem or another patriotic song.

The teacher is prepped in advance with talking points about how today’s kids have to know so much more than their parents did, even though they still get to celebrate some of the same fond traditions. When radio personalities compliment the kids on their singing and polite behavior, the principal credits great parent support and the school’s strong character education program.

The principal also will invite the radio personalities to visit the school so they can see for themselves how well-behaved and smart the entire student body is. This gives the principal or the PR account rep an opening to stay in touch with on-air personalities and their producers, setting the school up for more good news opportunities later.

A similar approach, with more

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emphasis on the parade visuals and “cute kid” interview opportunities, would work well on TV.

Weekly newspapers, the local section of dailies, and local radio and television news represent an untapped PR gold mine for most school districts. Districts with more than one public relations professional should try to “own” the local weekly newspaper. Typically understaffed, these pub-

lications welcome prewritten articles packaged with photographs and captions that add to the story and identify the players.

University alumni magazines, trade publications, morning news shows, local gossip and celebrity columns, and the “people in business” sections all represent fertile ground for media placements. As always, the key is matching the story package with the particular news outlet or news section being targeted.

Following published writer’s guidelines, reviewing editorial calendars that list upcoming topics, and scanning past issues or newscasts also pay dividends. Nothing screams “unprepared rookie” louder than pitching a story that was covered extensively last week, last month, or last year.

Improving TV news coverage

As newspaper readership dwindles, local TV news has become increasingly important. TV also is a completely different animal than print, and as a

Key Communicators

Key communicators are one of school PR’s oldest—and most effective—tactics. They are a network that feeds your public relations department regular news and information. Key communicators also share information with their colleagues and peers on your behalf.

Here are some tips for setting up your network:

- To start an internal network ask principals and department chairs to identify volunteers who will represent their areas. To start an external group, look for individuals who seem to know or have the respect of a lot of people.
- Keep note cards with you at all times and jot names down. When the same name keeps popping up, that’s a key communicator.
- Find people representing different viewpoints, backgrounds, genders, races, social status, and geography. Once 40 to 60 names (or more) have been collected, ask them (individually, of course) if they’d be willing to serve.
- Call the group together and let it know what information is needed and how to contact the appropriate parties. Make it easy by providing a special e-mail address on an online news form on the district Intranet.
- Stay in regular contact. Recognition, appreciation, and frequent communication keep volunteers happy and involved.
- Send them copies of every press release, Web posting, or story generated from their news tips.
- Bring them back together in January to boost morale and then again at the end of the school year to celebrate their success.

result, requires a different approach.

For TV, it's all about the visuals, with a little sound thrown in on the side. Good pitches tell the news desk about the visuals first, the sound bite sources second, and the details third.

If good writing is always straightforward and succinct, good TV writing is short, sweet, and conversational. Write for the ear, not the eye.

Puns, partial phrases, alliteration, and new twists on old clichés all work well on TV. The idea is to grab attention, and then keep the viewers riveted for the next 10, 20, or 30 seconds. If it sounds good, use it.

TV loves people stories and easy-to-digest factoids. While print will cover achievement test scores in detail, complete with charts, TV will tell viewers whether the scores are up, down, or mixed. Rather than fight TV with long-winded press releases and explanations, prepare a package that illustrates the district's story.

If a school with 23 subgroups hits 22 Adequate Yearly Progress targets, use that to illustrate the absurdity of labeling that school a failure when it's clearly having success with a very diverse student body. By the same token, if a school with four subgroups hits all four AYP targets, don't oversell it as one of the state's top schools.

Help viewers look a little deeper by identifying real kids with real stories of struggle and success who represent each of the 23 AYP targets. Let the kids conduct the media briefing and share with reporters how they feel about their school being labeled as failures based on an annual test.

Better yet, invite local reporters to take a mock state test to see how they would fare. Challenge them to report their results on the news, along with facts and interviews the district provides on how today's academic standards are the highest in the nation's history.

Everyday school and classroom activities can be turned into TV news if packaged appropriately. Terry Abbott, press secretary in the Houston

Independent School District, served up charming kids and heartwarming teachers on a regular basis. His annual "top 10 gifts kids want for the holidays" list is a perennial favorite and has been copied successfully by districts nationwide.

To put the package together, Abbott challenged a different elementary school class each year to poll classmates about their holiday wish lists. With a teacher's guidance, the kids tabulated the results, created charts, wrote the media briefing script, and chose their spokespeople. The district then held a media briefing at the school with the kids as the stars of the show.

The kids inevitably were polished, poised, and brilliant—delivering a great subliminal message about the power of public education. But the fun part came during the question-and-answer session. Inevitably, that's when real personalities started to shine, and it was fun for everyone involved.

Is it cotton candy? Yes, but who said everything about education has to be so serious? Most agency PR folks I know would love to have mission-driven clients with adorable kids who are passionate about doing good, not just doing well. Yet we sit back and complain that TV only covers "the negative."

The real question is: What are we offering on a daily basis as a replacement? ■

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