

Keys to Better Coverage

Is your district doing a good job of selling its good news stories? In today's changing media landscape, it's time to consider the strategies you are using, and whether they are working

It's no wonder so many people believe the nation's public schools are failing. If you only knew what you saw on TV or read online, what would you think?

Urban districts, situated in the nation's biggest and most sensational media markets, are particularly hard hit. For them, "swift-boating" happens daily. Perhaps we all need to take a page from the Obama campaign, and start fighting back—hard.

We can get a whole lot smarter about how we pitch stories, craft press releases, package news, and grab attention. We can create what media guru Terry Abbott calls "an overwhelming fire hose of good news" about our students, teachers, parents, and schools.

Public relations agencies do it every day. Why can't we?

Ramping up responsiveness

The rules have changed. The media game is harder now. Competition is fierce, and the person who gets there first wins ratings and advertisers.

"The major difference now, as opposed to five years ago, is speed and timing, especially with the TV media," says Cynthia Robbins, a former television news producer who now works as a media relations specialist for Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. "There is a need to be first with the story, some-

times to the detriment of having all the facts."

Rick Kaufman, executive director of community relations for Minnesota's Bloomington Public Schools, points to the Columbine tragedy as a turning point. Kaufman served as chief spokesman for Colorado's Jefferson County Public Schools when the shootings occurred and managed communications with more than 700 worldwide news outlets in the tragedy's wake.

"We saw during the Columbine High School tragedy this insatiable desire by news media to be first with information, often at the expense of not corroborating the information or checking the source for accuracy," Kaufman says. "There have been numerous times when reporting is based on 'un-named' or 'anonymous' sources."

Today's "anytime, anywhere, anyone" publishing means news no longer breaks, but flows in a constant 24/7 stream. Meanwhile, traditional media struggle with sagging advertising revenues that are shrinking newsrooms across the country, across all media. Lines between reporter, editor, photographer, videographer, and anchor are blurring, thanks to budget cuts and new information technologies.

"Newspapers are posting content, including video, to their websites

throughout the day," says Philip Tate, senior vice president of Luquire George Andrews, a Charlotte-based advertising and public relations firm. "Local radio and TV stations are also posting content. ... The TV anchor/reporter is being asked to be a 'one-woman band' more frequently, which means she carries the camera and tripod to do stand-ups on site by herself."

News reporters now must compete for space and priority placement with co-workers and colleagues as well as with other organizations. "There is no longer a news hole of a few hours or a set number of pages to fill," says Robbins. "Stations and newspapers are looking to constantly update their websites with new information."

Having more space to fill hasn't made it easier for districts to pitch and place features and soft news, however. Post-9/11, only hard news prevailed, a trend exacerbated by No Child Left Behind and the accountability era, according to Chris Tennill, communications director for the School District of Clayton in suburban St. Louis.

"We went through a dry spell for two to three years where we couldn't get anything education-related covered unless it was just something awful in the school district," Tennill says. "There was no space for puff pieces or warm fuzzies like the student who got a 1600 on the SAT or a 36 on the ACT."

Kaufman agrees. "The competition for stories is so high that schools and districts really have to have something unique just to get noticed," he says. "Local journalists may not always look for the dark side, but your story really has to be new, different, and relevant to the audience."

Changing media landscape

Lightning-fast access to accurate information and interviews with knowledgeable experts is the winning combination in the new media environment.

But structurally, this poses a problem.

School districts and other heavily regulated organizations are not known for agility and speedy decision-making. Public relations professionals can't do their jobs effectively if administrators are not responsive, share only partial truths, or try to hide or "spin" damning news.

To shift from defense to offense, school leaders must make media relations a district priority. And actions, primarily in media training and financial support, talk louder than words. On the other side, public relations professionals need to mine contacts in various departments, area offices, schools, and classrooms the way reporters work their beats, constantly trolling for news.

The stories are out there; we just have to find them. Then we have to find ways to package and pitch them to reporters and editors. Almost anything can be newsworthy if we research potential story hooks, find compelling visuals, and identify people with something important, compelling, funny, or touching to say.

Let me be clear: Don't flood reporters' e-mails with non-newsworthy events or information. Much of what we do in schools every day is good, important work, but it's not news.

Instead, take an idea, event, program, or initiative with no easy, obvious, or apparent news value and make it newsworthy. A routine observance of 9/11 can become a national story about how one diverse, high-poverty school is making sure kids born after 2001 don't forget the heroes who died that day in defense of democracy.

Different mediums require different kinds of support and value different kinds of information. Pictures, not words, sell for TV. Radio needs sound from interviews, but it requires background or ambient noises that help

bring the story to life. Print, especially daily newspapers, requires more data, facts, interviews, background documents, photo ops, advance notice (embargoes are fine), trends, and time.

Online reporters and editors, bloggers, and citizen journalists appreciate HTML releases with embedded video, audio interviews, RSS feeds, social media bookmarks, and hyperlinks to related documents or news coverage posted on the Web.

It won't be easy because this sort of media relations takes time and resources, something in short supply at most school districts. If adding staff isn't practical, then expectations need to be managed. Media relations impact public opinion, but most public relations experts caution against putting all of your efforts into the mass media basket.

"The reality is there are far more effective ways to get your message out," says Kaufman. "Instead, focus on the new media—blogging, social media outlets, and podcasting—to get your stories out there."

Don't forget traditional media channels like the daily newspaper or school events, however. "There are enough 'purists' in our communities who will want to know you care enough about them to communicate using the printed word, group meetings, etc.," Kaufman says.

Emphasize visuals for TV

TV needs something for viewers to see and something for them to hear, so you must set the stage. Give TV reporters a complete package—good visuals, bulleted copy, and access to "regular" folks like teachers, principals, students, and parents—and you'll see better results.

Speed and immediacy matter, too. TV often has less than two hours to go from idea to finished product.

That's why Charlotte-Mecklenburg opened a special media line that is modeled after a TV station's assignment desk. The phone is answered "live" (no voice mail) nonstop from 8 a.m. to 5

p.m. daily. Reporters get faster service and staff members aren't hounded by multiple voice mail messages and urgent e-mails.

"TV generally will not wait until the next day for a response," says Robbins. "The story will air, whether they have all the information from 'our' side or not."

To get a jump on "day turn" TV stories, which often seek to localize national news, enterprising districts are positioning top leaders as "go-to" experts on a range of education issues and topics.

Tennill publishes an *Education Experts Guide* for reporters that lists each person's area of expertise, years of service with the district, degrees, honors, professional memberships, and previous work experience. Experts receive basic media training from the district's communications team.

The Clayton district hasn't seen an increased number of media calls, but the quality is improving, Tennill notes. "Now they call us and say, 'We know you have a guy who's an expert on evolution and routinely talks about opposing intelligent design. Can you set something up for us?'"

Kaufman says districts that develop relationships with education reporters and offer to be a resource are the most successful.

"Offer to be the 'education expert' on issues related to schools and education so the station has someone to go to in a pinch for a comment, or at least to discuss a story that will help a reporter ask the right questions," says Kaufman. "Being seen as a resource is a great way to get in the door and to get your message out."

These tactics let reporters and editors know you understand—and respect—their workplace reality. Just like you, they have a job to do. Helping them do theirs well benefits everyone. ■

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