



Media Relations

A vital tool for school board members

Dealing with the news media is a critical component of public relations for school board members — especially now that you are a public official. Chances are reporters will call you at work or at home, so be prepared at all times to be contacted by the press.

The news media hold immense power over public policy and public opinion. Your district has important messages to convey to the public, and news outlets are the best vehicles for conveying those messages about your schools.

Carefully planned and ongoing media relations programs provide proactive, positive messages to the public via newspaper, radio, Internet and television news. While your public relations programs must be prepared for negative news and crises, the emphasis should be on long-term positive relationships with reporters and editors.

Get to know your local media representatives on a personal basis, and establish yourself as a credible and reliable source of news.

The "Information Age" has created a multitude of media that report the news. Newspapers are no longer the sole source of news. Television, radio, newsletters and the Internet are now major sources of news for the public. Media relations

programs should consider each available medium and its needs. Television news is visual and needs pictures for stories. Radio news needs an audio element. More and more people look to the Internet for information.

Getting started

The first step to a successful media relations program is to establish a protocol for all media calls. The board president is the main spokesperson for the board. This person should be kept abreast of all important activities in the district — both good and bad.

This is not a time to use your position to further your own agenda, but to convey your district's message.

If you have a public relations staff member, he/she should be the one to field all media calls and act as the triage person. This will give you time to prepare your message, get a feel for what the reporter is looking for, as well as establish the deadline for a response.

The most efficient way to start a media relations program is to create lists of the local media, including relevant reporters, news directors and editors. This information will be a big help when you want to inform the media about an upcoming event. It is also a great way to make your first contact with the media. These

fact sheets should include the following information:

- Names of reporters, editors, news directors and television assignment editors, along with their phone numbers, fax numbers and e-mail addresses
- Non-traditional media or reporters who may cover your issues on an irregular basis
- Newscast air times and frequency
- Deadlines
- Miscellaneous information about reporters or editors that might be helpful

Some tips about media relations

Personal relationships are critical, so get to know your local reporters and editors, and let them get to know you. Talk to them at school board meetings. Invite them to have informal conversations. You want the media to view you as a credible source to whom they can always turn for accurate and timely information.

Always be honest. If you can't discuss something, say you can't release that information, or you'll get back to them — and then follow up as quickly as possible.

Speed pays in media relations. Get your releases or other information out as soon as possible. If you want

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coverage of an event, notify the media well in advance, and then follow up with a reminder the day before. Distribute releases quickly — by fax, e-mail or in person.

Reporters live and die by deadlines. Learn your local media's deadlines and provide information in plenty of time for reporters to write or tape their stories. Always return calls promptly, and if you promise to get someone information, do it quickly.

The media have the last word. Take every reporter seriously. Don't turn down an interview unless your experience has established a particular reporter is inaccurate and unreliable. Every contact is an opportunity to influence a story or show a reporter there is more than one angle to an issue.

Anticipate attacks/crises/questions. Have messages and talking points/Q&A on all subjects prepared and up-to-date.

The sound bite rules. Sound bites are quick, concise and witty summaries of your position that reporters can't resist. Make sure you have snappy 10- or 15-second sound bites in every message. The sound bite should contain your most important point, because chances are that's all you will get in the newspaper or on the air.

Track coverage. Keep clips and tapes if available.

Reporters are busy. The more work you do for them, the better chance your position will be reflected in their stories. Give reporters written information and background data. Put usable quotes in news releases.

Don't expect every news release or tip to be used. Reporters try to cover as much as they can, but will not be able to cover every event or story you give them.

Give reporters "tips" when you can. Inside information or insight into issues will help build relationships with the media.

Offer "exclusives" when possible. The most important key to a successful media relations program is to remember that as a board member you now represent the district. Get to know your reporters, know your district's protocol for dealing with the press, and make sure you are aware of what's going on in your school district so you can keep board communications with the public solid. ■

Egan-Waukau is the media relations specialist for the Wisconsin Education Association Council. She is also the president-elect of the Wisconsin School Public Relations Association (WSPRA), which provided this column. WSPRA, specializing in school community relations, provides visionary leadership and services to Wisconsin schools by equipping its members with effective communication management skills. (www.wspra.org)

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