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District level committee work is one of the fastest ways to understand the system. I have been a member of Strategic Planning in the West Bend School System for four years and a member of Village Partnership Steering Committee for the past year. As a member of these committees it affords me a unique perspective of the district as a whole. From elementary through middle and high school to post graduate, student success is our mission. By being involved in meetings with a diverse group (board members, district administrators, teachers, parents, community members) and viewing the district globally it enables me to understand both my role with greater clarity and the role our high school plays in this grand scale undertaking called education.

The benefit to me from district committee work is a greater depth of understanding of my clerical function. When I work on projects for our site such as training and staff meetings, I know not only *how* we decide on staff development projects for the year

Bring Image Builders and Breakers to Your District

■ Amanda Brooker, Green Bay Area School District

Your frontline staff can make or break the reputation of your district. WSPRA can train your staff in a half-day seminar called *Image Builders and Breakers*. Interactive activities, exercises and examples will train your frontline staff to provide top-notch customer service.

Cost is \$500 for a half-day seminar for your district staff. Call Amanda Brooker at the Green Bay Area School District at (920)448-2025 or email abrooker@greenbay.k12.wi.us



WISCONSIN SCHOOL PUBLIC RELATIONS ASSOCIATION

Understanding Media Key to Building Alliance with Reporters

■ Lori Holly, Menomonee Falls School District

News reporters, many public relations officials lament, are to be feared and not trusted. After all, they will always misquote you, annoy you with their arrogance, and inflame, distort, and sensationalize everything, right?

They are never around when your school wins the academic decathlon but seem to appear out of nowhere—knocking on your door or hovering above in the station's brand new chopper "with power zoom"—demanding immediate comment on the crisis that has just befallen your district before you've even had a chance to assess the situation because, after all, they have a *deadline*.

It's enough to make you wonder sometimes what this country's forefathers were thinking when they authored the First Amendment. Right?

But wait a minute. Let's hop over the fence and take a look at the public relations professional from the reporter's point of view.

Public relations professionals, or "flaks" as they are so fondly referred to by their friends of the Fourth Estate, expect the press to come running when their school's team wins that academic decathlon, but will insist that the mold found in one of their district's schools, causing some parents to keep their children home "is not news" and it will be impossible to find the superintendent is "not available to comment right now."

Despite their differing and distorted views of each other, the fact remains that as public relations professionals we are paid to work with the media.

But how do you work with reporters when reporters and public relations professionals clearly have very different agendas?

Get to know your reporters. As simplistic as that sounds, it is the key. Not all reporters are created equal. You have to know what kind of person the reporter assigned to cover your district is.

Meet informally over lunch or coffee with reporters to get to know them. Ask them about their philosophy of news. Why did they become a reporter? When they say "off the record" what does that mean (it means very different things to different reporters.) When you have a better understanding of a reporter and what motivates them, it is much easier to know how they will approach their job.

Secondly, respect the fact that reporters – like you - have a job to do. Their entire profession was established based on the premise that people have a "right to know." They have a right to know about what goes on at City Hall and the State Capital and they have a right to know is happening in their public schools – the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Unfortunately, it is the "bad and the ugly," according to most surveys, that interest readers and viewers most. They are the stories that sell the most newspapers and earn the highest ratings.

It is possible, however, to lessen the sting of those stories that are less than flattering and to get a few more of those "good news" stories about your district in the paper.

How? By engaging in a little game of quid pro quo.

In short, if you make their job easier for them, they are likely to be more inclined to make yours easier for you. When they call a half hour before their deadline desperately needing a quote from a school official — find one for them!

Then, tomorrow, call the reporter and tell them again about the academic decathlon. Suddenly that reporter is going to be willing to push their editor a little harder to find room for that "good news" news story.

Here are a few things other things that will help you start building that relationship:

- ◆ Unless you have a reason not to, give a reporter the benefit of the doubt that they are going to approach a story fairly and report all sides. Most reporters, believe it or not, want their reporting to be balanced.

(continued on page 2)



From the President . . .



Amanda
Brooker

Dear WSPRA members,

I'm taking a gander that every association's first President's letter of the year deals with resolutions. I'm not even going to go there, because I've broken every one I've made in my lifetime.

I will, however, talk about taking care of one's self — in body and in mind. Educators are the hardest working people I know. I've never seen such a large group of people just running themselves into the ground. In addition to the day-to-day activities for district employees, we have night meetings, parent conferences, academic and athletic extracurricular activities, professional associations, graduate classes, community organization meetings and committees, etc., etc., etc. Educators are in early and leave late.

While we don't have the salaries of the corporate world, educators have something corporate doesn't — passion. The mission of helping children succeed drives us into a workaholic frenzy. The very future of our communities depends on it.

So I'm offering one piece of advice — take care of yourself. Pulling an 11-hour day? Go out to lunch, no eating at your desk. Stressed? Stay away from the vending machine in the staff lounge and take a 20-minute walk around the block. Depressed? Visit a kindergarten classroom for 15 minutes. If that doesn't work, nothing will.

Take a mental health day. Eat dinner at home with your family. Sleep in on Saturdays. Put away that business book and read a novel for fun. Take a yoga class to decompress and get limber at the same time.

Understanding Media (continued from page 2)

- ◆ Provide reporters with enough sources to ensure they reach someone in the short amount of time they have to gather their information before deadline.
- ◆ Treat all media representatives equally, unless, of course, one has violated your trust. News outlets are extremely competitive. The name of the game for reporters is “Get it fast, get it first, and get it right.” If you always release news on one paper or station's deadline, reporters from the one always left coming in second are going to resent it and it is bound to show in their coverage. After all, they are going to have to find *something* that their competitor didn't have.
- ◆ Always return a reporter's phone call promptly. They really do have deadlines (and editors and news directors that get really ugly if they don't meet them).
- ◆ Don't use a lot of jargon. Not every reporter that covers an event or issue in your district is going to be an expert on education issues. Offer them the background they need to understand the issue at hand. Don't make them look stupid.
- ◆ Do their thinking for them. Show them the “big picture.” Beat reporters are under a certain amount of pressure to produce stories regularly from their beat, yet their editor is not likely to print a story on your district's new mentoring program for teachers because it doesn't affect a large number of readers. However, if you point out to the reporter that mentoring programs are being considered by many districts across the state as a way to address the teacher shortage problem and that many are using your district's program as a model, you will have grabbed their interest — and the interest of their editor. Again, you've won great publicity for your district and put another feather in your reporter friend's cap
- ◆ If a reporter claims it was the editor that skewed the story by taking a quote out of context, believe them. Nine times out of ten it was the editor! ❖

All Staff Play Important Role in District Image

■ Amanda Brooker, Green Bay Area School District

Who are the most influential district employees in the community? The superintendent? The principals? The School Board president? NO! Citizens all over the United States were called for a Gallup poll and asked these three questions about 12 school employee groups:

- ◆ What school employee is most accessible to you?
- ◆ Who do you get most school information from?
- ◆ Who do you believe to be most credible, re: school information?

Here is how the public ranked these 12 employee groups regarding the above three criteria:

- | | |
|-------------------------|---|
| 1. Secretaries | 7. Teachers |
| 2. Custodians | 8. Librarians |
| 3. Bus drivers | 9. Principals |
| 4. Food Service Workers | 10. Central Office Administrators |
| 5. Nurses | 11. School Board Members |
| 6. Counselors | 12. State Department of Education Staff |

Surprised? Most people are. But then again, you're the ones in the schools, you know what is going on. When you talk about the schools, people listen. You are an opinion leader. An image builder and breaker.

Picture this. It's Friday night. You've had better days, on top of it all there was a bomb threat. You go to a dinner party at a friend's house. Discussion turns to work. Your friend asks, “How's your school year going?” You respond:

- a.) Horrible! The kids are rude, can't read their way out of a paper bag, and their parents are nuts! No wonder we're always having bomb threats!
- b.) You know, things would be great, but my superintendent is bipolar and the teachers don't have a clue. I'm thinking of taking a job with the Merchant Marines.
- c.) It's going well, but today was a little crazy. Must be a full moon tonight.

If you answered “a” or “b,” you've just become an image breaker. If you answered “c,” you've acknowledged that just like everyone else, you have good days and bad days without destroying the image of the district.

We are an organization that revolves around people. Because of variability of human nature, schools are cauldrons of issues just waiting to bubble over.

When something sensational happens in the schools, the media and community are quick to make it a topic of discussion. As employees, it's tempting to fill in the blanks when people ask what's going on. But, filling in the blanks is dangerous. It's how rumors are spread — an image breaker.

If you don't know the facts, what can you do?

- ◆ Think carefully before answering.
- ◆ Don't speculate.
- ◆ Admit you don't know.
- ◆ Have the person contact the building administrator, or the designated spokesperson.
- ◆ Offer to find out the facts and get back to that person.

Sound familiar? It's the very same rules when being interviewed by the media!

If you're the district administrator, remember to update all district employees on important issues, not just your administrators. And by training your staff in these few simple steps mentioned above, you can build your district's image, avoid damage control, as well as improve employee satisfaction. ❖

WSPRA membership dues invoices will be sent out in April. Please look for them in your mailboxes. Prompt payment will ensure that you will not be deleted from future mailings.

Membership Has Its Benefits

■ Linda Wickstrom, Elmbrook School District

Have you recently considered all the things you get from your WSPRA membership? Apart from the significance of being associated with the proud heritage of the National School Public Relations Association, there are very real and practical benefits that affect you and your career on a personal level:

- ◆ **Connect.** Throughout the year, you have several opportunities to meet other professionals, either in person or via the phone/e-mail, to share information and receive encouragement—and give the same in return.
- ◆ **Learn.** Workshops, the annual fall conference, the WSPRA website, and the WSPRAgram keep you up with trends in the field.
- ◆ **Grow.** WSPRA supports all communications levels. Plus, members provide an excellent resource when you need help or advice.
- ◆ **Lead.** Gain management experience by mentoring fellow members. Consider involvement with the WSPRA Board and play a role in the direction of the association.

Stay at the top of your game. Better yet, get involved. Make a personal commitment to attend the fall conference in November. And share the benefits of membership with others. Reach out to friends and colleagues. Tell them all the great things about WSPRA membership. Encourage them to join. Renew your membership. Let's keep WSPRA a vital — and growing — organization. ❖



The Clerical Key

Get Them Involved! Support Staff are on the Front Line of Public Relations

■ Ruth Ruh, West Bend East High School

As we all too well know, first impressions are often made long before a parent or visitor speaks to the leader of our school. Our support staffs are our first line of public relations. Secretaries, assistants, janitorial staff, and all the other important people in our educational systems can provide invaluable positive first impressions if we engage them in the process of education. This article was written by an active person in the West Bend School District who has made it her personal priority to be a positive ambassador for our schools. What's her secret? Being involved!