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**Keep Communications Hot during the Summer**

■ Lori Holly, Menomonee Falls School District

When that final school bell rings, don't make the mistake of packing up your communication plan. Effective communication is a year-round job and can be especially difficult in the summer months when the school hallways are quieter and offices are emptier. Here are some tips to keep your communication and community engagement efforts hot all summer long.

- Publish a June newsletter or e-newsletter featuring those retiring from your schools. Include everyone from administrators to custodians.
- Keep your web site up-to-date! Take down that last School Board meeting agenda and announcements from the last week of school. Use the site to promote summer playgrounds, summer school, "Back-To-School" events, etc.
- Continue publishing your E-Newsletter. People have more time to read in summer.
- Plan your "back-to-school" communications. Include dates of fall open houses, news of new staff members, etc. Publish it in August before the first bell rings! Likewise, don't ease up on engaging your community in meaningful dialog about education.
- Get your superintendent to engage the public informally wherever the community gathers— little league games, parks, etc. What better time to learn what's on their minds?
- Involve students and staff in community Fourth of July Parades. Think beyond your marching band! Honor your academic decathlon team, championship sports teams, or student council. Be sure to be seen with a bold banner that proudly shouts your slogan and features your logo.
- Secure a spot at community picnics or festivals. Sponsor a "dunk tank" and get teachers, coaches and administrators to be the dunker. Students and parents alike will love the opportunity to "get back" at their favorite teacher or coach. It's a great time to display your marketing materials and talk to those visiting the community or just moving in.
- Hold tours of your buildings for new families or families looking at homes in the area. ❖



WISCONSIN SCHOOL PUBLIC RELATIONS ASSOCIATION

**Effective Communication Priceless!**

■ Dorreen Dembski, West Bend School District

While shopping in a mall recently I participated in a market research study. After viewing a commercial that advertised a brand of flavored water, I answered several questions and gave my feedback on such things as how I felt during the commercial, what I thought was the main message, and if I would be motivated to purchase the product after viewing the commercial. The company was spending thousands of dollars to determine the effectiveness of their message.

How much time and money do we spend evaluating the messages that we send to our public school customers? Taking a wild guess, I would estimate, well, not much! Of course, the motive of the message I was viewing was clear: the sponsoring company wanted to know if the commercial would sell products to people like me. But then, why would they spend money airing a commercial that would produce anything less?

Some people in public education would say that communication planning, public relations, and marketing cannot be priorities in the face of increasing pressures on budgets, test scores, and meeting the diverse requirements of our students. No one argues that good communication isn't important. On the contrary, most people recognize its importance. The problem is that we don't make effective communication a priority.

I argue that effective communication is as core to the operation of a school district as advertising and public relations are to the marketing plan of a for-profit company. So core, in fact, that the failure to communicate will ultimately bring down even the best-laid plans that are intended to address budgets, test scores, or serving our students. If then you believe effective communication is core, how can you make it a priority?

First and foremost, effective message development requires planning. The commercial I viewed was clearly targeted to tell me about a sugar-free flavored water product in 30 seconds, using visuals, emotions, and words. However, during the

commercial I did not see or hear once that the beverage was sugar-free. Test marketing their message represents good planning because a part of their message was missing. Was I to assume it was sugar-free? I didn't. In this case, it was research money well spent because it uncovered a missing piece of information.

All too often, we also assume accurate communication will just happen. Just as I didn't know the beverage was sugar-free, if you don't tell your school story, people simply will not know it. Consider your improvement planning process: We set the goals, we do the research, we create the action plan, and we evaluate the budget. But do we plan for communication? To make communication core to your system, adopt a simple rule: Every improvement plan must also be accompanied by a communication plan.

A communication plan *is a plan*. Research, Analyze, Communicate, Evaluate—RACE and answer these questions in a plan:

Who are our audiences? What do we need them to know and understand about your topic? What do they already know? Why is the information important to our audiences? What do we want our parents, teachers, students or the community to do with the information that we are sending? When will we send the messages? How will we send the messages? Will we use print? The website? A video? How will we evaluate the effectiveness of our communication? What two-way communication efforts will we use so that we also receive information and feedback?

Write down key messages, identify audiences, and plan how to best reach various audiences. Establish timelines, and yes—evaluate your efforts.

What are the benefits of the RACE toward effective communication? Well, excuse me for stealing from another commercial ...but the benefits are well, PRICELESS! ❖

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## From the President . . .



Lori Holly

Following an exhausting but productive final WSPRA Board of Director's meeting for the year—and the last I will preside over as president—I spent several hours reflecting not only on the work that this Board has done over the past year, but on WSPRA as an organization. This association is a terrific asset to public education and, more specifically, to the students we serve. Contrary to the notion that school communications professionals are hired only to make the superintendent or administration of a district “look good,” school communications professionals are the key to bringing schools and communities together through planned, well-executed plans. That, the research clearly shows, positively impacts student achievement.

As a Board this year we have had some very thoughtful discussions about critical issues facing public education in Wisconsin and how school communications - and WSPRA in particular - can continue to play an essential role in, and lead the charge on, many of these critical issues.

To that end, we have begun to make some dramatic changes to the structure of the organization. The addition of an Executive Director (see related article), which was the result of months of discussion, research, and debate, is a critical first step. In June, the Board will embark on a new strategic planning effort to ensure that our value and belief statements, as well as our mission statement, are still relevant.

Like all strategic plans, WSPRA's plan needs to remain fluid and change as the organization grows. I believe the team of leaders in place at this critical juncture in WSPRA's history will lead WSPRA to greater accomplishments.

I have had the opportunity since joining this wonderful organization to get to know some pretty remarkable people. I have never worked with a more selfless group of professionals. You work, and work, and work for kids and when you're ready to drop, you work some more. Even when many in the education arena do not always see the impact we as communications professionals have on student achievement you never stop working on behalf of kids. I am proud to have been associated with all of you.

As some of you know, I will be moving on to other ventures as my current position has fallen victim to the budget axe which is wreaking havoc on much of public education these days. Please know that the lessons you have all taught me will go with me and that I will count my work with WSPRA as among my proudest moments.

It has been my honor to serve as WSPRA president. My best wishes to the new Board and all of WSPRA for continued success. ❖

## The ART (and Science) of Open Records and Schools

■ Mabel Schumacher, Ph.D., Fort Atkinson

*“It is declared to be the public policy of this state that all persons are entitled to the greatest possible information regarding the affairs of government and the official acts of those officers and employees who represent them. . . . Providing citizens with information about the affairs of government is an essential function of a representative government. . . . The denial of access generally is contrary to public interest. . . .” Wis. Stat. § 19.31*

In the realm of school public relations, it is clear that a district's response to an open records request can do a lot either to build trust with its public or to create an atmosphere that is shrouded in secrecy and suspicion. It is important to remember that there is both an art and a science to an open records response.

The SCIENCE has everything to do with having policies and procedures in place according to federal and state regulations. It requires knowing the scope of the records available to the public—including electronic communications which are increasingly subject to access. (Note: As a result of this expanded definition of records, districts must rethink their e-mail storage and record-maintenance procedures.) Keeping up to date on changes in the legal requirements of open records is critical.

The ART of open records requires a closer look at how a district responds.

**Attitude** represents the manner in which the response is made. Remember. . . everything about the response can be analyzed by the person making the request. That means tone of voice, body language, and facial expression—as well as the words that are said. A smile can be heard over the phone as well as seen in person! Individuals responding to open records requests should be given opportunities for inservice regarding the importance of their response in creating a positive image for the district.

**Response** represents the internal workings of the district. It is helpful to have a single point person to whom requests are made—whether it be one person in the district or one person at each school. Whoever is in charge of public record requests must be well versed in all nuances of the law. Although it is not a requirement, it helps if the request is made in writing to provide an appropriate paper trail. The district can make the process easier by having a form available to initiate the request.

**Timing** involves the efficiency of the response. Districts are required to create timelines to respond to requests. These responses are maximized by clear, efficient procedures that are consistent across the district. If possible, it is better to respond within a shorter timeframe. Our definition of an appropriate timeframe (by the specified deadline) is often misunderstood by the public as a “delay.” Making an effort to fulfill not only the letter, but the spirit of the law in a helpful and courteous manner will pay great dividends in developing public trust.

Take the opportunity to meld the science and art of open records to enhance your district's relationship with your community. It is worth the effort! ❖

## To Blog or Not to Blog (Part 1)

■ Lori Blakeslee, PR specialist, Green Bay Education Association

While the word “blog” (short for web log) sounds like it comes right out of a Dr. Seuss book, blogs are personal web sites that serve as online diaries and discussion boards.

Blogs were initially dismissed as lacking credibility, however, they are now seen as sources of breaking news. With an estimated five to 10 million bloggers building online communities everyday, they are beginning to have a significant influence on what people are talking about.

If your school district is contemplating starting a blog, the key to an effective blog is to view it as a relationship-building tool that will help you engage your stakeholders in new and important ways.

A blog is not a new way to “sell” information to students, parents or taxpayers. Instead, it is a tool that must be seen as transparent and truthful in order to be credible. So if the district decides to begin an official blog, it is imperative that the blogger (writer) is identified, whether it is the superintendent, a school board member or PR staff person.

A district should not begin a blog if it is not willing to engage in a dialog with its stakeholders. Blog readers expect to post reactions to your opinions. So it is important to identify who in your organization will be responsible for posting daily content and monitoring/responding to feedback.

On the flip side, you may not be the only one talking about your district. Bloggers may be holding discussions about your district on their blogs. So it is important to have someone designated to track blog chatter. This can be a great way to identify if a public awareness campaign is gaining traction, as well as an “early warning” source to upcoming issues.

Finally, does your school district have a policy about students, teachers, administrators and school board members creating personal blogs? If not, your district may want to draft a policy, which addresses blog creation, posting, linking, commentary and response.

Watch for more information about blogs in future newsletters. ❖

## Board Approves Executive Director Position

■ Lori Holly, Menomonie Falls School District

After months of research and discussion, the Board of Directors approved the creation of a part-time Executive Director position in its continuing efforts to grow the organization and

## MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

### Recognize a Child Advocate

■ Brian Hanes, superintendent, Oostburg School District

At the beginning of each school year our district plans a “welcome back” session with all staff and I remind staff that **the most important decision our district makes is who we hire!** At the welcome back session we introduce new staff and outline our focus areas for the new year.

For the past several years we have also recognized a district child advocate by presenting a framed certificate to them. This is a simple way to keep our focus on those individuals who have earned the distinction of being recognized as an outstanding child advocate. In addition to presenting

improve awareness of the critical role that communications plays in public education.

The move brings WSPRA in line with many other professional associations and will help WSPRA move its agenda forward in the state.



Also at its April meeting, the Board approved the appointment of Mabel Schumacher as the organization's first Executive Director, effective July 1. Mabel has been a devoted member, board member, past-president and mentor for WSPRA members for many years. She is a retired educator and administrator with a passion for WSPRA and its mission.

The Executive Director will be charged with helping WSPRA develop

strategic collaborations with other state-level education groups in an effort to increase awareness of school public relations and grow the organization's membership.

“This is critical to the organization's survival and it is something that volunteer boards, as committed as they are during their tenure, do not seem to have the time and the resources to do,” said past-president Mary Ellen Marnholtz. Board members sought input from past WSPRA leaders such as Marnholtz in studying the proposal.

The Executive Director, who will report to the president, will also serve as the financial officer of the organization and oversee the office manager position. A formal job description will be available at the annual meeting in November. It is also available by contacting Pati Welch at [pwelch@wasb.org](mailto:pwelch@wasb.org).

The Board of Directors will evaluate the position at the end of one year. ❖

the certificate, we publish a picture and short article in our school newspaper. To assist with our selection process I ask our administrative team to recommend individuals based on outstanding service performed for children. Like all districts, we have multiple individuals and it is a challenge to select just one.

The Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators (WASDA) organization recognizes a state child advocate winner annually. The award is named the Bert Grover Child Advocacy Award (a former state school superintendent).

In addition to this annual single state recipient, wouldn't it be wonderful to see every school district start an annual tradition of recognizing a local child advocate? We have many individuals in our community that go above and beyond the call of duty for our children. Encourage your district to draw up some simple criteria that works for your school district and **RECOGNIZE A CHILD ADVOCATE!** ❖