

# ***Strategic Public Relations in Tough Times***

## **A Leadership Challenge**

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# So what is the challenge?

## Internal Communication

- Plates are full
- Nobody understands communication, PR
- Lack of support from supervisor
- I'm not at the table when decisions are discussed, made

## External Communication

- Budget cuts negatively impact ability to communicate
- Mandates (e.g. NCLB) screwing up my work
- Parents, community just don't get it
- I'm only one person!

# How do I tackle the challenge?

## Internal Communication

- Plates are full →
- Nobody understands → communication, PR
- Lack of support from supervisor →
- I'm not at the table → when decisions are discussed, made

## Leader's Response

- Strategic planning
- Build relationships; be a service provider
- Demonstrate your value; “go to” person
- Become a strategist and a counselor, not just a technician

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## Leader's Response

- Demonstrate value of communication, do more with less
- Strategic planning
- Build relationships
- Become a strategist and counselor, not just a technician

## Strategic Planning

# Assessing your communication

- **Who needs to know this?**
- **What do they need to know?**
- **What is the best time and vehicle to communicate this?**
- **How will we know the message has been received?**

**“Most people worry about how they’re going to communicate before they even think about what it is they want to say, to whom and why.”**

*Larry Ascough*  
*Godfather of School Public Relations*

**“Research is the first and most important step in the communication process. It is also the most frequently ignored.”**

*Bill Banach*  
*Godfather of School Marketing*

# **Identifying strengths, weaknesses**

- **What communications efforts are working?**
- **What communications efforts aren't working?**
- **Where am I missing the point?**
- **Am I reaching all of my publics?**
- **Am I targeting my messages?**



**“Communication is a process, not a product. It’s not enough that your publics know something. It’s what they do with that knowledge that counts.”**

*Jennifer Wayman Reeve  
NSPRA President, 1998-99*

# **The Challenge...**

- **A Leadership Test**  
Work defines the organization; be credible
- **A Communication Test**  
How strong is communication program?
- **A Professional Test**  
How will you emerge as a key adviser?

# Where do I start?

- Have a plan ...

# Comprehensive Communication Plan

*Desired behaviors and attitudes:*

## Internal Audiences

- Take pride, ownership in district; stay informed.
- Show mutual respect, trust and understanding; value all roles w/in organization.
- Employees respect and value customer feedback.
- Exhibit district values.

## External audiences

- Exhibit community pride, trust in schools, district.
- Feel involved, engaged in public schools.
- Choose to enroll in school district because of diversity, quality of opportunities.
- Support school district.

# Where do I start?

- **Build Credibility**
  - deliver on your promises
  - trust and honesty go a long, long way
- **Focus efforts on service**
  - counsel principals, leadership team, etc.
  - grace under pressure; crisis responder
  - parent letters, talking points, training
  - collaboration; move others' agenda, not yours

**Must have a servant's heart, but a leader's mind**

# **Where do I start?**

- **Be a sensemaker**
  - offer “options to solutions”
  - learn the business of schools, administration
  - learn, educate others on issues (e.g. NCLB)
  - exude excitement; positive and upbeat
- **Secure a place on the management team**
  - politically savvy
  - know how to read your audience
  - listen first, then speak credibly
  - stay on top of trends (NSPRA network)
  - educate others of the value of communication

# **Sensemaking on NCLB**

- **What is NCLB?**
  - **know the issues, requirements of law**
  - **relationship of AYP, state assessment system**
  - **initiatives to improve student achievement**
  - **those “marked” schools, what do you offer?**
- **NCLB Communication Plan**
  - **identify audiences, methods, message**
  - **focus on key messages; speak w/ one clear voice**
  - **use polling data to validate message**
  - **prepare public; put results in context**
  - **don't whine, but point out flaws in AYP**

# **Sensemaking on Budget Cuts**

- **Budget Reductions**
  - know the issues
  - impacts of state, local funding
  - impacts cuts will have on schools, departments
  - focus internal, external messages
- **Communicating About School Finance**
  - districts experiencing same as everyone else
  - focus on key messages; one clear voice
  - prepare public; put issues in context
  - involve community; share the pain!



**“Public relations is developing relationships which change attitudes that bring about desired behaviors.”**

*Pat Jackson, APR*

*PRSA Fellow*

**“Public relations is a planned and systematic two-way process of communication between an educational organization and its internal and external audiences. It is a plan to encourage public involvement and to earn public understanding and support.”**

# **Effective Communication**

- **Two-way process**
- **Builds trust; attitude change**
- **Establishes positive relationships**
- **Is tied to student performance results, accountability**

**Effective communication is never simply delivering a message.**

**As the eyes and ears of an organization we listen, we counsel and we respond.**

# **Hierarchy of Effective Communication**

- **One-to-one, face-to-face**
- **Small group discussion/meeting**
- **Speaking before a large group**
- **Phone conversation**
- **Handwritten, personal letter**
- **Mass-produced, non-personal letter**
- **Brochure or pamphlet**
- **Article in school, district newsletter or magazine**
- **News carried in popular press**
- **Advertising in newspapers, radio, TV, posters, etc.**

# **Mass vs Interpersonal Communication**

Research says mass media is best for providing information.

But interpersonal communication is best for changing attitudes.

***Use both!***

# **Mass vs Interpersonal Communication**

## To inform

- Announcement
- Brochure
- Bulletin
- Flyer
- Memo
- News releases
- Newsletters
- Speech
- Cable TV

## To change attitudes

- Dialogue
- Discussion
- Open house/reception
- Parent-Teacher Conf.
- Seminar
- Team project
- Telephone call
- Home visit
- Workshop

# **How Communities Learn and Make Decisions**

- **3%** → **printed materials**
- **7%** → **talking to others**
- **90%** → **talking to employees, students;  
being a part of a relationship**



**More than 70% of parents say that they rely on personal observations and conversations - not the local news media - to gather information about their communities' schools.**

*“Good News, Bad News: What People Really Think About the Education Press”*

*Education Week*

# **Effective Communication**

- **Putting out STUFF does little to influence people's opinions or change their behavior.**
- **We must target our message to our market.**
- **The most effective messages and approach can best be determined when considering the needs, interests of individual audiences.**

**Too often we spend 80%**  
**of our time on the**  
**15%-20% who will**  
**never come around.**

# Strategic Public Relations in Tough Times

## 100% of Stakeholders

1%  
**Immediate  
Favorable**

Zealots, minds  
made up as  
soon as they  
hear of issue

45%  
**Leaning  
Favorable**

Have opinion,  
won't do  
anything  
about it

8%  
**Opinion  
Leaders**

**Willing to discuss,  
open-minded,  
will drive decision**

45%  
**Leaning  
Unfavorable**

Have opinion,  
won't do  
anything  
about it

1%  
**Immediate  
Unfavorable**

Zealots, minds  
made up as  
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# **What if I'm the only one?**

- **Create a PR advisory team (superintendent, principals, teachers, support staff).**
- **Set at least three goals**
- **Do one thing well (document how you did it)**
- **Next year do it again, even better; then add “one new thing”**
- **Help everyone as much as you can**
- **If you do a publication, focus it on students**
- **Internal relations; build bridges**
- **Work smart; spend more time thinking**

# **The Challenge... Revisited!**

- **A Leadership Test**  
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# **Conclusion**

**The quality of the relationship is more important than the quality of the message.**

**Donald Wright**

*The Magic Communication Machine:*

*Examining the Internet's Impact  
on Public Relations, Journalism and the Public*