

Kern County
**Superintendent
of Schools**
Office of Mary C. Barlow
...advocates for children

News Media Tips *for* Educators



Media relations primer

A quick Google search of “Public Relations” (PR) would yield numerous definitions. At its core, **PR is simply a management function of communication between an entity and its stakeholders with the end goal of maintaining a favorable public image.** PR tactics may include print and email newsletters, promotional videos, Marcom (e.g., brochures, fliers and related marketing communications tools), websites and speeches. Perhaps more than anything else though, good media relations is the linchpin to effective public relations.

Like it or not, traditional media outlets like newspapers and TV newscasts – and more and more these days – “new media” outlets like blogs and social media define much of how we perceive the world around us. Traditional and new media helps set the agenda for what we think and talk about. Therefore, these outlets are essential vehicles to help schools communicate their messages to their primary stakeholders: parents, students, community members and legislators.

The benefits of maintaining a good working relationship between your school/district and the local media are many. Some of these benefits include:



- Allows a district/school to communicate its messages to the masses at NO COST.
- Stimulates awareness of and keeps your school/district and its programs top-of-mind with stakeholders.
- News coverage is seven times more credible than advertising, studies show.
- Reputation management (i.e., helps mitigate negative perceptions).

What is news?

Defining news may seem like a simple task. News is what happens. News is what people are talking about. News is new or a current issue. Choosing what is considered newsworthy is oftentimes more difficult.

Reporters and editors choose stories from the flood of information and events happening every day. These stories are selected with five primary criteria in mind: importance/impact, timeliness, prominence, uniqueness and human interest.

Importance/Impact

The importance of a story and its impact in the local community are closely related. Stories affecting a large number of people will have the most impact on readers' lives. The importance of a story is what makes it news.

Timeliness

If something happened yesterday it probably isn't news. The media is generally focused on telling about today's events or what is going to happen tomorrow.

Prominence

It matters who you are. Famous people and high profile community members will get more coverage just because of their status.

Uniqueness

Uniqueness is something that makes a news story one-of-a-kind. Being recognized as the first or only school/district to offer a new academic program within the region, state, nation or world is an example of a unique story.

Human Interest

Human interest is a news story that details a first-hand account of people's experiences and feelings. This type of story is meant to evoke emotions. These are oftentimes called “feel good” stories.



Understanding the media

Deadlines

The media generally works under extremely tight deadlines, usually turning stories around in a matter of hours or even minutes. It is not uncommon for reporters to contact you and want to arrange an interview the same day a story is due. Do not panic if such a media request occurs. Always ask what the reporter's deadline is. Your respect for their deadlines will leave a lasting impression.

“Hard” vs. “Soft” News

News gathering agencies give more time and space to “hard” news topics such as politics, crime, finance, education, health and environmental issues, as opposed to “soft” news topics such as fundraising events, grant announcements and recognitions. “Hard” news is either timely (by tomorrow it will be old news), controversial or both. However, “hard” news is not necessarily bad or negative news. Reporters and assignment editors are often looking for “soft” news stories to provide balance to news coverage especially at times when “hard” news is scarce, for example, during holiday seasons. This is a good time to promote an exceptional event, program or student.

Background Materials

Generally, members of the media are interested in background materials, particularly on topics that are complex. You may offer to provide further topic explanation if necessary. Providing copies of background material for the reporter following the interview is highly recommended.

Simple Messages

Reporters are not education experts, nor are their audiences. Therefore, it is important to keep messages simple and concise. Avoid using hard-to-comprehend words or phrases for both the reporter and audience.

Consistency

Each media outlet is very competitive and, if possible, would generally like to be the first to report on a story. During a series of media interviews highlighting the same topic, it is important to provide each reporter with identical information.

They're Not Out To Get Us

Reporters are not looking for the negative. They are, however, trained to not merely accept what officials tell them, but to substantiate their information. Reporters are not concerned with

placing schools in an unfavorable light. Rather, a good reporter attempts to present many sides of any issue. If you do not respond, the only materials they have belong to the opposing side.

Localizing A Story

It isn't uncommon for TV, newspaper or radio reporters to want to “localize” a story that has made news in another part of California or beyond. For example, after the Sandy Hook Elementary tragedy, the local media was abuzz with stories about how local schools were prepared for such events.



Op-eds bring local, national and world events into perspective for newspaper readers. Op-eds are a great way for educators to offer a recommendation or solution to a controversy or problem.

If you do not respond, the only materials they have belong to the opposing side.

Preparing for an interview

Deadline

Ask the reporter when his or her deadline is. Remember, for radio or TV, deadlines are often within a matter of hours; deadline for print can range from hours to days. Meeting a reporter's deadline is key to maintaining a good relationship - and assuring that your story is told.

For TV, the majority of daytime news-gathering takes place from about 9 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. so stories may be completed for the 5 p.m. newscasts. *The Bakersfield Californian* typically likes to have interviews done no later than 4 p.m. for the next day's paper.

Understand the Topic

Before the interview, ask what the story is about and what exactly the interviewer wants to discuss. Develop a good understanding of your interview topic. Then, take time to prepare 3 to 5 key points worth emphasizing during the interview. If the topic is controversial, think about the most difficult questions you might be asked and prepare some answers.



Background Materials

Have background materials (facts or statistics) available for members of the media, particularly for complex topics. Reporters will appreciate the additional information when writing their stories. If time permits, offer to email background materials in advance.

Delivering Your Message

Be sure to practice delivering your message in a clear and concise manner. Short answers provide better sound bites for radio and television and better quotes for print. Remember to emphasize your key points and reinforce them with examples. Review your talking points just before the interview or consider asking a colleague to discuss the topic with you to help you warm up and focus your answers.

Confidence and Composure

Practice your confidence and composure. An interview is your chance to tell the public something interesting about your school district or program. Your energy and enthusiasm about the subject will capture the reporter's interest.

Location

Locations can vary depending on the topic. An office setting provides for a more intimate atmosphere. In many cases, doing the interview "on location" is best, as the reporter can "see" the topic in action. Conducting the interview outside on a nice day can also be a consideration. In any instance, make sure the area is free from clutter.

Dressing the part . . .

In your interview, you want people focused on your face and message, not your clothing. As a general rule of thumb, your clothing and accessories should be simple and understated. Dress to the occasion [e.g., if you're talking about something serious, dress professional. If you're talking about something fun, dressing down is fine].

Colors / Patterns

Blues, grays, browns and pastels are camera friendly. Avoid solid white, black, and red. Also, steer clear of fine patterns such as herringbone, plaids, stripes, polka dots and checkers. On camera, these patterns can dance and shimmer in a distracting manner.

Accessories

Keep accessories simple and avoid anything dangling, shiny or that makes noise [e.g., beeping watches or clanging bracelets].

Eye Wear

Always remove sunglasses during an on-camera interview. Remove prescription eye glasses if you are comfortable without them.

Jot down 3 to 5 key talking points worth emphasizing during the interview. If the topic is controversial, think about the most difficult questions you might be asked and prepare some answers.

During an interview

Relax and Breathe

It's normal to be nervous. Remember, an interview is really just a conversation with another individual. Just be yourself. Relax, breathe and smile when appropriate.

Body Language

Body language can be stronger than a thousand words. For television, try to be somewhat animated and enthusiastic in your responses, while using your hands to gesture. Also look at the reporter or camera person while being interviewed, not the camera.

It's OK Not to Have an Answer

If you don't know the answer to something, say so. Ask the reporter if time allows, "Can I get back to you with that information?" Never speculate.

Be a Good Listener

Remember to always be a good listener. How well you listen to questions is as important as how well you answer them. Never hesitate in asking the reporter to repeat a question.



Brevity is key — provide short, but complete answers. Be sure to get to the point quickly; short statements of 10 seconds or less are preferred as they allow for easier editing for TV and radio. And, pause between your thoughts.

Nothing is "Off the Record"

No matter how informal the setting, reporters will take for granted that everything said to them is on the record and quotable. If you do not want people to know about something, do not say it.

Take two

Most interviews intended for TV and radio are taped. Therefore, there is no harm in asking a reporter to re-record an answer if your original delivery doesn't go as hoped. Remember, the reporter wants good sound bites to edit, so he or she will oblige if you ask for a "re-do."

Show compassion

Show empathy and concern when it's appropriate. This is especially relevant during times of emergency or a crisis when someone's life has been negatively affected by a situation.

Never respond with "No comment." A reporter will assume you are trying to hide something and probe deeper into the subject. If you cannot respond, give a reason — for instance: propriety or pending investigation.

Be in control by using bridging statements . . .

The objective of any interview is to answer the reporter's questions, but also to ensure that you talk about your key messages. If the reporter asks an innocent enough question, answer it. But if it's a really tough question, answer in as few words as possible — "yes" or "no" or "perhaps" then bridge to your key message using a bridging statement. Examples of this are "We find the more important issue is...", "I think it would be more accurate to say...", "Let me emphasize that...", "Before we move on, I might add...", or "It is also important to remember..."

Here's an example of bridging to your key talking points:

Question: "Isn't it true that the accident could have been avoided?"

Answer: "I would rather not speculate. What matters most in this situation is that we are using every possible measure to determine what went wrong and will put steps in place to ensure that it never happens again."

Media access to schools

According to California law, school officials may restrict media access to school campuses in the same manner as access by the general public. While no state laws bar the media from school grounds outright, individual school districts may adopt regulations limiting access to school property. In June 1996, the California Attorney General's office issued an advisory opinion giving school administrators the authority to deny media access to school grounds if their presence "would interfere with peaceful conduct of the activities of the school." [A.G. Op. No. 95-509]

Following are some general guidelines to consider relative to media and school sites:

1. Always require reporters to sign in at the front office upon arrival at a campus and to wear a badge so that others on the site can immediately identify them as such. Be sure a staff member accompanies the reporter while on the school campus. A reporter may be denied admission to a classroom in session if it would interrupt student learning.
2. Schools can prohibit student interviews that would disrupt educational activities.
3. Districts cannot require prior parental permission for kids to speak to the media, since they have a constitutional right to free speech. Although, parents can instruct their child not to communicate with the media as a matter of parental discretion on or off school property.
4. Teachers and staff have First Amendment Free Speech rights, but an administrator can require that staff be interviewed outside of the educational day and on that individual's own time.
5. The media has the right to cover school events held off-campus that are open to the public, and does not need parent or school staff permission to interview, photograph or take video of students participating in such events.



Media access to records

All official reports and surveys are public records – this includes yearbooks, contracts and salary information, including that of the superintendent and administrators. You may not withhold such information when it is requested.

1. The general public, including the media, has access to public records under the California Public Records Act. An agency has 10 days to determine if a request seeks public records and to notify the requesting party as to whether the agency will produce the requested documents, or needs more time.
2. Confidential student and staff information, including student and staff records, cumulative files and special education files, is protected from disclosure by the above acts and the Education Code.
3. Student records and special education files may not be disclosed to the media without written parental consent or by court order. [Education Code Section 49061]
4. Directory information may be disclosed to the media. Directory information is defined in CA Education Code 49061 and district policies. Also, remember that emails, faxes and yearbooks can be public information.

Photography releases

Promotional photos and/or video footage taken by district staff adds significantly to the communication value of district and school publications, websites and other marketing materials. Many schools require a signed waiver from parents/guardians to be on file before a student can be photographed or video taped by school/district staff; others consider permission to be the absence of an opt-out form. Whatever the case, districts should have clear policies and procedures in place.



Crisis communication

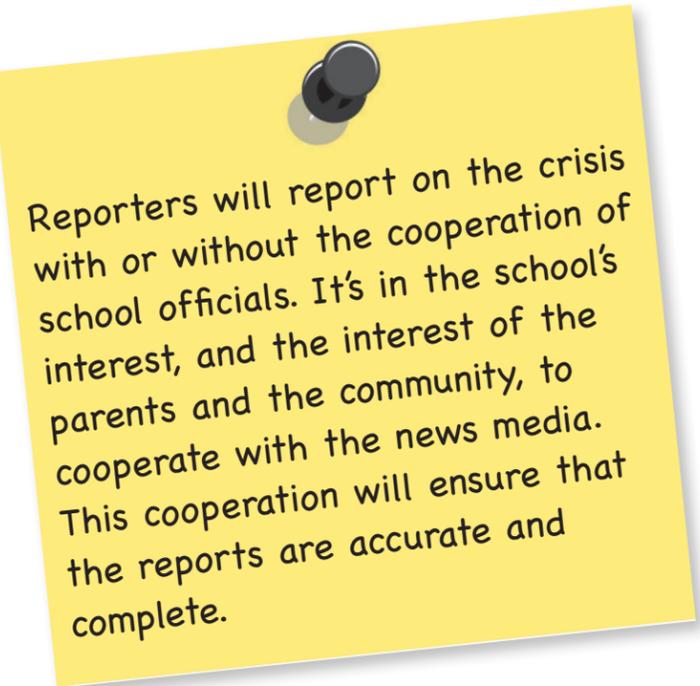
Communicating with the public is critical during and immediately following an incident. While this can be done using several methods – automated mass notification systems, school/district website, etc. – the media also plays an important role in a crisis situation. Some hazards like extreme heat offer some warning, but others like earthquakes, chemical spills or man-made hazards may occur without notice. Following are some things to consider in preparation for communicating well through the media in times of crisis.

One Voice

Designate a school/district official who will serve as the primary spokesperson or representative to deliver information to the news media. If your district does not have a dedicated public information officer (PIO), most often the spokesperson should be the district superintendent. Ensure people who are tasked with talking with the media are properly trained.

Joint Information Center (JIC)

Establish a Joint Information Center (JIC). The JIC serves as the hub of information sharing and dissemination. Representatives from any of the responding agencies (e.g., law enforcement, fire, mental health) will work with school official to ensure that accurate and timely information is released and that all media representatives get the same information at the same time.



Reporters will report on the crisis with or without the cooperation of school officials. It's in the school's interest, and the interest of the parents and the community, to cooperate with the news media. This cooperation will ensure that the reports are accurate and complete.

Media Staging Area

Set aside a dedicated area for media to do their work as close to the scene as is practical. With media in one place, it is easier and safer for school officials and first responders to control the situation. The identified spot should be large enough to accommodate video and audio equipment as well as TV microwave trucks.

Be ready by having a crisis communications plan prepared in advance . . .

Crisis Communication - Checklist

Pre-incident

- Risk assessment: Identify top threats and any vulnerabilities.
- Draft generic talking points and news release templates for various situations so you have a foundation from which to work from.
- Identify a school/district spokesperson and supporting staff and define their roles (e.g., Who will speak to the media? Who will initiate an alert using the mass notification systems).
- Provide training for communication representatives.
- Develop and regularly update an Emergency Contact List of key personnel.
- Set up an Alert Notification System capable of multiple means of communication to employees and parents. Test twice a year.
- Identify other means of communication (e.g., website updates, social media, phone trees, etc.) and ensure proper logistics are in place to utilize these methods on the fly.
- Ensure you have an updated media contact list.
- Establish one or two potential media staging / briefing areas at each school site.
- Establish one or two potential parent collection points / re-unification areas.

During an incident

- Assess the situation; gather the facts.
- Direct media to your site's predetermined media staging / briefing area.
- Work with responding agencies' PIOs to establish a JIC and coordinate responses to the media.
- Activate your school's Alert Notification System as soon as possible to keep parents in the know.
- Provide timely and regular updates to the media using other predetermined communications methods (e.g., social media / website).
- Control rumors by getting accurate information out as soon as it is verified.
- Monitor social media and control rumors as necessary by correcting inaccuracies as necessary.
- Have someone knowledgeable about the incident staffing the phones so there are consistent messages being delivered.

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