

# Small District—Giant PR World

Tackling a giant PR world on a small district budget with some ideas that cost little to nothing

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January 16, 2009

- **Evaluate Current Communications:** Take a look at what you are already doing with your PR and communications work. Assess what is working, what isn't working and what might be missing before you make any changes or implement something new.
- **It's Everyone's Job to Communicate:** Communications and PR is a group effort; not just meant for one or two people. Make sure communication objectives are in everyone's job description and evaluate them on their contributions.
- **Include Everyone in the Meeting:** Everyone is in the business of promoting the school district and being a goodwill ambassador their individual school. Invite everyone in the building to the faculty meetings—custodians, food service, secretaries, paras, etc. They will have a better understanding of what is happening in their own building and around the district that they can share with others in the community.
- **Remember Your "Internal" Audience:** Employees want to feel "in" on things, and it's a fact community members rely on district employees as a source of information about schools. Make sure your employees are "in the know" about district happenings by communicating with them through an Intranet, emails, newsletters, staff meetings, and make sure news from the board meetings is disseminated the day after the meeting is held—this can be done electronically or in a newsletter format.
- **New Employee Communication Training:** Let your new employees know what you expect from them in the area of communications. Tell them what it's like to work in the district, what's expected of them and how they play a role in the everyday PR for the district. Don't forget substitute teachers who constantly rotate in and out of your buildings each day.
- **Be Visible:** Administrations can show their staff how important it is to build relationships by being visible in the schools and community. Building those relationships will connect people with you, the school and the district.
- **Key in on Messages:** With any event or news story that is happening in your district, make sure you develop your "key messages" or talking points to deliver your information. You only need about three or four to get your message out to your stakeholders effectively.
- **Create a Key Communicators Group:** Identify those parents and community members (young singles, business professionals, parents of toddlers, "empty nesters," and senior citizens) who are seen as leaders in and around the school district. Invite them into meetings three to four times per year with the superintendent. Share information with these leaders about what is happening in the district so they can go out and share it with others. You can also do this internally with staff.
- **Go "Clubbing":** Get involved in you local and area service organizations such as Rotary, Lions and Chamber of Commerce. Membership in these organizations makes you visible to those key leaders in the community and can build strong partnerships with your schools. Occasionally ask them to publish information about something that is happening in the district in their organization's newsletter, e-newsletter or website.

- **Know Your Media:** Find out if they like to write their own stories or if they prefer you to submit all news releases. Offer to provide the release via email—this prevents them from having to retype the info and most times reporters are very grateful. Find out their deadlines, meet them and don't bother your reporter for the "little things" on those busy days. Since press releases are free, don't overuse the media. Make sure you are using other methods too to get your message out to the public.
- **Slogans, Themes, Names and Logos:** This may be a small investment up front, but once you have something, it will link everyone in the district together and create a common bond. Make sure they are being used consistently throughout your schools on all communications. Schools can also develop something for their building that will unite them. This is a great way to pull everything together!
- **Improve Your Sign Language:** Look at all the signs in your buildings. Are they inviting? For example, "Keep Off the Grass," "No Parking," "Visitors Must Report..." can be replaced with signs that say "Visitor Parking" and "Welcome to Our School." Signs are used to give directions and they should be inviting.
- **Spit Spot:** No one likes to enter a building that looks like a mess. Be sure to walk around your building and look at it like you are seeing it for the first time. What needs to be fixed? What areas are messy and need to be cleaned up? What small touches can be made to make the building more inviting, inside and out?
- **Make "Happy" Phone Calls:** Make "happy" or positive phone calls by sharing good news with parents and community members about the good things that are happening in school.
- **Write Notes:** It may seem trivial, but notes of thanks and recognition are one of the best PR activities there is. Set aside a special time each week (can be as short as 10-20 min) and write those notes you never get around to writing. Write to a student, staff member, parent or community member. It will cost you only a small amount of time and a box of note cards.
- **Visitors Welcome:** Personally invite people to visit the school—parents, media, senior citizens and business people. Let them spend time in the classroom with students and teachers.
- **Displays:** Help students get noticed in the community by arranging for displays of their work in public places such as banks, stores, hospitals and so on.
- **Share Info Weekly or Monthly:** Write a weekly/monthly news column and/or do a weekly/monthly radio show in your community. Staggering your communication efforts is also effective.
- **Distribute Information:** Provide realtors, the city, your chamber of commerce, welcome wagon, library and other community groups with your brochures about the schools. You can also give information to offices and business where people are waiting to see someone, such as dentist offices, clinics and hair salons.
- **Ask for Feedback:** Hand out "mini surveys" at parent/teacher conferences or Community Education classes. Ask questions like: Do you feel welcome in our school? In what way could we be more helpful?
- **Say "No" Slowly:** No one, especially school administrators, can say, "yes" to every request. There are times when you have the responsibility to say "no." But when you must give a negative response, at least let it come after you have listened fully to the request. If you are caught off guard, don't be afraid to ask for time to think about it.
- **Follow Through Promptly:** One of the most significant characteristics of an inviting administrator is that he/she follows through promptly. If you can handle the request at the very moment it's made (with a phone

call, email or memo) it saves you time and is a special recognition of the individual. If the request can't be handled immediately, be sure to recognize their request, let them know you are working on it and will get back to them as soon as possible.

- **District News IS School News:** Make sure to feed district news articles to individual schools to include in their school newsletters. These are often read by parents and are a great way to let them know what is happening around the district.
- **Give Aways:** Often times organizations have events where they have drawings for prizes. Why not give them something from the district with the logo on it, or better yet, give them tickets to a school event, such as a musical or basketball game or maybe free admission to a Community Education class. This is a great way to get people into your buildings and supporting your students and events.
- **Schools as Community Centers:** If you don't already, consider opening your school doors to local organizations and groups for meetings or events. This is another great way to connect the public with your schools.
- **Go Green—From Print to Electronic:** Rather than print, use email or the website to communicate your message in a time effective manner. Information most likely will be more current and accessible when you make the switch. This is perfect for an internal newsletter. Just make sure it's printer friendly for those to print a copy for their staff who have no or limited computer access such as food service workers or custodians.