

Good P.R. and Dealing With the Media

Is your system prepared?

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Part I: Introduction and Overview

What is Public Relations?

Public Information Professionals & the Media

The Board's Role in Good Public Relations

Communicating Clearly

Introduction:

What is Public Relations?

School board members, principals, administrators and staffs do more for a school system's public relations than any single public information officer can do from a central office. Common sense tells us that.

Go into a restaurant and listen to a group of teachers. Do they like their job? Are they complaining about the principal? The students? The parents? If so, is this good p.r.?

Again, common sense should tell you the answer.

What about your custodians? Your bus drivers? Your teacher assistants?

How many times have you received a complaint based on third-hand, misguided information that has little or no basis in fact?

Guess what, folks, the media is picking up on those complaints. And, more often than not, they will run with them. And sometimes, they will run with them with little regard for the facts.

That's where a public information officer comes in. Often called "spin doctors" by those who hold public relations professionals in disdain, what they are trying to do is get out the other side of the story. **YOUR** school system's side.

The best ways to do this are to be **UP FRONT** and **FACTUAL**. If you can't tell someone something that's confidential, tell them you can't tell them. But assure them that they will know as soon as the time is right.

So the task we have is multi-faceted. Students, parents, business partners, the community at large and the media are all part of the public relations plan. Get one going against you, and it often has a domino effect. Get one going for you, and the dominos roll — though more slowly — up hill.

Some simple rules:

- Superintendents and board members don't like surprises. Keep the Superintendent and his staff informed at all times. It's also worth noting that the Public Information Officer does not like surprises, either, for what that is worth.

- Focus on solutions, not rehashing the problem over and over.

- Respect deadlines, especially when dealing with the media.

- Be up front about your problems, and typically they will move down on the page.

- Be upbeat about your successes, and typically they will move up on the page.

A Quiz

What is the single most important rule of public relations?

Do a good job.

Public relations and marketing cannot solve problems related to service, programs or products. Research shows that 90% of public opinion is based on the quality of the service you provide.

Hitting the Home Run

What good and effective public relations can accomplish

Good Public Relations

- Builds bridges and strengthens the bond between your school, your school's parents, the staff and the community at large.
- Provides the public with an opportunity to understand your system's programs, available services, goals and accomplishments.
- Increases support for your staff and students and recognizes their accomplishments.
- Closes the gap that many parents and the general public feel about your schools.

Effective Public Relations

- Is about maintaining a good reputation among the vast number of publics you serve.
- Is providing good service to your customers.
- Is building and maintaining strong relationships.
- Is responding in a timely fashion to problems that arise with quality answers and steps to solutions.

Why You Need A Public Information Professional

Over the past two decades, the public's trust in traditional public schools has eroded. Today, we have private schools, private religious schools, home schools and charter schools, a combination of which takes valuable resources from many of our school systems.

On average, 75% to 80% of the population does not have school-age children. We also are in an increasingly mobile society where families no longer are centered around a particular area or community. The times when a child came home and told his or her family what happened that day at school are dwindling.

Combine all of this with increasingly intense scrutiny from the media, and you have school systems that are more under the microscope than ever before.

Public information professionals are not the solution when it comes to performance. The key, as we mentioned earlier, is doing a good job. However, the public information officer serves as a conduit, a person in your system whose specific task is getting the word out about your schools.

The Role of the Public Information Professional

Public information professionals wear a number of different hats, as you will see on a subsequent page. However, the professional's role can be summed up in seven words: Dealing with the public and the media.

A good public information officer has the community's pulse first and foremost at all times, and he or she can often help prevent problems or perceptions from developing before they do. The way to do this is by providing the public with sound, accurate information about your school system.

Role (continued)

As your system's liaison to the media, the public information officer is a point person for reporters to speak with when they need information or during a crisis. The media's intense glare can and often is a distraction; the public information professional helps the media get what it needs and helps prevent your administrators and staff from unnecessary distractions.

A Key Player

The Public Information Professional as a Key Player in Your School System's Decision Making Process

Increasingly, school systems are bringing in public information professionals from outside education. They often have been a part of the media at some point or worked in public relations in another field. This perspective can be extremely valuable to your school system.

In many systems, a large portion of the PIO's time is devoted to dispelling myths and rumors. They are charged with providing accurate, timely information to the media and the general public.

Both of these groups are interested more in the outcome than the process. They don't want to know what brought you to this point, but what you're doing now.

For the PIO to fully succeed, he or she must have access and a part in the decision making. Most superintendents hold executive staff or cabinet meetings on a regular basis. The public information officer must be a part of these meetings because they can bring the public's side (not just the educators) to the table.

Public information officers should be allowed into closed session meetings of the board. Any session that is closed brings up red flags for the media and general public, and the public information professional can help curb the rumor mill without violating what is said behind closed doors.

The Many Hats of the School P.R. Professional

1. Media Relations
2. Speech Writer
3. System Editor
4. Publications
5. Recognition Programs
6. Special Event and Master Calendar Keeper
7. School System Publication Information
8. Meets With Prospective Newcomers
9. Works With Realtors
10. Photography
11. Internal Communications
12. External Communications
13. Official Spokesperson for System
14. Business Partnerships
15. Community Schools
16. Liaison to Board of Education
17. Print Shop
18. Educational Access Channel
19. Power point Presentations
20. Serves at Discretion of Superintendent
21. After School Child Care
22. Marketing Plans
23. Systemwide Displays
24. Community Boards
25. Volunteer Coordinator
26. Special Events Coordinator
27. Writes Video Scripts and Produces Videos
28. Interior Decorator
29. Teacher Recruiter
30. Parent Involvement
31. Disaster Services
32. Advisory Councils
33. School News & Publicity
34. Facility Rentals
35. Assist in Policy Writing

**And last, but not least...
leaps tall buildings and flies like Superman!**

Great PR Advice for School Board Members

Source: National School Public Relations Association

The National School Public Relations Association recently asked seven past presidents of its organization to provide tips to school board members about communication and public relations. NSPRA's Presidents Award winners contributed the following ideas based on their years of experience. Their combined experience in working with Board members exceeds 100 years. And, as winners of the NSPRA Presidents Award, their colleagues have endorsed their wisdom and expertise. The information was compiled into an NSPRA bonus item, which was made available to all members. Included here are excerpts:

Cite a good leadership or communication practices of school board members.

- Arrange board agendas with at least as much time for curriculum and instruction items as for business and personnel items. (Ann Barkelew)

- One of the most important roles for board members is listening. Board members should make a point to listen to the hopes, concerns, fears and questions of the public and then — keeping what they've heard in perspective and realizing that they have heard from less than a representative sample — pass along what they've heard to other members of the school team. (John Wherry)

- Hand out compliments in public. When criticism is unavoidable, do it in private. A good board member practice is to refer inquiries from parents or citizens to the appropriate staff member . . . then follow up with the person to see how things turned out. Another good practice is to work out a procedure with the superintendent on reporting rumors or complaints that the board member learns about. (Larry Ascough)

- The greatest contribution a school board member can make is to hire an outstanding superintendent. Make sure that the superintendent can communicate with board members, staff and community. When you think about those areas that cause grief, invariably a lack of effective communication is at the bottom of the problem. (Don Bagin)

From your experience, what type of actions by board members damaged the overall perception/reputation of schools during your career?

- Refusing to disclose information that should be public make the Board appear to be hiding something or overly bureaucratic. On the other hand, members who give reporters legitimately confidential information for the purpose of embarrassing a staff person or another board member are usually transparent and quickly lose the respect of their colleagues, staff and the news media. (Ken Muir)

- Board members who insist on interviewing candidates and making final hiring decisions on staff members such as principals and coaches. Those are administrative jobs, not policy decisions. The only person the board should interview and hire is the superintendent. (John Wherry)

- Some board members may develop relationships with special interest groups to the detriment of the overall district good. Playing favorites is counter-productive and debilitating. Others have been known to continuously damage progress through "loose lips." They negatively influence board action by making public

Great PR Advice (continued)

statements prior to adequate board discussion, and if things don't go their way, they blast the decision retroactively. (Larry Ascough, Joe Davis)

- Pulling surprises on other board members and the administrative staff at board meetings. Leaking embargoed information prematurely. (Joe Davis)

What advice do you have for school board members when working with their district's communications professional?

- Give the ideas and advice of the district's communications professional the same attention and consideration that you give that from the district's attorney or business manager. Try to ensure that the communications budget is sufficient for research, surveys, strategic planning and professional development, and that the communications professional uses all of these tools to benefit the school district. (Ken Muir)

- Identify the most appropriate communication roles for school board members; work with the PR professional to maximize these opportunities. (Ann Barkelew)

- Treat other education team members with the respect you want them to show you. (John Wherry)

- The communications professional works for the superintendent and should not be put in a position of taking orders from board members. Respect the professional's expertise regarding the district's communication needs. If a board member has a PR concern, it should be discussed with the superintendent. Meanwhile, be enthusiastic and supportive of good communication with all publics. (Larry Ascough, Joe Davis)

- Demand the best. Obtain the best professional you can find, then lean on that person to provide you with sound communication advice that will help implement the school system's goals and improve learning. (Lew Armistead)

What advice do you have for school board members when working with the media?

- Be honest. (Joe Davis, Lew Armistead)

- Be sure that something positive happens at every board meeting. Prepare a jar filled with 3 x 5 cards that extol some undertaking in the school district. Have an audience member pick one out and read it. Reporters will probably pick up on it and may even ask to look at the contents of the jar for other story ideas. (Don Bagin)

- Allow the superintendent or the communications professional to provide factual information and to speak for the district — and the board — in reporting actions and events. Individual board members should confine their comments to the media to policy matters and explanations of their own viewpoints on issues. (Ken Muir, John Wherry)

- Never assume that anything is "off the record" when talking to a media representative. (John Wherry)

- You cannot get the last word in a dispute with the media. As the saying goes, "Never argue with someone who buys ink by the barrel and paper by the roll." Remember that being "misquoted" generally means that the media has reported exactly what you shouldn't have said. (John Wherry)

- Remember that it's not the media's job to do PR for the district or individual board members. News is what's unusual, which often translates into any "warts" the board or district might have. Don't go off the record, or be an "anonymous source." Always be cooperative, available when appropriate, and know the proper source where reporters can get an authoritative answer to a question. (Larry Ascough)

Great PR Advice (continued)

What's the best way for a board member to handle a news report that has an error in your statement or an action taken by the school board?

■ First, consider the extent of the mistake. Don't demand a correction if your name is misspelled. But always alert the reporter to the error so it won't happen again. Do it in a professional, calm manner. On major mistakes, don't be afraid to talk with an assignment editor or news editor. But always talk with the reporter first. (Lew Armistead, John Wherry)

■ Regarding an action by the school board, communicate the correction only through the district communications professional. Do not take it upon yourself to speak for the whole board unless you have been specifically designated to do so. (John Wherry)

■ Every district should have a standard procedure for handling erroneous media reports. Reporters usually appreciate knowing about actual errors, but handling such situations is an art. And there is a time to discuss continuing problems with editors. But usually, the problem should be handled by the PR director, the superintendent, or the board president, depending on the situation. Erroneous reports of an individual vote or statement may merit a call to the reporter . . . or it may not be that important. Avoid nastiness at all costs. Individuals treated like professionals will act like professionals. (Larry Ascough)

From a communications perspective, how can board members improve their image in the community or within the school system internally?

■ Be a good listener. Don't make up your mind until you have considered the major aspects of any issue. On controversial issues, carefully explain why you made the decision you did. Always try to act in the best interests of all students and to build support and respect for the school system. (Ken Muir, Lew Armistead)

■ Be a school volunteer. Find out first-hand what's happening in the classroom. That's where the action is. (Lew Armistead)

■ Show respect for all the people who comprise the school team and the important contributions they make to the education of students — from school secretaries and bus drivers, teachers, aides and carpenters, to principals and the superintendent. (John Wherry)

■ Good images are earned, not manufactured. Boards must be open, reasonable and fair. They should insist on policies and procedures that encourage effective external and internal communications and involvement. A Board should expect management to be proactive, to anticipate problems and have positive plans to deal with them, and to aggressively communicate progress, problems and plans. Individually, be reasonable, smile and stress the positive. (Larry Ascough)

■ Practice candor at all times and don't shoot from the hip. (Joe Davis)

■ Newly elected board members may have difficulty voting against a measure that may not be in the best interest of the total school district because it benefits a group of constituents who helped them win office.

What advice can you give members who find themselves in this political and sticky situation?

■ Prior to speaking publicly on the issue, or casting your vote at a board meeting, meet with the leaders of the proponent groups to explain your thinking. Discuss the pros and cons of the issues with them. If you remain committed to a position that is different from that of your supporters, explain clearly why you believe what you do. In most cases, your constituents may not be happy about your position, but they will respect your decision. (Ken Muir)

Great PR Advice (continued)

■ Follow your own moral compass. In a few years, you won't be on the school board anymore, but you have to live with yourself and the votes you cast forever. Measure your own integrity and decide if your vote is for sale or not. Know that, in the long haul, people have increased respect for those who vote against them based upon deeply held personal values. Again, it's integrity. It's your chance to see for yourself, and to display to the world, what you're made of. This is why you "get paid the big bucks." (John Wherry)

■ When the item comes up on the agenda, ask the chairperson for the privilege of explaining your vote before it is taken. Then address the whole electorate, not just a select group of constituents. (Joe Davis)

■ Voting for anything that is not in the best interests of the district will eventually come back to haunt a board member. True board leadership calls for adequately educating constituents, preferably before taking action. (Larry Ascough).

About the Contributors

Lew Armistead, APR (Presidents Award 1994), is President of LA Communications, Reston, Va. For many years he served as Director of Public Relations for the National Association of Secondary School Principals. He has worked in the field for more than 25 years, including 17 years with the national press. A former president of NSPRA, he began his career with the Association of California School Administrators.

Larry Ascough (Presidents Award 1981), a veteran of more than 30 years in school public relations, is currently Director of School Community Relations for School District U-46 in Elgin, IL. He formerly served as head of communications for the Dallas (Texas) Public Schools, held communication positions for the state departments of education in West Virginia and New York, and is an NSPRA past-president.

Dr. Don Bagin (Presidents Award 1986) is Professor of Communications at Rowan College of New Jersey, in Glassboro. He is author, with Donald R. Gallagher and Leslie W. Kindred, of one of the most widely used textbooks in school public relations, *The School and Community Relations*. He has taught communication theory and practice to thousands of school administrators and communications professionals.

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Dr. Joseph L. Davis (Presidents Award 1980), spent much of his career in the Columbus (Ohio) Public Schools, serving at one time as its Director of Information and subsequently as Superintendent of Schools. He was a former president of NSPRA, and prior to his retirement, directed the Education Management Center for Ohio State University in Columbus.

Dr. Kenneth K. Muir, APR (Presidents Award 1985), was a high school business education teacher and counselor in Baltimore, before serving as Director of Information for the Montgomery County (Md.) Public Schools. A former NSPRA president, he has been a business and public relations consultant to the Association, and is editor of its new book *School Public Relations: Building Confidence in Education*.

Dr. John H. Wherry, APR (Presidents Award 1998), is president of The Parent Institute in Fairfax, Va. Before that, he served as NSPRA Executive Director for 13 years. He began his career as a teacher and public relations officer for the Kansas City (Kan.) Public Schools. He has written and spoken extensively throughout the United States and Canada on school public relations and parenting.

The key to successful, accurate news coverage is:

SPEAK IN PLAIN ENGLISH

This one sounds simple, but it's not as easy as it looks for some educators.

Whether it is dealing with a reporter or with the average parent, speaking in plain English is something that will pay off.

Far too much attention is given to acronyms that condense words that many "plain folk" won't understand. Testing data, while important to us as educators and ultimately our students and parents, is in many cases so complex that it goes over the head of most people.

Remember that your audience is a bottom line group. In cases when safety is not the primary concern, what they want to know is:

- How it will affect me and my child.
- How it affects us as taxpayers.
- How it reflects on the school and/or the school system.

The ABCs of Educational Acronyms...

Here is what you shouldn't say... to the media or anyone else

I'm an ILT on a PDP who wants to be on an IGP. How can I do this when the SBE and DPI have us teaching the ABCs, especially when we have many kids on IEPs because they are ADD, ADHD, BEH, EMH or otherwise EC. And what if I'm part of VIF? Do I help LEPs or is that the responsibility of someone else in the LEA?

Please don't think of me as an SOB or put me on a PIP for bringing this up. I don't want to be DOA.

This PSA provided by your local PIO,
GC

Part II: News and The Media

When the Media Comes Calling

What is News

Media Basics: The 3Rs — Reporters, Rights and Rules

Crisis Communication

Common-Sense Guidelines for Working With the Media

Source: National School Public Relations Association

Whenever you are working with the media — print or electronic — observe the following common-sense techniques. Beware of falling prey to the delusions listed. Remember, when you speak, YOU are your school system.

24 MEDIA COMMANDMENTS

1. If you don't want it printed or broadcast, don't say it! — Think before you speak. Put your mind in gear before you put your mouth in motion.
2. Say it in 30 seconds. Twenty seconds is even better. Try to get as close as you can to a newspaper headline. Ask yourself, "How is this going to sound on the radio and look on TV and in print?"
3. Don't make smart aleck statements.
4. Never say "No comment." This sounds like "I refuse to answer on the grounds it will incriminate me." Instead, say, "I'll have a statement later." Then, do just that as soon as you get organized. It's O.K. to say "I don't know." Don't try to wing information. Tell the reporter that you need to check some facts first and you'll call them back shortly. Then check the facts and call them back as soon as possible. Be reliable.
5. Never wear dark glasses during a television interview.
6. Don't be misled by "off the record" unless you want to entrust your career to the media.
7. Never give reporters your personal opinion. Reporters view whatever you say as your school system's viewpoint.
8. Avoid being outwardly hostile toward the media. Remember, the way you treat the media is often the way the media will treat you. The Golden Rule applies with the media, just as it does with the rest of the human race.

24 MEDIA COMMANDMENTS (continued)

9. Always convey to the reporter that you are trying to help him/her meet his/her deadline.
10. Be organized! Be in charge! The media respect this. Often the presence of a news paper reporter's notepad, a photographer's lens or an interviewer's microphone will cause chaos all by itself. This causes confusion as reporters jostle for a position to get your statement. Remember, the media likes 1, 2, 3!
11. Avoid the appearance of a cover up.
12. Be proactive. Always get your story out first. Get bad news out quickly and correctly. Be honest.
 - Remember, truth never catches up with the lie.
 - Dribbling out information keeps an embarrassing story alive.
 - Make it a one-day story and most folks will not remember it.
 - If more facts continue to leak out little by little and the story festers, you've prolonged it into a scandal or worse.
13. Record all sensitive media interviews. Assume all calls from reporters are being taped. This is simply standard operating procedure for the media. In all states but Florida, recording conversations is allowed. Only one person needs to know about the recording. And, that person is the reporter.
 - You don't have to respond immediately to a telephone call from a reporter. First, ask when their deadline is. Second, say you will call back with the information in 15 minutes. Third, do just that!
 - You never want to get the reputation you stall and don't call back.
 - Remember, you never want to force a reporter to go to a secondary and less reliable source for YOUR story.
14. Be wary of still photographers. Think carefully about your body language. Especially avoid touching your nose, as this may indicate one of the following non-verbal messages: (1) "I am lying;" (2) "I'm not sure about what I'm saying;" or (3) "I'm afraid about how you'll react."

24 MEDIA COMMANDMENTS (continued)

15. Be alert for the waiting tactic. Most people can stand only 6.5 seconds of silence. Reporters know this and usually find you'll fill that silence. That's when they get their real story. Remember, if you have said all you need to say, STOP!
16. Be aware of newspaper deadlines. Causing a reporter to miss a deadline creates friction.
 - Deadlines assume more importance than getting complete information. Reporters must go to print or on the air with what they have at deadline.
 - If your story isn't part of their story at deadline, it's your fault!
17. Don't let the media take over your agency offices or building. They have no legal right to interfere with your agency's operation. Schedule news briefings elsewhere.
18. Be prepared for a media blitz.
 - Use a chalk board for statistics. Better yet, have handouts.
 - Convey you are trying to help the media.
 - Remember, the media — like you — are simply trying to do the job their editors or news directors have assigned them to do.
 - Take care of the local media first. First your hometown, then the county, then the district, then the state, nation, and world. Remember, the "big boys" will go back to the big cities and you'll still have to deal with the "hometown" news teams.
19. Never change your ground rules in the middle of the game. Don't play favorites.
20. Don't assume the interview is over until the TV or radio crew drives away.
 - Female reporters give little slack because they must work harder for recognition.
 - Remember, the tape is always turning when they walk up, when they disassemble their equipment, and even when they drive away.
21. Maintain a good balance in your media relations account. You get a penny when you do something good. You take out five dollars when you do something stupid.
22. Always be 100% right in your confrontations with the media.
23. Don't fight with people who buy ink by the tank car and paper by the truckload.
24. Don't screw up on a slow news day!

What is news?

Often negative, news is information that is not the norm. Simple day-to-day operations are not news. Often times, “good news” doesn’t get reported unless it contains one of the following three elements:

- Conflict
- Irregular or unusual events or circumstances
- Something special or different.

You’ll notice that these are the components in every “bad news” story as well. What you have to remember is that if it’s just a normal everyday thing, then usually it’s not news.

Don’t forget...
news also can be what reporters say it is.

Delusions of Grandeur?

1. "I'm safe from 'big-city' reporters" (out-of-towners, out-of-starters).
2. "The out-of-town media will treat me like the local media."
3. "I can respond to the media in my own good time and in my own good way."
 - Contrast the speed of the print and electronic media with the pace of your agency...your office.
 - Give the media the information as soon as possible.
 - If you don't know or don't have the facts, tell the media you will get back to them as quickly as possible. Then, do just that!
 - Follow up as soon as possible with additional facts as they become available.
 - Shift into high gear or be left behind.
4. "I can wing it."
 - Be prepared!
 - Use the people resources available to you: your staff, the director of information, your director, managers, etc.
5. "I can retreat into the security of silence."
 - The media sees this as stonewalling and as evidence of a cover-up.

Media Basics: The 3 Rs

Reporters, Rights and Rules

Reporters

Reporters, despite what you may think, are human, too.

They make mistakes, some more than their share. They can allow personal experience or feelings to cloud their questioning. They also can be the best and most reliable compatriot you have ever had.

Reporters distinguish themselves by being first and/or providing more information than their competitors. That is their job. If you are contacted, your job is to make sure the reporter is able to do his job without hurting you.

Sounds tough, doesn't it? It's not as hard as you think.

Just as you have a chain of command, so does the media. Respect their job, try to be accommodating and be up front with the reporter. Don't be afraid to spend time discussing the facts of a story, but don't go away from your message.

If you do these things, as a general rule, the media will respect your position as well.

Reporter's Rights

A reporter has the right to:

- Reasonable access to legitimate news sources.
- Have his/her deadlines and logistical needs considered.
- Ask any question on any topic.
- Receive a concise and direct answer to relevant and appropriate questions.
- Seek timely responses to inquiries and to follow-up for clarification.
- Request printed or pictorial material to support an interview.
- Receive correct information if misinformation is given.
- Check quotes or seek additional information prior to publication.
- Redirect the interview to other topics and to evaluate and report the story from his/her perspective.
- Access — The right to gather information, photos and video from any public — right away.

Your Rights

You have the right to:

- Find out what the story/topic is prior to the interview.
- Know how the interview material is to be used, and if other people will be interviewed for the story.
- Pause, to think of a knowledgeable answer to a question.
- Interpret and restate obscure or lengthy questions.
- Clarify information.
- Steer the topic, and to bring up key points relevant to the story.
- Find someone who is willing to conduct the interview.

NOTE:

You do not have the right to view or read a story prior to publication.

Rules to Remember

#6: Give the media what they need, not necessarily what they want.

#5: Respect deadlines. Respect deadlines. Respect **DEADLINES**.

#4: Be accurate. Avoid opinion. Never give out confidential information.

#3: "No comment" is a no-no; be non-defensive, pro-active and outwardly friendly – regardless.

#2: Accentuate the positive. You can't eliminate the negative.

#1: DON'T LIE.

The most important rule is to be honest. Don't lie to a reporter. Don't necessarily give up the farm, but don't lie. Don't ever give out confidential information. You **WILL** get caught, maybe not now but eventually, and the media suffers from an extreme case of elephantitis when someone lies to them.

Crisis Communications requires

common sense and lightning speed

It is the administration's job to speak to the media.

The key to being accurate is one clear message.

As a board member, your job is to have a crisis communication plan in place.

In a crisis, board members should not speak to the media without some direction from your public information officer and/or superintendent.

Part III: The Interview

How to relax

Common questions you may have about doing an interview

Conducting a news conference

Interviewing techniques

*Strategies for
answering questions*

How to Relax

These tips will help you to relax before and during an interview:

- Be energetic.
- Stand up straight.
- Gesture (helps to relieve tension).
- Stretch before (helps to relieve tension).
- Take deep breaths.
- Focus on the subject.
- Talk in short sentences.

Questions You May Have About Doing Interviews

How long should my answers be?

Be as concise as possible without sounding rude, abrupt, or insensitive.

What do you do when a TV station is going live?

Hit your main messages immediately and briefly. Find ways to return to them as often as you can.

What if a reporter wants to go off the record?

Do not do it.

What information is on the record?

Everything said within sight and sound of a reporter.

What if I stumble?

As long as it is not a factual error, just keep talking, especially if live. If embarrassing and on tape, say you want to start over.

Should you be positive in the face of tragedy?

No. Be caring, reassuring and non-defensive.

How much should I engage in small talk?

Be wary of it. It is a good source of embarrassing quotes. Remember there is safety in silence.

What if the reporter surprises me?

Stop and ponder the question thoughtfully and silently, then answer.

Things you should do when...

Conducting a News Conference

- Don't wear expensive jewelry.
- Males wearing dark colors convey authority.
- Females should not wear dangling earrings.
- Give out a news release prior to the conference. Only one person should do the talking. Everyone else should stay away.
- Choose a roomy room. Think of the equipment TV crews bring. Have a lectern.
- If you schedule the conference for 10 a.m., begin it at 10:05 a.m.
 - NOTE:** A 10 a.m. news conference is excellent planning, as it allows reporters time to develop their story through careful interviews, data reviews, etc.
- Wipe sweat off your face before the conference. Remember the Nixon-Kennedy debates?
- Schedule news conferences in the morning whenever possible. Start with "I have a short statement . . ."
- State at the outset how much time is available before the spokesperson's next obligation.
- You know it's over when the questions dwindle or become silly, and the crews begin packing their equipment.
- At that point say, "I'll take one more question." Then, say "Thank you very much" and leave!!
- Do not answer any more questions as you leave no matter how loudly reporters shout. They had their chance.

Interviewing Techniques

#1: Don't memorize your message, but know what you want to say.

Your goal is to deliver your information conversationally, not memorize it. Think of your messages as a "concept" to be conveyed rather than inflexible statements. Use words that naturally come to you.

#2: Before you start an interview, avoid distractions and get focused.

Try to concentrate only on what you are about to say. Avoid last-minute distractions and conversations before starting an interview. If that is impossible, then take a moment to gather your thoughts before speaking.

#3: Be up front – at the front.

Say what you want to say at the start of the interview. This way, your message won't have to be weaved (and in some cases, jammed) into the conversation later. Ask the reporter if you can say "a few things" about the topic before the interview begins. Then, if the reporter has questions, they can ask them after you've gotten your message out.

#4: Repeat the primary message.

Before the interview ends, make sure you find some way to restate your primary message a second time.

#5: Keep the "Spirit."

If the interview is extended or concerns very technical topics (test results, budget questions), try to deliver the spirit of your message. Always be consistent with the "spirit" if not the "letter" of your messages.

#6: Address – not finesse.

Maintain the philosophy of your messages while trying to be forthcoming so the public and the reporter believe you addressed rather than finessed the issues. For this to work, it is important to contemplate answering all worst-case questions. This is time-consuming with a risk of getting off message or saying too much, but it can be persuasive.

Taking Control:

Strategies for Answering Questions In Interviews

Interviews, despite the potential complexity of your topic, actually can be very simple to do as long as you are the one who is in control.

Here are some tips for taking control of the interview.

- Be friendly
- Be calm
- Stay in control

Remember who you are trying to reach — the general public.

What you should do when...

... **You have no information at all**

Say you don't have it, but will provide it as soon as you can.

... **A reporter interrupts your answer.**

Ask — nicely — if you may finish what you are trying to say. Then finish it before moving on.

... **You don't understand the question.**

Ask the reporter to repeat or rephrase it until you understand it.

... **The reporter is nasty, or asking you loaded questions.**

Remain friendly and calm. Remember your real audience is the public the media is reaching, not the reporters. Strive to be "the quiet voice of reason."

... **You can't answer the reporter's question.**

Say you can't, say why you can't and steer to a message.

... **A reporter exaggerates or says something that is not true**

Correct the reporter nicely. State the truth. Do not repeat the exaggeration in your answer.

What you should do when...

... A reporter stresses the negative.

Stress the actions being taken. Be reassuring and be positive.

... A reporter misstates the situation.

Say: "We don't see it that way." Again, be friendly, calm and in control.

... A reporter says you're not doing enough.

Don't repeat the accusation. Simply tell them again what you action you are taking.

... You have information you are not sure is correct.

Do not use it until you are sure it is correct.

... The reporter asks about rumors or incorrect information about which you are aware.

Say you can't confirm it, but will when and if you can.

... You are faced with speculative "what if" questions

Say you don't want to speculate, but you want the people to know you are doing everything possible on their behalf.

... The reporter misses the news conference and another isn't scheduled.

Give a private interview if it serves your strategy.

... Reporters want you for individual live interviews.

Do them if they serve your purpose.

... You are baited to attack a person.

Challenge ideas and issues instead of people, if possible.

Appendix

Scenarios

Credits

Scenarios

Book Ban

A kindergarten parent in your school system wants to ban the book "Fun With Dick and Jane" because she objects to excessive use of the word "Dick." The parent, who is an extreme religious conservative, has gone through all of the channels and is planning to bring her church members to picket your board meeting. News stations have gotten hold of this information and you are beginning to receive inquiries from state and national media. Prior to the board meeting, interviews are set up with a nearby television station and a reporter with an alleged sense of humor shows up at your door.

Board of Education Member

A Board of Education member who historically exercises very little control over what he says at a Board meeting unleashes a triad of accusations in public against the assistant superintendent of program services. The accusations are groundless. Even after caution from the Board attorney, the Board member refuses to quit. The accusations are both professional and personal and make the front page of the weekly newspaper and TV. The employee files a grievance against the Board of Education. Did the public accusation violate the legal protection provided students and employees? As Board chairman, what do you say to the media reporter concerning the Board member? What is the Board's position when media continues its investigation?

Bomb Threat

You have a bomb threat at a high school on a rainy day. This is the third bomb threat in five days. Because of the weather, the principal puts half of the students on buses and the other half in the gym and auditorium. A police search turns up no bomb - it is another hoax. A group of parents call for the dismissal of the principal because he didn't follow school system bomb threat procedures. The media brings the parent complaint to the chairman of the Board and wants to know what action the Board is going to take against the principal, if any.

Bus Accident

A chartered bus with a group of 4th grade children is involved in an accident while on a field trip in another state. Several students are injured, one critically, and the driver is arrested on suspicion of being under the influence. The driver is not an employee of your school system. A reporter arrives seeking comment.

Coach Arrested

A coach is arrested for sexual harassment of one of his female students. Other students are alleging he did the same thing to them over a several year period. The employee, who is well known in the community and a personal friend of yours, is now working in a nearby system.

Conflict With County Commissioners

The county commissioners have refused for the last several years to increase current expense funding by more than 2%. As a result, your school system is behind the 8-ball and is facing moves that include layoffs of some support personnel. One reason the commissioners refuse to increase funding is because student achievement is below the state average in some areas and just at the state average in others. A reporter who covers the commissioners, not your school system, arrives seeking comment.

Conservative Religious Right Gift

A conservative religious right organization who in the past has advocated strict censorship of books in the school media center and also has opposed the system's sex education curriculum offers \$500,000 to underwrite five visiting teacher professional positions for a year. The gift comes with no strings attached. It's up to the school system to hire and place the teachers. A large group of parents attend the Board meeting and oppose the gift. The gift is the single largest gift the school system has ever been offered. Are you willing to accept a gift from an organization that has so vehemently opposed your school system in the past? Are you concerned organization may try to control teachers even though no strings are attached to the gift? What are you going to say to the parents?

Financial Issue

The superintendent of schools is arrested for writing a series of bad checks and ultimately declares bankruptcy. The media wants to know if the Board of Education can place any faith in the superintendent to manage a \$125 million budget when she is unable to manage her own budget. A week later the press uncovers the superintendent has a history of bad checks. Also at issue in a school system where character education is an important initiative across the curriculum and the superintendent is the top curriculum leader and top role model, what impact will this have on the program and what kind of a message does this send to students?

- Issues
1. Competency of superintendent to manage a \$125 million budget when he or she can't manage own budget.
 2. What kind of message does this send as top role model in the system?
 3. Does the Board have any legal or moral responsibility to consider the contractual relationship with the superintendent.
 4. Should either issue affect contractual agreement with superintendent?

Maintaining Staff

School teachers are fleeing your system to neighboring districts because your supplement is 10% lower than the average in your area. To raise the supplement, however, would require as much as \$4 million. This has only become a problem recently and centers around two elementary schools in your county with weak principals. Parents have been bombarding your board meetings recently and have spoken with reporters about how you are making no efforts to retain qualified teachers. A reporter who has a child in one of the schools comes to talk to you about the problem.

School Sanctioned Field Trips

Up until now, the Board of Education often approves field trips that have already occurred. The Air Force Junior ROTC program at a high school sent a request to the Board for approval of a trip to Andrews Air Force Base in Washington, D.C., between monthly board meetings. A student was critically injured and faces disability. Approval of the field trip is on the agenda for the next Board Meeting. The family of the student has retained counsel and indicated it will sue the Board for negligence. Although Board policy says field trips must be approved in advance, approving field trips afterwards has been a common practice in the past. How do you defend your liability?

Credits

Information in this booklet comes from personal experience and a variety of resources, including the National School Public Relations Association and North Carolina School Public Relations Association. One section features information from Rick Amme's Mastering Media session.

For more information about NSPRA, visit the organization's website at www.nspr.org

For more information about NCSPPRA, visit the website at www.ncspr.eastnet.ecu.edu

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