

Public Advocacy



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Key Communicators

Beat the rumor mill with a trusted network of truth-tellers

AS SCHOOL LEADERS, YOU KNOW how difficult—if not impossible—it can be to stop the rumor mill once it starts. And this is made even harder by the information overload your parents, staff, and community face thanks to social media.

One way to combat rumors is by developing a group or groups of key communicators to help tell the true story about what’s happening in your schools. In fact, developing a cadre of unpaid cheerleaders for your district may be one of the least expensive, most important communications tasks you undertake.

“Everybody, in essence, has a broadcast station in their back pocket that allows them to reach thousands of people instantly,” says Tom Salter, senior communications officer for Alabama’s Montgomery

Public Schools. “Now it’s more important than ever that people know what’s really going on and not just whispered over the electronic back fence.”

Salter is the author of *A Guidebook for Opinion Leader/Communicator Programs* published by the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA). Written a decade ago, it remains one of the most popular publications sold by the organization.

“It’s even more relevant today,” Salter says.

AND SO ON

In the early 1980s, Faberge Organics introduced the concept of viral marketing to a mass audience through a series of popular TV commercials. “I told two friends,” the spokesperson said, holding

up a bottle of shampoo, “and they told two friends, and so on, and so on.”

In essence, that’s what key communicator groups do, but the idea behind them dates back to the 1960s. Salter says the groups were first developed by Donald Bagin, the late Rowan University professor who created the first graduate program in school public relations.

“He was interested in cognitive dissonance theory and how people change their minds,” Salter says of Bagin, whose brother Rich is NSPRA’s longtime executive director. “The bottom line is: They normally don’t do it.

“However, people do change their minds when someone they know and trust provides information that they can test out and then decide whether they agree or disagree,” he continues. “If you are reading something from a friend on Facebook or Twitter that’s not accurate, and you don’t have another thing to counteract it, that becomes the truth or perception.”

School districts share mass and targeted communications with the staff and the public through press releases, social media posts, and publications, among other channels. Chances are you also have regular communications with municipal and county government leaders, clergy, and the leaders of civic organizations. While important, they’re not the same as key communicators.

“That’s the low-hanging fruit,” Salter says. “Key communicators, in my view, are the people who really have an impact on the way other people think, but they’re not the ones so much in the spotlight or shouting from the mountaintops. They’re the ones whispering in the background.”

Salter targets barbers, doctors, and real estate agents, among others, for his external key communicator group. The reason: They see multiple people from all walks of life every day, and they “talk and talk about what’s going on about

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everything, including the schools.”

“If the barber or hair stylist has information he or she can share or can pick up the phone when the customer is still there and call a school official, it makes them feel important,” Salter says. “More important, the question can be answered quickly and factually before someone else tells the story, because people often make up stories to make the world make sense.”

Internally, Salter suggests seeking out custodians, food service staff, and other classified employees. Depending on your district, you might want to look for student leaders who also would be good candidates.

“Sometimes people don’t realize the custodian in the school may be the deacon at one of the largest churches in the area,” he says. “To people in that church, that person is the school system. If a church member asks, ‘Why do we need a new tax?’ and this person can’t answer it, then the information may be inaccurate. Suddenly, ‘the superintendent needs a new car’ becomes the story.”

SETTING IT UP

Setting up a key communicator network is not a large expense, but it does take staff time and effort. It also does not happen overnight, because you want to make sure you have the right mix of people from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. Reach out to your schools and others for prospective candidates and contact them

to make sure they will be willing to serve.

Usually these types of groups are set up in the late summer/early fall as school is starting. You typically will have one in-person meeting a year. Salter has two; one in the fall and one in late winter/early spring to discuss major budget initiatives for the following year.

“We talk about what we’re going to do and the things we have done, and we usually have to say it more than once because we have a couple of different groups that are involved,” he says.

The key communicators should know that they will receive information about the district’s major initiatives as well as “anything that will help them help you,” Salter says. It’s also important to establish a contact person they can call or email if an issue arises.

“The contact person needs to make sure he or she knows the members of the key communicator group and demonstrate that they are willing to listen to concerns and questions in a timely manner,” Salter says. “It’s all about establishing two-way communications.”

In Montgomery, Salter has set up a closed Facebook group page for his network that allows members to ask questions and receive information that is not necessarily aimed at the general public about issues.

“It makes them feel important that they are getting information that they think is exclusive and coming from the horses’ mouth,” he says. “It’s another way to build trust.”

Salter also has a database on his key communicators that focuses on their areas of interest. If an issue arises on one of those areas, such as STEM education, he will send them surveys or personal invitations to events that are relevant.

In the end, key communicators groups are about “building relationships,” Salter says. “If you build good relationships, then when the stuff hits the fan, the people you are tuned in with as key communicators will be your advocates. They will stand up for you, fight for you, and help you.”

If you’re looking to start a key communicators network, check out Salter’s book on the NSPRA website (<http://www.nspr.org>) as well as a tip sheet NSBA has developed for its National Connection members. The tip sheet is available at <https://www.nsba.org/establishing-key-communicators-network-tipsheet>.



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