

WATT Works in School PR?

Light Bulb session presented by Gerri Allen, Washtenaw Intermediate School District

Use “miracles” to connect with your audience.

When speaking in public...always have three "miracles" tucked into your back pocket...true stories about the amazing things students and/or teachers are doing/learning in your schools. Use these stories to "paint pictures" for your audience. Facts and figures are nice for annual reports...but real-life stories create an emotional connection and are rarely forgotten. Sometimes you can capture the entire essence of what we do with one example of how a child was forever changed by a teacher.

Karen McPhee, Ottawa Area ISD

Meet regionally with MSPRA colleagues.

Meet regionally for professional development, media leverage, MSPRA updates, neighboring district issues, and building relationships with colleagues who understand your job and its challenges.

Shelley Yorke Rose, Oakland Schools

Join NSPRA.

Membership in the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) is the perfect complement to your membership in MSPRA. It's a combination that will give you 1,001 PR ideas!

These tips come from NSPRA:

Invest in yourself.

Offer to “split the cost” if your request for professional development is denied. It sends a message about just how important your career is to you. Don't be the person to hold yourself back.

Be enthusiastic, passionate and proactive.

Be the type who does more than expected, offer thought-joggers for your bosses for issues on the horizon, do whatever it takes, whether it be maitre'd PR in making sure there are enough chairs in the room for your meeting to offering counsel on your boss' presentation style.

Practice Integrity with a capital I.

Sooner or later your reputation will become one of the biggest assets you have. So you need to ask yourself, “What do I stand for?” In our profession, integrity and credibility rank at the top of the list. During your career, you will be tested in so many ways. By taking the high ground, people will be able to see you better and just what you stand for.

Be committed and persistent.

You need the commitment to believe in education and what it can do for our society. Paraphrasing a Wit and

Wisdom quote...If you are not the first in line to donate a pint of blood, don't do PR for the blood drive. We need to believe in what our function can do to help education. And we need to be persistent.

Share crisis letters with all buildings.

If a school building in your district has a crisis that requires the principal to send a letter home to parents, encourage the principal to send a copy to all other principals (or to district headquarters for distribution) by e-mail ASAP. It gives staff members correct information and cuts down on rumors.

Check out the NSPRA award-winning web sites.

See the winners from NSPRA's annual Publications and Electronic Media Contest at www.nspr.org.

Treat everyone like a guest.

Treat EVERYONE who visits your school like they are your guests at a party.

Cindy Lyons, Jackson Area Career Center

Supply a regular, newsy one-pager from central office.

Prepare a one-page sheet of district news that can be added to each building's regular parent newsletter. It's an easy, convenient way to get information about the district into the hands of parents.

Marybeth Roose, Ph.D., Howell Public Schools

Jennifer Rogers, Michigan Association of School Boards, compiled these tips from state & national sources:

Create positive gossip.

Schools do millions of things right every day. Talk to others about the “right” things your school is doing and their positive effects on student learning. Mention staff members' good work to others in the community.

Set up a personal key communicator network.

Tell opinion leaders you know about what's happening in your schools. Ask them to share the information with others. Ask them what they're hearing about the schools. Ask them to call you when they hear negative comments. Remember, the most influential communicators are not always the most visible people in your community.

Be a booster.

Attend school events, such as plays, sports, concerts and assemblies. Buy some band candy or donate some time to the school bazaar. By demonstrating your school spirit you encourage others to do the same.

Compliment others.

Tell others when they do a good job, have a good idea or make a positive contribution to your schools and your students. Look for opportunities to tell others that they are valued and that you recognize their efforts on behalf of your students. Use board meetings to systematically recognize staff and commend and honor volunteers.

Welcome visitors.

First impressions help form the attitudes people have about your school district. Make sure that visitors to your schools and to your board meetings feel welcome and that they know that their involvement is appreciated. Greet all visitors, even critics, with the same attitude: your shared goal is what's best for your schools and your students.

Communicate clearly.

Avoid education jargon. It sets up barriers to clear communication. Use simple, direct language so that everyone can understand your message.

Set high expectations.

Encourage your school board and administration to set the tone for your school district by adopting policies and procedures that support strong public relations efforts and comprehensive school-family-community partnerships. Model what you want by your words and actions.

Express appreciation.

Write thank-you notes for jobs well done. Appreciate even the smallest jobs. Never miss an opportunity to recognize the contributions of others to the success of your district.

Recognize employee contributions.

Let staff members know that you are interested in their programs by scheduling reports at school board meetings. Develop a staff recognition program for your district that includes opportunities to honor the work of the support staff as well as that of the teachers and administrators. Encourage parent organizations and other community groups to also laud staff achievements.

Encourage community involvement.

Support efforts to get people into the schools and to take the schools into the community. Remember that school employees are the key ambassadors for your schools. A successful strategy for winning community support is to go directly to key groups via their opinion leaders, on a school-by-school basis.

Visit schools.

Take your board members around to meet with employees face-to-face. Personal encounters, even in a group situation, can build trust. Arrange your visits for times when student learning will not be disrupted. Be sure the staff knows that you're coming to learn, not inspect. Talk to students, too.

Establish a relationship with reporters.

Maintaining a positive rapport with reporters can pay huge dividends, especially when a crisis occurs. Remember, the media's role is to provide objective, accurate information, not to make the school district look good. Give reporters the best information you have or tell them why you can't.

Tell the truth.

Never lie - to a reporter, to your staff, or to the public. It will be much worse if someone has to dig out the facts because you haven't been honest. Intentionally providing inaccurate or misleading information will affect your credibility and tarnish the reputation of your schools.

Always speak "on the record."

If you don't want to see your words in print or quoted, don't say them. Nothing is ever really "off the record."

Recognize that bad news doesn't get better with age.

Acknowledge bad news and then quickly decide what you are going to do about it. If it's potentially damaging, you may want to manage the situation by telling reporters before it becomes public.

Some additional tips/reminders...

Attend school board meetings—even if it's not required. Be on hand to serve as a liaison for the reporters who are inevitably there. Be available to help make sure people are signed in and know the procedure for public comment. You'll also learn more about what's going on in the district.

Help your boss meet the board's expectations. Offer to be a resource—through your boss—to them for things like media relations training and talking points on hot topics. Helping your boss help the board helps you.

If you don't already do so, ask to **sit in on the superintendent's cabinet meetings**. If you have to, offer to take notes. Short of that; ask to have weekly meetings with your superintendent to make sure you're kept in the loop. If you aren't in the cabinet meetings by the end of the first year, keep knocking on the door. You're most effective when you have direct access to decision makers.

Never underestimate the power of your access to the superintendent. Carefully weigh things that you take to your boss. Also, know that some people will assume that you speak for the superintendent. So, watch what you say.

Get good at playing dumb. Be confidential. Always.

Use MSPRA. MSPRA members are the only people who really understand your unique role. Use us. And, use the list-serv to stay on top of **WATT works in School PR!**

Gerri Allen, Washtenaw ISD

gallen@wash.k12.mi.us

For Beginners (and those who wish they could start over...)

WATT Works in School PR?

Light Bulb bonus compiled by Gerri Allen, Washtenaw Intermediate School District

Two things would have made it easier when I started:

1. Information on the four-step process for community relations because it would have provided a basis for considering the entire situation. (**R**esearch, **A**nalyze, **C**ommunicate, **E**valuate.)
2. A look at a communications plan because it would have given me an idea of what others were doing and what I could do.

Richard A. Egli, APR, Egli and Associates

The thing that continues to amaze (and often

overwhelm) me is the customer service component of this job. Keeping the general public -- and various constituent groups -- happy has presented a much bigger challenge than working with the news media or communicating internally. And communications is just a part of this challenge (meeting the wide variety of information needs of our many 'publics.'). Beyond traditional information tasks (like publications, web communications, releases -- all of which are fairly systematic -- are areas like District HQ front desk/lobby operations, requests from alumni, and the literally thousands of incoming calls and e-mails that have no where else to go except to the PR person.

And when dealing with such a wide variety of publics, I've learned that it's impossible to over-communicate. We've been repeating key messages on items of strategic importance to the district over and over again in our newspaper page in the local paper, in parent newsletters, online, in our staff publication, in lobby display info, etc.

Tom Vance, Portage Public Schools

If I could have done things differently, I would not have

assumed that the Board of Education understood the importance of school PR. I would have devoted effort to helping that group of internal constituents understand the vital role school PR plays. (I recently read a quote from Gary Aungst, NSPRA member from Arizona; he said his primary job is to sell and continue to sell the school PR function to his board--before actually practicing PR with external or other internal constituents.)

Mimi Bell, The Rehmann Group

Things I would have appreciated knowing as a new PR

person: How to write a press release and format it. How do I get free publicity? Do I mail, fax or email a press release? How do I find out who to contact in the media? (If you want the answers, contact me.) Good luck!

Joan Richmond, Traverse Bay Area ISD

1. **Before all else, BECOME AN MSPRA MEMBER!**
2. Go out to the buildings you are communicating for and interview the top folks to find out what they expect from the school PR program.
3. Create a database with information gathered through personal phone calls to all media sources. Include reporter names, assignment desk, editors, deadlines, and whether they prefer press releases to be faxed or sent via e-mail. Create fax sheet cover pages for each media source that can be easily edited to include your latest press release.
4. Find out what strategic planning has been done for your organization (mission, goals, etc.) and what goals the organization has for school communication. Use this input to establish your own goals. Communicate these with the people you interviewed.
5. As you are "doing school PR," ask yourself "Why am I doing what I'm doing right now?" Are your day-to-day activities supporting your strategic goals?
6. Go to a few established school PR offices and interview them to uncover best practices, challenges, things they would do differently.

Kristin Tank, Muskegon Area ISD

Life would have been easier starting out if I had sought out a mentor. A boss and coworkers can be relied on for many things, but not everything.

Michelle Ready, Ottawa Area ISD

Back when I started, I wish I would have done some form of a communication audit. Either with the superintendent/cabinet/or board members, or based on data to know what is working and should be maintained and what was not working or outdated that could be let go. Too often as new professionals we spend the first year doing what we think we should continue based on the position we are filling, instead of utilizing concrete information to determine the best communication plan for the time.

Anita Banach, Clarkston Community Schools

1. **One of the best pieces of advice I received is** to make decisions based on what's best for the children you serve.
2. A long time ago I was told: good communicators learn to listen, really listen.
3. And, lastly, I can't express how helpful it is to earn your APR (Accredited in Public Relations).

Judy L. Evola, APR, Walled Lake Schools

My PR ABCs

Survival Tips gleaned from MSPRA members—my teachers, colleagues and friends—through the years.

By Gerri Allen, Washtenaw Intermediate School District: gallen@wash.k12.mi.us

- A**nticipate: Parent concerns....staff reactions....student views....administration issues...board needs...media questions. One indicator of an excellent PR program is the complaint that doesn't surface or the story that doesn't get reported...
(Who says our work is hard to measure?)
- B**e thankful: for meaningful work, for spell check, for people who find the mistakes in your prose—before or after printing, for those who watch your back.
(Thanks for watching mine.)
- C**ommunicate. Put it in the newsletter. Post it on the web. Write a news release. Send an e-mail. Leave a voice mail. Produce a memo. Then, patiently explain it to the one who says, “no one ever told *me* about it.”
- D**o the right thing. Be the conscience of the district.
(Always!)
- E**xercise your role as PR Counselor. Knock on the door until it's opened. Speak until you're heard. To paraphrase Edward L. Bernays, the father of modern public relations: We'll know we've arrived, when our PR counsel is taken as seriously as that of an attorney's.
- F**ind help. Ask any MSPRA member, for anything, anytime.
(Thank goodness for our list-serv!)
- G**o home. Work is rewarding but family is irreplaceable. One night a week, go home when everyone else does. Then your family can see you in person, not just on the evening news.
- H**ave fun. Katherine Graham, the late publisher of the Washington Post, once said, “To love what you do and feel that it matters—what could be more fun?”
(I agree.)
- I**nvoke clarifying questions: What's the purpose? Who's the audience? What resources do we have? Who will be responsible?
(Don't proceed until you get the answers.)
- J**oin MSPRA and NSPRA (National School Public Relations Association). Participate beyond conferences. Share your input, opinion, and expertise. Do it for the children. Do it for the district. Do it for yourself.
- K**now that the best surprise is no surprise. I've learned that you shouldn't surprise your boss with new information at a committee meeting; or surprise your staff with changes by announcing them first in the newspaper.
(Save surprises for birthdays and awards.)
- L**earn bit by bit. Pay attention to that ‘unrelated’ presentation. Note that factoid shared at a meeting's end. They might come in handy. In this day and age of 24-hour news coverage and the expectation of 24-hour customer service, recalling a critical bit of information at the right time could save your PR bacon.
(Think of them as bacon bits.)
- M**entor someone. You'll be surprised at what you discover about yourself, your job and your profession. It's been said, “We teach what we most need to learn.”
- N**ever sacrifice a relationship to be right. PR is building personal relationships. (We learned this from Pat Jackson.) And, we can't afford to sacrifice any of them. As my Winkelman's manager once advised, “Never close a door behind you...because you never know when you'll need it open.”
- O**rganize your day. But plan for emergencies.
- P**roofread other's work—not your own. Note: To prevent a CLM (*Career-Limiting Mistake*)—NEVER proofread your own work in the wee morning hours.
(Bonus: P ray...for guidance, energy, insight, energy, patience, energy, wisdom, energy, enthusiasm, energy, and, of course, energy.)
- Q**uantify your work. Use data to support strategies. Cite surveys, research and trends. Consider all inputs. Remember PR is a blend of science, art and instinct.
(Then, go with your gut.)
- R**emain humble. In our business, this has a way of taking care of itself.
- S**peak the truth...quickly, unfailingly, always.
(Spinning just makes you dizzy.)
- T**ell people when they do a good job. We all benefit from genuine, specific praise.
- U**se the RACE formula.
Research. **A**nalyze. **C**ommunicate. **E**valuate. It works.
- V**erify the facts. Then ask an uninvolved colleague to double check them.
- W**rite. Then edit, edit, edit. Clear, concise writing is the product of good editing. Mark Twain once wrote to a friend, “Sorry for the long letter. I didn't have time to write a short one.”
- X**erox™ a copy. Answer a phone. Get someone coffee. Do whatever it takes to deliver dynamite, customer service.
(Others take their cue from you.)
- Y**earn for fairness. But know that life and the media aren't always fair....
- Z**ealously support public education.
(See letters A-Y, above.)