

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. As you know from my e-mails, 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. **R**esearch. **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.)