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Practical ways to work with newspapers, radio, and television

Mobilizing the media

By Albert E. Holliday

"The best public relations starts in the classroom" is a cliché, a trite expression, a phrase that has little relevance in the 1980s for most school districts in the U.S. and Canada. Why? Because citizens usually don't know about 80 percent to 90 percent of the positives occurring daily in their schools.

That citizens and even parents don't know is largely the fault of school officials and educators. They continue to rely on traditional student-parent contact and local word of mouth communication to get the school message across. But these are not effective anymore, thanks in large measure to medical technology because:

- People now live much longer than they did 20 years ago. One result is that in all communities senior citizens comprise a large bloc of voters.

- Not as many children are being born. The number of households with school-aged children has shrunk considerably in recent years.

The result of these two factors is that, in most communities, the number of non-parent households is larger than those with school-aged children. Adults in those homes do not have regular contact with educators or students or schools, once the main vehicle of information in a community.

This is an important matter because the number one source of information about schools now for non-parents, according to Ned Hubbell (a pollster headquartered in Port Huron, Michigan) is the media—newspapers and radio and television stations.¹

Here again school officials are in difficulty as they are usually passive in relations with the media. They only respond when asked and, as the media is often oriented mainly to crisis situations, they are usually called on to comment or supply information on problem issues, such as increases in budgets, closing of buildings because of declining enrollment, staff furloughing, declining test scores, federal aid cuts, etc.

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Such matters are worthy of concern, but not as exclusive news for the attention of that very large non-parent block in your community. If schools are to enjoy public support at a level educators and boards believe is justified, they must make a substantial effort to work closely with their local media.

(One aside: I have worked with several hundred administrative and teacher groups in communication in-service training sessions. In almost every session I hear two comments: (1) "Why is it the media just reports the 'bad' on page one?" and (2) "We'd be pleased to provide reporters with the 'good news' if they'd only call." But the media have limited staff, and reporters do not have time to make 20 calls a day asking, "Do you have any good news to report today?" Reporters must cover crisis situations; and if an issue is of importance, it will be carried on page one. However, editors and radio and TV news directors will usually be quite responsive to educators who provide them with solid news and interesting feature material. They are in the people business as much as educators are and will cooperate anytime when mutual interests can be furthered.)

Let's see what might happen in a community when educational officials decide to mount an aggressive communication program using staff volunteers to work with the public media.

Wonder City, mid-America, is a community of 25,000 residents, with 4,000 students enrolled in public schools. The Wonder City public school system has one high school with 1,200 students, two 6-8 middle schools with 600 students each, and five K-5 neighborhood elementary schools with about 400 each. (One Catholic high school has 600 students and one K-8 Catholic elementary school has 500 students.) Each elementary and middle school has an active PTA; the high school's PTS association meets infrequently with a few people present. The staff numbers 15 administrators, 200 teachers and certified staff, and 180 supporting service staff. The nine-member school board is elected at large.

The Problem

In recent years, community support of local schools in Wonder City has decreased. Several millages (operation budgets) have been turned down by voters. A few incidents involving fights and drugs at the high school received quite a bit of attention from the media. An editorial in the local paper took the teachers' association to task for its stance on wages and benefits during the last bargaining period. To save money, the board cut out a quarterly newsletter to citizens and asked PTA officials to boost their school newsletter production to fill the gap. (The district has no PR policy, and no one person is assigned to the task of school-community relations.) One elementary school had to be closed because of declining enrollment, and citizens and parents in the area broke into two warring camps—one to "save money" and the other to "preserve our neighborhood school."

Gains in many areas (improvements in achievement scores, an effective management team operation for administrators, an excellent report on the high school by the regional accreditation agency, energy conservation efforts that have cut the district's fuel consumption by 40 percent, etc.) have been recorded recently. But educational officials have general agreement on one matter—the public doesn't seem to know of the successes and achievements of students, the staff and the board. As

a result, the public has an overall attitude that schools in Wonder City are only so-so.

The Media

Wonder City has one daily, the **Evening News** Monday through Saturday. The **County Gazette** comes out each Thursday. Two shopping guides (each with some news and public service material) are issued free each week. The **Metro Times** is published weekdays and Sundays in the state capital 40 miles away and enjoys a modest circulation in Wonder City. (The **Times** features an outstate section with coverage of nearby communities three times a week.)

Two AM and one FM stations serve the city. WROC is the one kids listen to. WCIV is middle-of-the-road and has the best news department. WHUM-FM is the all-music, easy-listening station for adults.

One independent TV station is headquartered nearby Wonder City; three commercial network stations and a public TV station broadcast from Metro. Wonder City is served by a cable TV company; the 50 percent of the local households on the cable can get the local independent, the three networks, and the public stations plus seven others—one all sports, one religious, one with times set aside for local programming) and four from nearby cities. People not on the cable can pick up the independent, the four from Metro, and several of the city stations.

The Solution

A few administrators, one board member and several teachers attended a workshop on educational communication in late August sponsored by the state School Public Relations Association and came home fired up to mount an aggressive school-community relations program to combat Wonder City's problem.

They drafted a communication plan for the district, but the board turned down the request for employment of a PR specialist and funding for a monthly community newsletter, citing insufficient funds. The board did grant some released time for four teachers and one administrator who showed a great interest in this area to stimulate news media coverage of the district, with full cooperation of the board and administration.

The five who agreed to give it a try included Helen, a special education specialist in the central office; Peter, a guidance counselor; Maureen, a secondary English teacher; Angelo, a middle school social studies teacher; and Nancy, a 4th grade teacher.

In September, they met and decided to accomplish these goals:

1. To write and issue at least four news releases on timely subjects each week.
2. To place two to three photos in newspapers each week.
3. To stimulate one feature story in newspapers each week.
4. To stimulate one filmed feature on a TV station each week.
5. To produce a weekly radio show on WCIV.
6. To place material of interest to young people on WROC.
7. To place one or two public service announcements on WHUM each week.
8. To produce a weekly program on schools on the cable TV network.

The Operation

The five each planned to spend five hours each week on the media assignment. They began by writing a memo to all staff members indicating their plans and asking for ideas and contributions. They drafted an outline of story and news release possibilities for the first three months and divided the media among them so each had prime contact responsibility for one. (Helen, **The Evening News**; Peter, the **County Gazette** and the **Metro Times**; Maureen, the radio stations; Angelo, the television stations; Nancy, the cable company.) They made appointments with their editors and news directors and spent up to an hour with each learning how best to work with them. They gained valuable information about deadlines, style, writing tips, and how to handle feature ideas and photos.

In follow-up discussions, they compared notes and could see that each medium was different in its approach to news and features. Radio stations prefer short items for news broadcasts. Television stations, as they cover such a large area, would be able to use only hard news or unusual features. The metro paper's local correspondent would be the main contact for important school news and an occasional feature. The cable company's owners were receptive to a request for a weekly half-hour interview program.

The media most receptive to the five were the **News** and the **Gazette**. Their staff members had usually covered board meetings and wrote about hard news, such as a bus accident, appointment of a new principal, closing of an elementary school, etc. As Ed, the **News** editor, told Helen, "We don't have a large staff and can't cover everything ourselves. But we're in the people business, too, and will do all we can to cooperate."

The five received a media in-service program in the first months of their assignment, and over a year's time they learned:

- Their fellow staff members were quick to suggest stories and slow to furnish information in writing, and even then the information was usually incomplete. If a story had possibilities, one of the five had to do the research and check to be sure it would be complete, in the proper style, and on time.

- Working with the daily **News** and the weekly **Gazette** was often a delicate matter. The **Gazette** editor didn't like the **News** to have an important announcement on Monday when his paper didn't come out until Thursday. News releases without time references had to be planned carefully so each paper got an equal break.

- Editors dislike their rivals having the same photos. The five found ways to vary the placement and inclusion of people so each paper had its "own" photo.

- Instant process prints are a no-no. Photos have to be well-composed, in focus with people's eyes open, and close-up. Peter worked with several high school students interested in photography, and they were soon able to take and process (in the school's darkroom) excellent prints for newspaper use.

- There is a big difference in news value between Mrs. Reily's 3rd grade students' tour of the post office and the superintendent's plans to institute an energy reduction plan to cut fuel costs by 40 percent. Some well-meaning ideas for releases have to be turned down. (However, an effort should be made to use all items suggested by staff members. Items such as Mrs. Reily's field trip can be included, for example, in the biweekly staff newsletter.)

- Editors and news directors like local tie-ins to big

stories on the state or national level. For example, when a national study was issued with a report that young people are flabby, Angelo did a tie-in release with photos on the middle school's "fitness with fun" program.

- TV stations work best from advances—announcements sent two or three days ahead of an unusual activity or event. When an item has interest for a TV station, the scheduling of traveling crews is easier when the news director has time to plan.

- Staff members don't all read the same newspapers and often miss seeing a big story. To keep them informed (and let them know the five were getting results), Nancy arranged for copies of news releases and printed stories to be regularly posted on main bulletin boards in each building.

- Time is precious, and the goals of the five could not be achieved with only 25 combined hours a week. The plans for the weekly radio and cable TV shows were postponed. (The times these shows were to be broadcast and the expected very modest audiences at these times indicated that the efforts necessary to plan and do these shows were far out of balance in terms of time to do releases and features for newspapers.)

- The youth-oriented station, WROC, did not have much of a local news department. They did like having young people on the air, so Maureen and the news director trained 10 high school students to be reporters. They taped 15- and 30-second news briefs for broadcast in the late afternoon and early evening.

- The adult stations, WCIV and WHUM, were pleased to have short items for news broadcasts. And they used a number of public service announcements during each broadcast day.

The Follow-up

In June, the five wound up their year's efforts by presenting four scrapbooks of clippings from newspapers and a report of how many stories were used on radio and television stations to the board and the superintendent. Comments of citizens and parents to board members during the year were quite positive about "all those interesting programs we have in our schools." The five staff members reported that their plan to spend five hours a week each was shortlived as it usually took them another five hours each after school and on weekends to keep up.

The five agreed that their initial plans were unrealistic in terms of the time they had available. Ideas for special columns in the shopping guides and a spotlight series in

the **News** were dropped, as were the plans for the television shows. They were not able to do five releases each week. Some weeks they only issued one or two. They found that staff members provided many items at the beginning and end of semesters—these had to be spaced out so that they didn't glut the media with too many at one time.

Secretarial services proved to be a problem. They could have kept one person busy 20 hours a week with typing, checking facts, reproducing releases, mailing, maintaining files and labels, etc. And they found they needed one office, with a phone, to work from to keep things in order.

The board reconsidered the superintendent's recommendations of last year in light of this year's activities, and agreed to appoint Peter to a new position of full-time communication specialist and assigned him one half-time secretary. He was the one of the five who found the assignment of most interest. And the board authorized him to attend a five-day seminar on communications at state university in the summer. The other four "retired," pleased with their efforts but tired from the long hours they had spent.

While the team generated hundreds of column inches of newspaper coverage, not all residents subscribed to all newspapers and saw or heard all the broadcasts. So the board agreed to direct Peter to perform the job of issuing a quarterly newsletter to all households as well as to continue to issue news and feature releases and maintain good relations with the news media.

You will note that division of labor is necessary in such a program. Certain people will have to take the responsibility to attend to various aspects of the program, and one person should have the job of coordinating all. Not all aspects of this case history will apply to you, but a small committee of staff members can take this case history and adapt it to meet your needs and situation. You may not experience the most successful ending as the case history group did, but you will learn the most effective methods of working with newspapers and radio and television stations.

Footnotes

1. Ned S. Hubbell. "12 Tips for Better School Communications," *Information Legislative Service*, 17, July 29, 1979, pp. 12-14.