



Media Relations 101

One of the fundamentals of media relations is building a relationship with the media. This isn't done overnight and needs to be nurtured over time. Don't expect good results from the media if you don't feel you can trust them or they don't feel they can trust you. This kind of relationship takes time and effort.

Here are some things you can do to build this relationship:

- On first contact, or early in the relationship, make an appointment on their turf. Talk about what you can do to help the reporter/editor to get the information he needs. Taking a reporter, news director, editor or other media contact to lunch is also beneficial, however, they may turn you down, or insist on paying for their own meal.
- Periodically (perhaps once a year), gather the media together as a group for lunch to have a question/answer period. This could be associated with a briefing on a significant issue in the district. These sessions provide a good opportunity to air issues on both sides. Do not single out any one media contact during these sessions for praise or ridicule.
- Regular contact by phone is important. At least once a month (once a week would be ideal) call your regular beat reporters or others that cover your organization. Give them a story idea or just ask them if they have any questions about anything. These may be very brief calls, but it's good to stay in touch. At television stations, the assignment editor is a good contact because they usually determine what will get covered that day or week.
- Be honest, open and accessible. Provide as much information as you can about an issue when the media come calling. If they can't get it from you, they'll get it from somebody else who may not tell it like you'd like it told. If you give them a "no comment" on the controversial issue, they may not be too eager to come out for your good news story the following week.
- Encourage all of your regular media outlets to assign beat reporters. It is much easier to build a good relationship with one reporter than two or three. Education typically ranks in the top two or three in reader and viewer interest polls; therefore, media should be responsive enough to assign a beat reporter. This also makes your job easier because you don't have to explain the same story or issue to multiple reporters from the same outlet--especially on long-running issues.
- The bottom line in media relations is, don't expect the media to be your school district's PR agent. A positive story is always the best, but truly the most you should expect from the media is accuracy and fairness. When you take stock in this philosophy, which is hard for some to do, your relationship with the media will become much less stressful.
- Let your media know well in advance that the CSAP results are coming. Give reporters background on the CSAP assessments and education reform in Colorado. Encourage the media to do a series of stories on the CSAP program

- well in advance of their release by your school(s). This will help inform and prepare your community for the local results. Take advantage of state-wide programs like the Take the Test Day.
- Assess the most important data in your local results. Develop "key messages" to share with your community and media. Don't overlook glaringly negative data--the media won't. Be prepared to have an answer for anything that looks negative, but always redirect to your key messages. During a media interview or discussion with the community, you should mention your key messages several times. This will increase the chances of your message getting out. Avoid education jargon anytime you're speaking with the media or the public. Write it out if necessary. It is essential that your key messages be told in brief "soundbytes." The eight-second soundbyte has become the standard for politicians communicating through the national electronic media. Even with local television and radio it is extremely rare when a soundbyte over 30 seconds is used. If you're dealing with print media, this is not as crucial, but you still want to be concise and revisit the key message several times throughout a news conference or interview.
 - Before you release the results to the community, brief the news media. This could be done in a letter or mailed report, but the most effective way is face-to-face communications. One-on-one or in a group, ask to meet with your media representatives. Provide handouts, and go over the data focusing on your key messages. A one-page fact sheet would be helpful to emphasize your key messages, to provide brief background information and to organize the most important information. Give the media an opportunity to ask questions and be honest. If there are areas that need improvement--and there always are--point to your school improvement process, which should contain strategies to address those problems.
 - If achievement data are low, especially when compared to other schools in your district or area, you have to be prepared to explain.

There could be many issues to consider, and sometimes they are complex. Socioeconomic status (SES) is one issue to understand. Children not being prepared for school might be another issue. Students who did not take the test, or who didn't complete the test receive a zero and those scores are included in the overall average. A lack of resources or teacher training could have an impact. Be careful in your explanations. Don't stereotype low SES populations by labeling them as low achievers. Besides indicating what the possible factors are, share why those factors have an impact on learning. Don't assume the media or your community will know the difference. You know the old adage . . . never ASSUME anything. It will make an ASS out of U and ME.

- While making your explanations, don't make them sound like excuses. Acknowledge your weaknesses, provide the variables, and let your community know you are addressing the deficiencies. Then provide a follow-up report on your interventions.
- A dry run news conference is a good way to practice if you decide to schedule the real thing. You should practice your presentation, especially if it involves site council members or students. Have someone toss some questions out and see how you answer. A news conference with high school journalism students should provide a warm up for the real thing and would also provide information for the students to publish in their school publications.

