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AUTHOR Thomas, Diane
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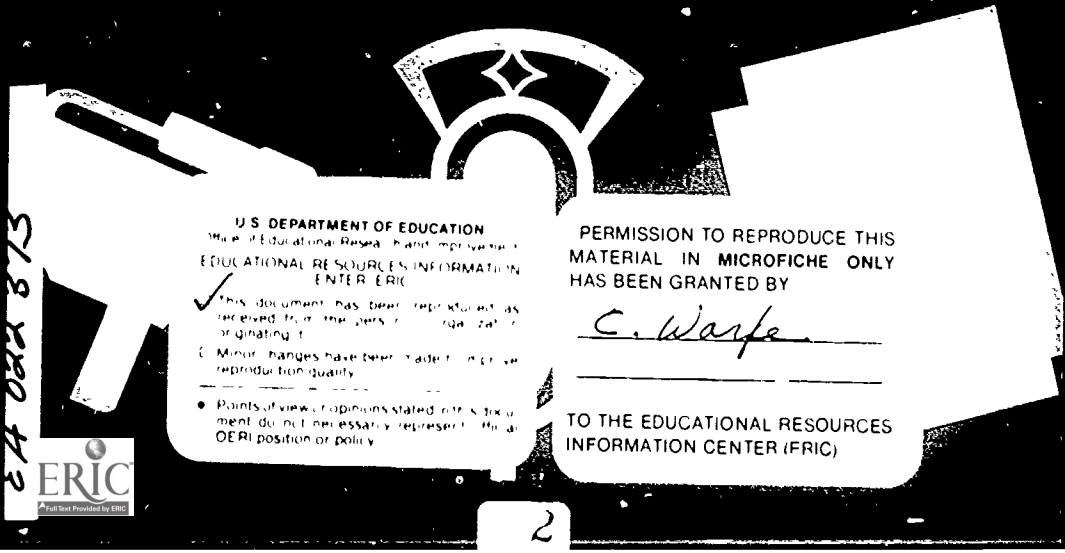
ABSTRACT

The way that a school board responds to media attention can make or break a school district's image and its communication program. Since elected officials govern by public consent gained from trust, a responsible communications program is based on willingness to do business in the light of day. Schools must be able to communicate the difficult news as well as the positive news. The first two chapters of this guide address various avenues open to districts eager to tell their stories and gain community willingness to work long hours without high pay. school visits, or through civic activities, including board member speeches and regular board meetings. School-site public relations goals can be accomplished through neighborhood coffees, newsletters, and open houses and fundraisers. Chapter 3 explains the new "media elite"; once composed of anti-intellectual working-class people, the media ranks are now filled with liberal, well-educated eastern suburbanites. Reporters resemble teachers in their professional commitment and willingness to work long hours without high pay. Chapter 4 is premised on the idea that good public relations policy helps reporters do their job by choosing a stance midway between control and openness. Extensive advice is given concerning effective board/media communication. Chapter 5 provides tips for writing news releases, appearing on television, using the phone, and holding press conferences. The final three chapters cover crisis communications, the fine art of complaining, and board/public information officer relations. (MLH)

SCHOOL BOARDS, PUBLIC RELATIONS, AND THE MEDIA



School Boards, Public Relations and the Media

Your Practical Communications Guide

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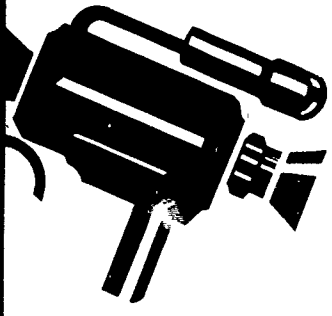

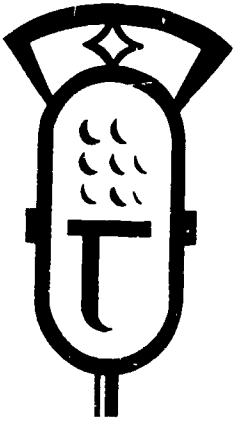

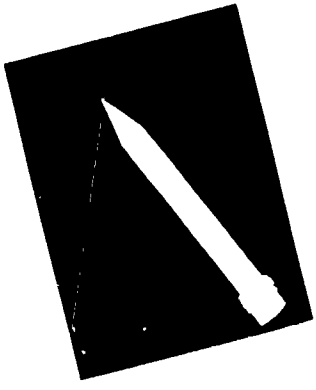

Your Practical Communications Guide

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Post Office Box 1660
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By Diane Thomas

Edited by Brian Lewis

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Accredited by the Public Relations Society of America, Diane Thomas is public information officer for the Santa Ana Unified School District. She is also president of Diane Thomas Public Relations in Huntington Beach, California.

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INTRODUCTION

You're a school board member. You've joined that group in our society known as "public figures," and that may not have been foremost in your mind when you ran for office. You believed in schools, in education, and you wanted to contribute to the betterment of public education. It seems that almost in the periphery of these goals and interests you found your words and actions watched and recorded by the media. You are a public figure subject to the scrutiny, comment and, sometimes, criticism of the press. And the truth — inconvenient as it may be at times —is that the media attention is part of the process of governing a public agency. The way in which you as an individual — and as an entire board — approach and respond to this attention can have an important impact on the image of your school district and the effect of its communications program.

Appropriate handling of the media should be an important tool in an overall public relations plan, so we'll spend considerable time in this guide looking at how-to's and how-not-to's. The resources for this guide are several. They are based on research, my professional experiences in 13 years of public relations and two years as a reporter, and on conversations with both reporters covering school districts and the public information officers (PIOs) who work with them on a daily basis. Hopefully, there will be insights to help you, along with your district's public relations officer, forge a strong media relations program.

A concern for good communications — good public relations — should permeate the district's actions, so we'll look at the many components of a PR program. Through this guide CSBA hopes to provide a solid jumping-off place for you to begin developing an effective communications plan that is workable for your district.

So let's start at the beginning.

Public Relations

Frequently misunderstood and sometimes maligned, public relations has often been the "make-it-what-you-want-it" profession. Look in the classified section of a newspaper under public relations and there will be ads for receptionists, car salesmen and senior managers in public relations firms.

PR professionals and the various PR associations fight this back-slapping. take'm to lunch image through stringent accreditation programs, codes of ethics and continuing education. But if public relations is more than just being good with people, precisely what is it?

Finding the ultimate definition of public relations has been an ongoing task for the past 80 years. Definitions range from one-sentence length to pages of complicated text. These are two of my favorites:

"Public relations is the management function which provides the professional skills necessary to communicate truth effectively to concerned publics."

— Dr. Carl F. Hawver, APR
President, Public Relations Society of America, 1974

"Public relations is the planned effort to influence opinion through good character and responsible performance, based upon mutually satisfactory two-way communication."

— Scott M. Cutlip, APR and Allen H Center, APR
Effective Public Relations, 5th edition

In a nutshell, these definitions state that PR should be carried out by those versed in that body of knowledge and in those skills — that organizations should listen as well as speak — and that the foundation of good PR is the "do good" rule. If you do good and let the public know, you'll have a good public image.

Elected officials govern from public consent which is gained from trust. A responsible communications program must be based on willingness to do business in the light of day. We must communicate the difficult news as well as the positive news in order to be believable, trustworthy. In his book, *Only by Public Consent,* L.L.L. Golden said, "Public consent does not stem from gimmicks or tricks. It exists because of performance in the public interest."

Image based on performance. Planning for public relations rather than trying to sweep up with it. To school districts this means consideration of the PR ramifications of a school closing *before* parents have packed the board room.

In talking to the public through various formal and informal means, organizations also need to plan for listening opportunities. The second definition cited earlier refers to two-way communication, a critical part of establishing rapport with your publics. In the next two chapters we will address a variety of avenues the district may use to tell its story and to gain input from the community. I would caution, however, that it only takes a handful of ignored recommendations from ad hoc committees or parent groups for the public to see through the transparency of feigned interest in outside contributions. Before initiating "listening" devices, be certain you're ready to hear them. Pretending to listen will prove just as troublesome as not listening in the first place.

CHAPTER ONE

The Communications Mix

Who are my publics? How will I communicate with them? The answers to these two questions are essential to mapping out an effective communications program. "Public" is simply a collective noun for a group of individuals tied together by some common bond of interest. Based on that definition, "people concerned with education" might seem to describe the school district's public. But within that family are many subgroups, each with its distinct unifying bonds that separate it from its siblings and dictate a different approach.

The "community" includes many groups. First, there are parents. Statistics show, though, that approximately 70 percent of the adult population has no school-age children. At the same time, that 70 percent does vote on issues related to schools — and many of them hold positions of influence that may help or hurt education's cause. They may fall into categories such as neighborhood groups, elected officials, civic leaders, the business community and — within that subgroup — businesses involved in partnership programs with your schools. Employees are another public and may be broken down into the categories of certificated, classified, school site and district office. Even the student public must be divided into elementary and secondary.

Addressing Your Public

It is critical to know and understand your target audience before attempting to create an effective message. Vocabulary choices will differ according to the public. Educators may talk to other educators in a form of pedagogical short-hand. Non-educators won't understand a message laced thoroughly with the alphabet soup of "educatorese." On the other hand, a communique to teachers that details already clearly understood references would appear stilted and confusing. For a message to be successful, it must

first be understood — and the proper use of language is key to that success. The worst question that could be asked by the recipient of your message is, "Who are they talking to anyway?"

Knowing your audience will also determine the avenue you choose to contact that public. You may reach a parent audience by sending home a principal's bulletin — but including an open letter in that publication to the business community is a certain waste of time.

Each of the special interest groups we've listed (and there may be others in your district) has a different point of reference to your school system. If asked what schools mean to them, each would respond differently. That answer is important to the development of your message. Although we dress up in coats of altruism and benevolence, humankind is basically egocentric. We are daily, hourly bombarded by messages that may be personal, professional, commercial or newsworthy in nature. One of our filtering mechanisms is basic self-interest. "What does this information mean to me? Why should I listen?"

Based on knowledge of your publics and appropriate communication avenues, you can share the same news with different groups through different vehicles and reap high returns on reader interest and understanding.

The story is the opening of two new schools. The following examples of news leads (introductory sentence, paragraph) target the story to different groups.

Public: teachers. Vehicle: district's internal newsletter.

"The 1990 opening of two new elementary schools in the central city will reduce class size in that overcrowded area," said Superintendent I. Komunikate.

Public: neighborhood groups. Vehicle: the town's weekly newspaper or community edition of daily paper.

"The creation of neighborhood parks will be one of the benefits when two new elementary schools open in the central city in 1990," said...

Public: business community. Vehicle: Chamber of Commerce newsletter.

"The groundwork for computer-capable high school graduates will begin with programs to be piloted at two new elementary schools scheduled to open in 1990," said Superintendent Eyel Talque. "Preparing young people for the modern workplace must start in the earliest grades..."

By defining publics and determining their separate interests in the overall story, a "hook" or angle can be used to maximize the possibility that the story will be read and, hopefully, remembered. In this way, you have targeted the message to precise groups.

Multiple Avenues

As the previous examples indicate, there are many vehicles available to transmit the district's message – and many of them can serve a double purpose as listening devices.

A survey of California educators cited in Cutlip and Center's *Effective Public Relations* showed that they regard personal contact as "the most important channel in keeping the general public informed about the schools." Those interviewed rated the daily newspaper and reports carried home by students as next in importance. I always find it reassuring when research bears out instinct. In our hearts we each believe that we have better than even odds at changing someone's opinion if we can only talk with them. Not only board members, but your administrative staff as well, should participate in this effort. Each person we affect individually carries new knowledge which may be shared with their friends, neighbors and associates. If it's significant information, those secondary recipients may also repeat the message to others. Each of our contacts, whether positive or negative, may live long past the end of the encounter.

Individual contact may take many forms. The simplest give-and-take opportunities may come from being in the right place at the right time —such as chance meetings in your neighborhood or workplace. Visiting schools and dropping by break rooms at the district office can prove enlightening for board members and administrators. Superintendents might plan a monthly brown-bag lunch for a small number of employees representing a cross-section of the district. Board members might plan a similar activity for department heads. We tend to develop working relationships with those one step up and one step down. The individuals just one additional step away see the district from a different vantage point. Warning: Although the district information-gathering just described may have many benefits, it must be handled properly to prevent backfiring. The intent of the get-to-know-you lunches should be shared widely. They should never *appear to be* nor *be* methods of checking up on individuals. If handled without care, they may cause suspicion and low morale.

Civic activities and civic club memberships demonstrate that educators are part of the total community and are interested in overall goals. This participation is also rich with opportunities for one-on-one conversations about education issues. Conversations which, of course, include listening in addition to speaking.

Speeches by board members and staff to civic groups should also be utilized. A speakers' bureau may be established, presenting board members and administrators as informed, qualified spokespersons to address these community groups. Fact sheets on basic district information or current school issues can be compiled by staff and made available to the speakers as supplements to — and handouts for — their presentations.

The regular board meeting may be viewed as the ultimate public speech. Look at your audience mix: cabinet members, district staff, principals, teachers, parents, community members and the press. There is an image you want to create with these groups and there are messages you want to share. Because it is a routine event, it may begin to feel as casual as conversation in your living room. It isn't. People are watching and listening. There will be comments to be made about sensitive issues. There will be differences of opinion between board members. There will be questions addressed to staff. There will be community input which may be contrary to your longest-held beliefs. And they must all be handled with the cognizance that people are watching.

A long-lasting reputation as a bellicose board may emanate from two battle-torn meetings that happen to get publicized. Staff loyalty and willingness to be the message-bearer may become strained if administrators are publicly ridiculed. The taxpayers who fund public education believe they have a right to the public comment portion of your meeting. It is a valuable tool to both the public and the board if speakers are treated with courtesy, yet diplomatically confined within the appropriate realms of time and propriety. Routine and controversial business must be completed in your regular meetings, but keep in mind that each public meeting is an image-maker for you and for the district.

One caution about image-**un**making in all forms of public speaking: **Don't repeat the myth.** Is there a major or minor unflattering reputation assigned to your district? Does it sound something like these? "You know those rich-kid districts are full of drug dealing." "Yeah, that's a mostly ethnic district. I bet it's rough and full of drugs." "None of the teachers get along in that district." "The board never listens in that district." Choose your myth or make up one, but remember that every time you — or someone else —repeat the myth, it continues to live and grow. It's better to prove that your students aren't underachievers by citing their achievements rather than by saying, "I know many people think our students don't do well, but..." The message that will be remembered is "our students don't do well."

Student achievement may be showcased by showing off your students. District "events" may involve the public and feature students in cameo roles. Groundbreaking for a new facility or an anniversary celebration for an older building are both occasions to which you may invite community members. Use the opportunities to tell them something about the current educational climate and make tours available when possible. Feature student entertainment or utilize youngsters as ushers or tour guides. Poised, smiling young people are effective salespeople for public education. Inviting public participation in grand openings and similar events builds familiarity which can be the foundation of mutual cooperation.

Another form of public contact is through community involvement.

There are many opportunities for that contact at the district level. AIDS education is a topical example of a controversial issue that all districts now face. By encouraging community participation in reviewing materials and preparing recommendations to the board, you can build a broader base of support for the ultimate decision. Participants on ad hoc committees gain a fuller understanding of the education system and the complications in developing far-reaching policies. Not only do they build confidence in the ultimate decision by sharing their insights with associates, but the general public places greater credibility in the decision because of "outside" participation.

School finance is another complex subject that few people outside education truly understand. To help unravel the mysterious web we call school finance, districts are turning to budget committees that include representatives of employee associations and the community. The purpose of the group is to make recommendations to the board, not to vote on final decisions. However, comment from committee members can be invaluable — and the benefit derived from the increased knowledge of the participants is immeasurable. A more positive approach to union negotiations may even emerge through participation by those groups.

Another vehicle is the school/business roundtable, which explores common goals and expectations. What changes in the marketplace affect the skills being taught to students? How can school/business partnership programs be strengthened to be more relevant to curriculum? At times the business community has been very critical of public education. Involvement can make them strong allies.

A few guidelines are appropriate in establishing blue ribbon committees. Make sure their parameters are clear. Establish clear-cut goals and agendas to keep the group on track. Acknowledge them publicly for their contributions. Use the committee as a sounding board to test ideas, plans for programs, potential problems. Educate them well and you will develop strong advocates for the district. Above all, listen to them and act on their recommendations. One of the quickest ways to lose credibility is to wave the flag of public participation and then shelve all their recommendations. Remember, good PR is based on good deeds, not the pretense of good deeds. The public knows the difference.

Information and immediacy are synonymous these days. You can enter the push-button news world with minimal expense by using an answering machine as the district's news line. Information about the upcoming board agenda, the latest test scores and the answers to questions you know parents are asking are some of the many possible messages that may be taped frequently during the week. During negotiations or other fast-paced events, the news can be changed hourly if necessary. The answering machine can also be utilized as a listening tool. By connecting it to your switchboard or to

a few phones in critical departments, callers at night or on weekends may leave messages that need next-day attention. As one more component of your communications mix, the answering machine can be an outlet for news — and another way to demonstrate accessibility.

Television is more than the 10 o'clock news. Local cable television opens two doors. School board members and district officials may be booked as interview show guests on your city or local origination channels, and public access cable channels offer production training and assistance in producing your own shows. Look at the opportunities for involvement by student communications classes in front of and behind the camera. Some fortunate districts have their own cable television stations through grants from the local franchise-holder. They can produce their own interview, news and feature programs, run student-produced videotapes (plays, school events, Kids News) and they can run a community bulletin board listing upcoming events, important dates, and student and staff honors.

Get It In Writing

So far in this chapter, we've defined some of your publics and talked about how to target messages to the people you need to reach. We've also dug through the tool box labeled communications mix and examined some of the many options that should be explored each time the district has a story to tell. And, as school districts go, you'll have many stories to tell. Let's move now to the written word and its usages.

Just as every district employee is a public relations representative for the school system, every piece of paper leaving the school and central office is a segment of the communications plan. For starters, take a look at the report cards being used. Better yet, ask someone without children in your district to give you feedback on report cards. Are they easy to read? Is the grading scale easily understood? Day-to-day correspondence also sends more than one message. Your stationery should create a positive reaction with appropriate graphics and choices of paper and ink colors. And — let's get basic — the content should be both coherent and grammatically correct. The production technique should produce a letter that's neat in appearance and has no typographical errors. Business letters don't need to be stuffy and full of jargon. A letter will be more easily understood and will create a better impression if it's written in comfortable, conversational tones.

These well written letters can be used in your communications mix in ways other than the traditional business sense. Letters-to-the-editor of local newspapers — if they are signed and defame no one — are an open source of response to news and editorial coverage of your district. Letters from the board and staff can serve your purpose well, but the greatest impact will be derived from parent letters supporting your position or asking for change. The parent groups you nurture for their assistance to schools can be quickly

called into action for letter-writing campaigns.

Op-ed pieces (newspaper terminology for the articles that appear on the page opposite the editorial page) are another avenue that can be used to present your side of an issue. Two years ago, a southern California newspaper ran several news stories about a controversial school issue. As is frequently the case, an editorial writer – the editorial editor in this case – felt strongly that this was an item to pursue editorially. He did that, but managed to miss a few of the facts from the news stories and then leaped to some odd conclusions. After the district collectively controlled its anger, the superintendent and his PIO wrote a controlled, point-by-point rebuttal of the editorial. The piece was unemotional, but calmly stated its dismay at the previously printed incorrect information. The piece dealt with facts and quoted Education Code. For safety's sake, the district's lawyer read the article to ensure that no new problems were being created. The newspaper ran the article across the top of the op-ed page where it would receive just as much chance for readership as had the misbegotten editorial. Victories can be had.

Another opportunity for the written word lies in the business publications in your city. Chances are, your local Chamber of Commerce has a member publication which should regularly receive news releases – if not a regular column – from your district. Many of your town's movers and shakers are Chamber members and they need to understand how education issues affect their businesses. Read the local business weekly or monthly newspapers in your area. From time-to-time they will address subjects that could benefit from a letter-to-the-editor response from you. It's helpful for the business community to note that educators read some of the same publications and are aware of their concerns as well as ours. Business papers are also perfect targets for certain district news such as top-level promotions, school, business partnership programs and high tech innovations in schools.

In looking for the perfect vehicle to carry your message, don't forget your own publications. Working on tight budgets as we all are, we need to get the most out of every publication dollar. Most districts produce a brief report on board meetings. Some small newspapers, unable to staff every meeting, will pick up verbatim sections and print them. It helps the paper because it looks as if thy covered the meeting and it helps you by giving your meeting additional coverage.

Hopefully, your district produces a newsletter for employees. These internal publications can promote cohesiveness – particularly in large districts where there are many school sites. And like the board report, they give employees important information about district business, themselves and students. Birthdays, vacations, weddings and babies don't belong in these newsletters. Instead, professional accolades and accomplishments,

student honors and novel classroom or school activities should be stressed. The employee newsletter is the ideal place to print the many wonderful activities and honors taking place in your district. Your audience really cares and the good news helps build pride in their profession and their employer.

All school districts occasionally feel as though they are under siege. It happens to businesses, too, and the common thread seems to be that employees of the beleaguered institutions feel second best. They even perpetuate whatever myth exists about their organization because they begin to believe the myth and are embarrassed about the place they work. Building employee pride is the first step in image-changing. Employees who believe in their employer and who are armed with facts are your best representatives. An employee newsletter can help achieve those goals.

In the Santa Ana Unified School District, we take that newsletter the extra mile. We mail the twice-a-month publication to PTA and PFO leaders, Chamber of Commerce officers, civic group presidents, business people, members of the clergy, elected officials, school/business partnership participants and the press. Why? Because representatives from your important publics should also have access to that positive news. Reading that your employees are invited to present papers at meetings, chair county or state committees, give speeches or are elected to professional organizations creates respect. Seeing notices about student honors and classroom activities demonstrates the excellence for which we strive. In addition, rather than send out 20 press releases, it has proved effective (not to mention less costly and more subtle) to distribute the newsletter to a handful of interested reporters. One reporter even called and asked to be on the mailing list. Results are what counts and we do get print exposure from newsletter items.

Which brings us to what might have been the most obvious part of the communications mix - the press. Because of the ongoing relationships that must be built with this group of people, it needs to be on your list of publics as well as on your list of communications tools. This avenue can be successfully utilized to reach large audiences, and we'll explore it in greater detail in later chapters. For the moment, simply include the media as one of the many resources available to reach your publics and affect their opinions.

The Power Of Persuasion

We invest time defining our publics and selecting our communications tools for one purpose - persuasion. Cutlip and Center call persuasion the effort to convey information in such a way as to get people to revise old pictures in their heads, or form new ones, and thus change their behavior. The three elements of this effort involve: changing or neutralizing hostile opinions; crystallizing unformed opinions, and preserving favorable opinions. In other words, we want to keep our old friends, make new friends

of the indifferent, and win over our opposition — or at least keep them out of attack mode. Changing a district's image or reinforcing its existing signature involves persuasion

As food for thought, here are a handful of public opinion "laws" from public relations scholar Hadley Cantril.

- By and large, public opinion does not anticipate emergencies; it only reacts to them.
- Psychologically, opinion is basically determined by self-interest. Events, words or any other stimuli affect opinion only in so far as their relationship to self-interest is apparent.
- Once self-interest is involved, opinions are not easily changed.
- People are less reluctant to have critical decisions made by their leaders if they feel that somehow they, the people, are taking some part in the decision.
- People have more opinions and are able to form opinions more easily with respect to goals than with respect to methods necessary to reach those goals.

If, then, we have egocentric publics (as mentioned earlier) and it's hard for them to change long-held opinions, can we have an impact? Yes. Let me suggest two approaches that have been supported through research.

The first sounds simple, but requires endurance. I call it my "water on rock" theory. The experts call it repetition. We are recipients, victims of it through advertising. And though some of us find those relentless jingles irritating, statistics show that their repetition produces new customers. In creating opinions about education, this translates to sending the good message over and over again through all portals in your communications mix until it begins to sink in. If you say "we're good" enough times and present the proof — "we're good because..." — people will begin to hear and to believe.

The second approach takes us back to the publics you identified as important to your district. Every community, each subgroup within it, has a power base. There are obvious ones, such as prominent elected officials and corporate leaders. There are more subtle ones that are at least equally important. Who is the teacher whose support the principal must have before instituting a new program? Who is the PTA member who commands community-wide loyalty? By impressing those whose opinions are respected, you can also impact persons in that individual's sphere of influence. PR texts refer to this as diffusion. We call these people key communicators.

Individuals have a need to belong to a group, and groups tend to have similar values and beliefs. We need to pinpoint group leaders — both the obvious and the not-so-obvious — and designate them for special communication. In this grouping are people you want to invite to district

events, to serve on ad hoc committees and to receive special communications.

In Santa Ana, we've created a VIP (Very Important Person) packet which goes monthly to approximately 250 people. I earlier listed a number of people who receive our employee newsletter. This is part of the VIP packet which also contains an attractive assemblage of the month's press clippings about SAUSD and important education topics. Few people read the number of newspapers we monitor, and many don't read their paper thoroughly due to demands on their time. I like to think of the clippings as a second chance for our audience to learn more about us. Because they regularly receive a mailing from us, it's easy to include other information as needed. A district map with a list of schools, addresses, telephone numbers and administrators' names goes out in the fall. The district fact card is included in another mailing. Negotiations updates are put in the packet. A letter from the superintendent has been added when bargaining may result in labor action. We also use the VIP list as a survey base to find out what they know about us – and what they *want* to know about us. It's a fluid list that grows and must be frequently updated. But, again, results are telling, and we've had considerable positive feedback on the project.

Tying Up The Threads

The foundation is set. We've talked about this thing called public relations and about your communications responsibilities as an elected official. We discussed publics and the necessity of identifying them and targeting appropriate messages. With a look at your array of communication tools and some of the pitfalls and possibilities in opinion change, let's take the next step and move into the specifics of these topics.

CHAPTER TWO

School-Site PR

The known quantity for most parents in your district is the school their children attend. For the most part, district officials are the invisible "they" who only come into play if parents have a special need, and board members may only be noticed when there is a crisis or major problem. You are well aware that only a small percentage of parents take the time to vote in school board elections, so their perception of the entire district rests extensively on the school they know. Based on these givens, we need to fully utilize school-site contact in district-wide communication efforts. Additionally, we need to ensure that principals are conscious of their public relations function and that they regularly survey the school's performance in these areas. The greatest opportunity for credibility comes from the point of greatest contact.

Let's start with the basics. The front office creates the first impression for all visitors. The manner in which people are greeted in person and on the telephone is a indicator of the way the organization is run, and establishes a corporate, or system, personality. Polite, friendly attention to the matter at hand — to the individual being helped — demonstrates good will and focus. Unfortunately, the receptionist's position is usually the first step on the clerical ladder of any company, in spite of the fact that it plays an important role in producing a responsible, responsive image. An employee who can direct a call to the proper person on the first try makes the school appear more competent than someone who transfers calls around the school or who's never heard of the requested department. A thorough orientation (and up-to-date lists of names and numbers) for new front-desk employees is worth the time — and good will — lost in apologizing to callers or visitors who have been misdirected.

Because your name and face are well known to school employees, neither you nor the principal will truly be able to test this performance. Asking consitutents how they are treated and arranging a visit or telephone call by a stranger for the purpose of a report are the only ways you will know

how people (or other district employees) are handled. Principals should arrange this kind of front-office check every month.

Faith in the classroom teacher can be the make-it or break-it factor for parents. In addition to providing quality education for their children, parents want teachers to listen to questions or problems and provide complete responses. Parents want to read teacher notes that are neat and grammatically correct. Trust in the educational system takes another drop every time a parent receives a sloppy note from a teacher. The importance of this communication should be stressed at in-service trainings and back-to-school meetings.

A principalship is much more than a job. Aside from the managerial tasks required to run a school, there are civic responsibilities, formal and informal meetings, student performances and athletic events to attend, and parent groups to shepherd. Because of its full-time commitment, a principalship looks more like a religious calling than a profession. And — because it's important and necessary — many of the hard-working principal's activities are in the name of public relations.

Although paperwork calls from the office, staff and parents need a visible principal to know who's running the ship. The principal is a persona of the individual school. Particularly in smaller districts, the civic participation mentioned in Chapter One is advisable for principals, as well as board and staff. Individuals withhold support from strangers, so principals should become well-known in their school community or town, depending on the district's size.

To widen interaction with parents, principals might institute a series of neighborhood coffees to seek out people who usually don't participate. If 10 active parents are asked to give individual coffees and they invite 10 uninvolved parents to each coffee, look at the number of parents to whom the principal can become a real person — a resource in planning their children's education, a credible symbol for the school district.

The principal's newsletter can be an asset in communicating and building relationships. Don't overlook the obvious: It should be neat in appearance and articles should provide necessary information in easy-to-read writing style. Reprint important news items from district publications and give credit in print for parent assistance to the school. Principals should be reminded of targeting techniques. The newsletter's audience is parents, so the content, slant and vocabulary should be appropriate for adults. Educatorese should be nonexistent and the average education level of the school's community should be considered. In many areas, newsletters are printed in more than one language.

The printing process for student newspapers has come a long way over the years, but some of the themes have survived. Students still complain about cafeteria food and open vs. closed campuses, but today's journalism

novice also feels freer and more compelled to write about controversial topics such as sex and drugs. Providing journalistic standards can be reinforced through county, state and national student newspaper competitions which provide, in addition to the score, written critiques of subject matter as well as writing and layout. Various class speakers may be utilized to encourage factual reporting — the one, certain way to avoid libel suits. Journalism staff from your local college or university and working reporters are usually willing volunteers. Professional organizations such as the International Association of Business Communicators, the Northern or Southern California School Public Relations Association and the Public Relations Society of America probably have local chapters in your area and all are active in community outreach. Use these local resources to encourage students to produce a product of which everyone can be proud.

More Bang For The Buck

The standard school-site events — open houses, carnivals, fundraisers —are important in creating a sense of family for school staff, students and parents. Use them well and they can serve multiple purposes.

Anytime parents enter the school grounds, they should receive a sense of the school's greater goals and the district's direction. Board members' welcoming remarks at various school functions should include references to visible evidence of programs or areas of emphasis:

- *"I think you'll be impressed with the quality of the student essays you'll see posted in classrooms tonight. Since we implemented the composition book program last year, tests show that writing skills have increased by..."*
- *"The guides for your tour tonight are all honor students. Principal Dewit Wright has told me that 30 percent of the senior class has a 3.0 or better GPA..."*
- *"The realization of this school/business parthership is much like the agreement we're finalizing with the city about..."*

To sponsor a school "party" is good. To sponsor a school party that also delivers a message is good public relations. What's the current issue and what are you (board, district, principal) doing to solve/ prevent it? Use the time you have in front of an audience to tell them something important. It doesn't need to be the sole topic of your speech, but it should be there.

Student art displays are a popular and entertaining way to decorate school offices, entries and main corridors. Suggest additions such as an attractive poster that delineates school, division or district goals. At school events and meetings throughout the year, you and the principal can refer to those goals and the progress toward reaching them. Scrolls for honor roll student names, pictures of student-of-the-month honorees and employee of the month recognition are other display possibilities that are clear examples of the school's value system.

School events are also a way to involve your non-parent public. School/business partnerships and adopt-a-school programs are a popular way to bring workplace expertise into the classroom to benefit students and staff. Partnering with the local hamburger palace can provide refreshments for parties and coupons for incentives -- both worthwhile benefits — but encourage schools to search for more meaningful business relationships. The lead chef at a major restaurant can inspire a foods class, and a prominent accountant may lend reality to math or accounting efforts. Even the fast-food restaurant can provide depth by explaining computer applications for maintaining inventories and placing product orders.

But don't lock your business partners into one realm of school activities. Ask a representative to speak about the partnership at a parent meeting. Invite them to host a booth at your carnival or lead a VIP tour at open house. Put your partners on school and district mailing lists. The partnership's main objective is is to broaden classroom experience, but you also want to benefit the partners by frequently showcasing their contributions. Additionally, the parthership experience should educate business people and make them allies for public education.

The school neighborhood includes non-parents who have their own, separate interests in school events. At least for the sake of courtesy, these neighbors should be notified when a school function will further crowd the streets with cars competing for limited parking spaces. The difference between a friend and an enemy can be as simple as a notification flyer. To go a step beyond notification, the flyer might also invite the non-parents to attend the function and stress the progress report component of the event. They won't have a specific classroom interest at an open house, but facility tours could be offered. Actual attendance from this group will likely be low, but you can make a difference by simply extending the invitation.

A Santa Ana high school has a classroom-oriented project that has successfully evolved into a benefit for several publics. Two home economics teachers decided to make food preparation classes more realistic by opening a mini-restaurant in an adjacent classroom. Students, with supervision, operate all areas of Valley Villa, including accounting, menu planning, cooking, table setting and serving, and running the cash register. Pupils have gained social and work skills that enhance their part-time work opportunities and their personal development. Beyond that creditable success, Valley Villa's customers are primarily teachers who enjoy the on-site opportunity for reasonably priced, good lunches. A senior patio was added as an upperclassmen's privilege, and neighbors were notified and have since become occasional customers. The Villa even caters, as time allows, for neighborhood groups. In addition, Valley Villa is frequently a lunch choice for district administrators and board members who want to highlight the program to visiting dignitaries. And finally, the Villa has been the subject of

a feature story and photos in a local newspaper. Valley Villa is a perfect example of utilizing the full potential of a school program.

Some of the Villa's regular non-school customers are senior citizens who live in the neighborhood. According to statistics, a larger proportion of our population is entering the senior citizen category. We are an aging society and school-site PR should include that factor in its planning. Classroom volunteers are becoming a rare commodity due to the increasing number of working mothers, but there are many seniors groups who can fill the gap. R.S.V.P. is the Retired Senior Volunteer Program which might have just the people you want for classroom tutoring or other projects. Elementary schools could explore adopt-a-grandparent experiences for reading reinforcement or oral history. The expertise available in retired businessmen's organizations might enhance class offerings or programs at the secondary level. Participants in police and fire departments' retiree groups are active people who are frequently searching for community service opportunities.

Let the overview serve to stir your imagination. Your individual schools have enormous potential for increasing system-wide credibility. School-site public relations should be a focal point in your district's communications plan.

CHAPTER THREE

The Media: Are They Really After ME?

"In the old days men had the rack — now they have the press."
Oscar Wilde

The way to sour the day of many board members or superintendents is to advise them that a reporter is on the telephone. Particularly since Watergate and the rise of investigative reporting, elected officials and business people nervously presume that a reporter's call or presence means trouble right here in River City. This fear and mutual distrust can contribute to the avoidance of media relations — an avoidance that contributes to *poor* media relations, creating the very problem that was being avoided. As an example of this process, I'll to step into the confessional and tell you about a lawsuit against a city council that was filed by the out-of-state newspaper I once worked for.

The story started innocently enough. I was told to make a routine call to the mayor of a nearby small town to write a three-paragraph story. I had been given a legal notice from our paper on which to base a few questions. The mayor was incensed. I later learned that he disliked reporters and newspapers and thought they had no right to meddle in his town's business. I recall saying something foolish about the people's right to know immediately before he slammed down the receiver. That's when I became incensed.

A fellow reporter told me that the mayor always behaved that way. No matter how small the story, he refused to give reporters the time of day. (It's called the ostrich approach to media relations. If you keep your head in the sand, the media isn't really there.) By that time, an editor was nearby and

laughing at the head of steam I'd worked up. Everyone else ignored the old mayor. I'd like to say that I was filled with rage against the insult to the Fourth Estate that I'd just experienced, but the truth is that most reporters are human — in addition to being idealistic -- and I'd just been hung up on. So I took his zero media relations into the next phase by stating that what the mayor seemed to need was solid, regular press coverage so he could learn the valuable lesson of cooperation. Naturally, I got the assignment.

When reporters at that paper began regular coverage of an organization or elected body covered by the state's Freedom of Information (FOI) provisions, we were to present a letter to the group that detailed requirements for timelines of press notification of meeting dates, topics that could and could not be discussed in executive session, and other legal miscellany regarding our intent to cover. As I delivered the letter I had a sinking feeling that I'd just entered into a suicide pact. The mayor was clearly unimpressed with the commitments to which I'd just obligated him, and it appeared certain that no one would emerge as a winner. To my credit, I did talk to a couple of councilmen and urged them to convince the mayor to cooperate. I needn't have wasted my breath.

I found out quite by accident that the city council — after receiving my notification — had held the equivalent of a secret meeting. They had rescheduled a regular meeting and failed to give the newspaper proper notification. The morning after the unscheduled meeting I called the mayor at my editor's instruction to request that he review the previous night's agenda and action — and to ask how it was that he neglected to notify me of the meeting change. My editor stayed close to my desk because I was also instructed to hand the telephone to him if the mayor's tempered sizzled. It did and I did. The editor began a lecture about not being rude to his reporters when — strike three — the mayor hung up on him.

The attorneys were the only ones who were happy. They had never seen such an open and shut case of FOI violation. I was assigned to write the several stories that followed about the lawsuit. Besides the fact that it was news, newspapers always want people to know that they're willing to go to court to protect the pubic's right to know. The newspaper settled for a written apology from the mayor. I uncomfortably covered a few more meetings and then we let them fade away.

Some might say that I instigated the unpleasant series of events — in fact, many did. And admittedly, anger factored heavily into the recommendation to cover the city council. But knowledge of a reporter's occasional weakness is just as important as the other lessons to be learned from that story.

Is the media really after *you?* Probably not. As an elected official you are required to share certain information with the media — and because you are dealing with human frailties, it's to your benefit to base media relations on

positive relationships rather than combative ones.

The Media: Who Are They?

Published in 1987, *The Media Elite: America's New Powerbrokers* paints a group portrait of this country's top journalists. The subjects of a two-year study that served as the book's foundation were randomly selected from our most prestigious media outlets such as the *New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, Time, Newsweek, U.S. News & World Report,* and the news departments of CBS, NBC, ABC and PBS.

The study concluded that America's top journalist is "the very model of the modern eastern urbanite, politically liberal and alienated from traditional norms and institutions." The composite newsman is just that — male (79 percent), white (95 percent), in his 30's or 40's, whose father is a professional or businessman (80 percent) and who comes from a northeastern or north central city. Eighty-six percent never attend religious services, 80 percent voted for Democrats in the four precceding presidential elections and 90 percent believe that women should have the right to have abortions. Perhaps the most startling result of the study was the amount of social and political homogeneity.

Once composed of anti-intellectual working-class people, the media ranks have changed and our approach must change as well. It has been a long time since a copy boy with a high school diploma worked his way up the reportorial ranks. Virtually all of today's reporters have university educations and some have graduate degrees. According to *The Media Elite,* "Increasingly, young people from upper-middle-class backgrounds began to seek (after World War II) jobs in newspapers and television as an exciting and creative career that would also have an impact on society."

In many ways, reporters are not unlike the teachers in our school districts. Although reporters may be more liberal, both groups believe strongly in the far-reaching impact of their professions. They are idealistic and certain that they could earn more money in other jobs. Even as they joke, "I didn't become a teacher/ reporter to get rich," their commitment shows. And many Baby Boomer teachers who graduated from high school in the 1960s became teachers for the same reason cited by the era's new reporters — for the profession's societal impact.

The teacher who spends an evening grading papers is not unlike a reporter whose evening is devoted to covering your school board meeting. Reporters work long, strange hours -- including graveyard and weekend shifts. Their holiday and vacation leave are generally minimal. In my first year-and-a-half at a newspaper, I didn't have two consecutive days off. Although we rarely think about it, reporters have families and personal lives, and they often would prefer to be somewhere other than at your emergency meeting. Conversely, the "thrill of the chase" can be very real for reporters.

The adrenaline flowing from a hot story can keep a news person going long past quitting time.

At the same time, reporters are largely at the mercy of editors and deadlines. The decision to cover or not to cover a story may be influnced by the reporter, but the final verdict rests with an editor who remains essentially anonymous. Similarly, reporters — except at small papers — don't write the headlines we dislike, nor do they choose the photos we find unflattering. Additionally, their stories are edited for content and length, and they are often as surprised as we are at the printed outcome.

The media, particularly television news, is frequently criticized for its impatience — translate rudeness. I'm old-fashioned enough to believe that rudeness is rarely acceptable, but it's fact that the deadline clock hangs over the reporter's head. Close doesn't count. The story either makes deadline or it dosen't. This isn't meant to excuse your least favorite reporter; it's meant to encourage you to get to the point. Bluntly, when a newswoman asks for the time, she doesn't want to know how to make the watch.

Reporters, then, aren't strangers. They share many traits with the group of people you vowed to support when you recited the oath of office. Most reporters are fair, responsible and have a high sense of integrity. In the next chapter, we'll discuss strategies to protect ourselves against the few who don't fit this description.

CHAPTER FOUR

Working With The Media

"Communication and leadership are inseparable."
Anonymous

The *Bible* states that "where there is no vision, the people perish." We might add that when the public dosen't know what the vision or direction is, they can't possibly rally 'round. Communicating well with the media is one way of ensuring the public's correct perception of your vision for the school district.

For district employees, the question is not only what should be said, but also who will say it to the press. Corporate philosophy regarding this authority ranges from everybody talks to virtually no one talks. The former is, no doubt, an effort to be accessible; but I believe it creates far more problems than it gains good will. By enabling all employees to speak with the press, an organization risks the certain outflow of incorrect and conflicting information. Few positions offer an organizational overview that permits a truly complete answer. The alternate, only one or two authorized spokesmen, not only appears to be uptight and closed, it is. Yes, it provides control — but also contributes to communication logjams. What happens when those two individuals are in meetings or unavailable? Reporters are stymied and your media relations efforts just went down the tubes.

I recommend an in-between stance that allows control, but also has a feeling of openness and helps reporters talk to the people they need to contact. Good public relations policy assists reporters in doing their jobs rather than impedes their progress. In this approach, the superintendent is the primary spokesperson for the district. In his or her stead, or upon request, the public information director is the spokesperson. Other managers (principals, directors, etc.) are permitted to speak about their areas of expertise only. For instance, a principal receives a telephone call

from a newspaper reporter regarding that school's third-grade bilingual class. The principal provides information until the newsman branches into district-wide goals and plans for the bilingual program. At that point, the principal would give the reporter the proper name and telephone number to pursue the topic at the district level. A coach questioned about the implementation of new "pass/play" requirements would refer the call to the appropriate person at district office because the requirements affect more than his school. Non-managers who are approached by the media should request clearance from their supervisors before responding.

Control is accomplished by limiting the number of people talking to the media and the topics on which they speak. Additionally, persons receiving media inquiries should notify the public information office. I have found that for the most part, reporters advise me out of courtesy that they're working on a story. When that's not the case, the notification from district staff keeps me abreast of media activity and allows my office to be of assistance to other principals/department heads when the reporter is obviously calling several people. Subsequently, I can say to those district employees who call me before responding to the reporter's message, "They called so-and-so about topic X and this is the response we developed." This process provides consistency and allows for preparation.

The "everybody talks" vs. controlled authority to speak to the press must be addressed separately for members of the board, but it is a serious issue which deserves discussion by you and your colleagues. Some boards designate their own spokesperson and consistently refer all press inquires to that individual. Frequently, the board president is the designee, but, more importantly, the person authorized should be selected based on ability to handle interviews in an articulate, calm manner.

The guiding tenet for board members in dealing with the press is the oneness of the board. Hashing out disagreements between yourselves on the news pages is harmful to the district and to the eventual settlement of the disagreement. Individual opinion should never be mistaken for board opinion. Do not speak for the board as a whole unless you've been so directed.

When a difficult vote is scheduled at an upcoming meeting, it is not unusual for a reporter to do an advance story outlining the issues — and asking for quotes on each side of the question or for predictions on the outcome. An honest, appropriate response might go like this: "It's true that we haven't reached consensus on this topic. We all have questions to be asked and I expect that we'll work it out at the board meeting. It's all part of the process of five individuals coming to agreement for the good of the district." With this kind of response, you've acknowledged that there are differences of opinion, but you have preserved the solidarity of the board by your refusal to participate in pre-game name-calling.

Once sworn into office, you're no longer running for election. You accomplished that. After election, you become a part of the whole and that interest must become primary. In times of negotiations or crisis, board members must be particularly careful. Most authorities on media relations during negotiations advise that the board and superintendent stay away from the media during that time. Your PIO and chief district negotiator should be the primary contacts for progress reports. First of all, the positions of the board and superintendent should be minimized as targets for the bad feelings that may ensue. You, as the district's top officials, should be able to take the lead — unscathed — in rebuilding employee harmony and team spirit once a settlement has been reached. Additionally, board members and the superintendent need to avoid any real or imagined promises regarding district offers. Comments to the media during this sensitive time must be carefully planned. The more an individual talks to the press, the greater are the chances of accidentally misstating information — or for being misunderstood by a reporter. When the mistake finally occurs, it shouldn't be made by you. The board should never criticize teachers or their association, and should make only the most general comments about the negotiating process. Negotiations — strikes or sick-outs — are times to keep board members' names out of the media.

The media guidelines chosen for board and employees are only as worthwhile as the rate of adherence to them. Training and refresher in-services are required to become proficient. An annual management team workshop on press policies and coping techniques is a must. Capistrano Valley Unified School District has a thorough, written document that outlines press responsibilities and prohibitions for its employees. It's essential that the entire team knows the game plan.

The media relations policy of some companies, including Control Data, insists that a public relations representative be present at *all* media interviews. The PR practitioner assists in pre-interview preparation, serves as the follow-up contact for the reporter and can provide post-interview feedback to the executive. On sensitive interviews, you and your district's top administrators may want to utilize similar services from your PIO. Before a substantial interview, it's always a good idea to brainstorm with your public relations officer and other staff about the questions that may be asked. Have them play devil's advocate and pose the tough questions and behaviors that are designed to elicit more information than you plan to give.

The need for training and professional assistance is reinforced in *The Anatomy of an Interview,"* by Jerr Boschee, former general manager of public relations for Control Data. He wrote: "Reporters are professionals. They conduct hundreds of interviews a year. They know what they are doing. When it comes to interviews, most business people are taking a significant risk. The stakes are much higher than the questioner may realize

— a job, a reputation, a company's well-being. Amateurs make mistakes. They mis-speak, they contradict themselves, they release proprietary information, they speak with confidence about subjects they don't understand. In short, most of them are over-matched, and they know they need an equalizer -- so they turn to their public relations people, many of whom are former journalists."

Although I was a reporter for only a couple of years, I found that I was usually successful in acquiring the information I wanted. Before we move into specific media tips, let me share an example from my experience in getting people to say what they shouldn't.

I covered a school district that was involved in unrest to the extent that a concerned parents' group had been formed and it was rumored that they had hired an attorney to investigate the possibility of buying-out the superintendent's contract. I called the chairman of the parent group to determine how much, if any, fact there was to the rumor. He was very controlled and told me no more than he wanted me to know. I did, however, learn the following things: the name of the attorney who had been hired; that a meeting with the attorney had occurred the previous day; the number of people at the meeting; and that topics A, B and C had been discussed.

With that information, I called the attorney. I introduced myself and said that I had just spoken with concerned parent Joe Brown who had told me about the meeting regarding XYZ school district. I confirmed with him the date of the meeting and the size of the group attending, then moved into some fairly innocuous questions about topics A, B and C that Mr. Brown had discussed with me. I then said, "And how successful do *you* think the attempt will be to buy-out the superintendent's contract?" The lawyer replied, "Well, so far my research indicates, ..." and he reviewed that entire segment of the meeting for me. I had my story.

I, of course, had not told the attorney that Mr. Brown disclosed information to me about the possible buy-out. That was his assumption based on other knowledge of the meeting that I had demonstrated. He certainly had the right — and he should have exercised it — not to talk with me about the matter. Was I being sneaky? Or was I simply using the tools at hand to get the story? Ultimately, it makes no difference. I got the story. The reporter's challenge is to acquire the information, get the story. To many it becomes game-playing with an imaginary scoreboard. reporter, 2; official, 0. Let's try to better your chances for a decent score.

Do's And Don'ts

- Above all, there is no such thing as "off the record." If you don't want to be quoted, don't say it. It's simple. A reporter I know explained that not only would he advise officials against going off the record with a reporter, he dislikes it when he gets put in that position. "It's almost like tying my

hands. What happens when I get that information from another source? The person who told me off the record may still feel betrayed even if I have a different attribution. It can be a dangerous game."

- The second half of rule #1 is that off the record is never retroactive. You can not talk with a reporter and then say, "I hope you're not quoting me on this." Again, if you don't want to be quoted, don't say it.
- Give yourself time to organize. If you have a secretary, instruct him to routinely ask the subject of a reporter's telephone call before transferring it to you. If you take calls directly, don't hesitate to request a call-back. Once you have the subject, you may find that you want to confer with others before answering — or that you need to locate a report or data before responding. It's always permissible to say that you want to check some information first or that someone is in your office or at the front door. Stalling for a little time is permissible as long as you fulfill your obligation by gathering the information you need quickly and returning the call by the designated time.
- Jot down notes as a reminder of the important points you want to make. Be sure you make them.
- Always return reporters' calls and do so as promptly as possible. They're working on one or two deadlines per day and the deadline doesn't wait for you or that reporter. You may call back to say that you can't discuss the subject in question, but be courteous enough to place the call.
- When talking to radio news people, always presume that you're being recorded. I suggest telling the reporter that you'd like to hear the questions to be asked prior to taping the interview. I've never been refused that accommodation. As a reporter delineates the subject matter, you can make notes or decide if a call-back is necessary.
- For both radio and television, think fast, but talk slowly. You'll be more easily understood and you'll sound more competent if you speak in a measured cadence.
- Tape record your voice while reading a news release and again while retelling the release in your own words. Listen critically for pronunciation difficulties, vocal tone, awkward pauses, repeated use of catch pharases, and "ahs" and "ums."
- Television on-the-spot interviews can feel very threatening because of the onslaught of people, lights and camera. To gain time to feel more prepared, you may (as with radio) ask to talk-through the interview questions before beginning. If an assertive, out-of-time reporter continues pressing the interview, you may have to resort to the "omigosh" technique of media management That's when you drop everything in your hands (omigosh!) or abruptly stoop to tie a shoelace. You've ruined their set-up and the camerman will be jockeying to get back into position. As you stand up, turn your back to the camera and ask sweetly to have a

run-through on the questions to be asked. A television station is not going to air film in which the interviewee drops out of sight and the interviewer is left open-mouthed. (Remember, this is the last resort measure. If used too frequently, you'll damage your relationship with television news people.)

- Setting up in your office to videotape an interview requires five to 10 minutes. This is your opportunity to get more specific about the questions to be asked. (You already know the general topic, because you talked about that with the reporter before you agreed to the interview, right?) You may also use this time to help the reporter and crew — and, thus, yourself — feel more comfortable. An interview with someone you've just been chatting with is generally less threatening than if the flames of fear and hostility had been fanned during that 10 minutes.
- If a television reporter is smoothly walking and talking you into a pre-set interview spot (background has been chosen; lights and camera positioned), you have the easiest of all options to get your preparation time. Don't walk into the lights. It may sound simplistic, but most of us mortals react automatically at such times. Just as process servers find that most people reach out for paper that is extended to them, most of us will allow ourselves to be escorted by a strong personality — even into a situation that causes us some trepidation. All we need do is politely dig in our heels for a couple of minutes.
- Hear the words you're saying and know when to stop. A friend of mine is a former prosecuting attorney turned legislator turned educator. His years of experience proved to him that the same folly causes people to get into trouble on the witness stand and with a reporter — the inability to stop talking. You know what you want to say and what is appropriate to say. Do it and then stop.
- Beware the long pause. It's fascinating that silence can be so intimidating. Nature abhors a vacuum and, given a pregnant pause, most of us feel obliged to jump in and fill the void. Perhaps this silence is the reporter's natural weapon to combat your ability to stop talking when there's nothing left to say. The reporter may truly be shuffling notes or she may be waiting for you to say more than you intended. If you feel compelled to say something, try asking if she has sufficient information.
- Don't ramble. (It's the time they want, not the watch-making lesson, remember?) Refer to your notes and be concise.
- Don't song and dance a reporter. If you don't know the answer to a question, say so. Then tell the reporter who does know the answer and arrange for that conversation to take place. Or offer to research the answer and call back with the required information.
- Don't lie. Never. Ever. No matter what the temptation. Morally, we'd all agree that lying is wrong. Practically, you'll be found out eventually and

you can never repair the damage.

- Answer direct questions with direct answers even if the response is that you have no information. Emulate Thoreau: simplify.
- Don't say "no comment." It's an immediate way to make a reporter suspicious and angry. Take a little more time to proffer your reasoning. "That matter is under litigation and it would be improper to discuss it." "Contract offers are made at the negotiating table." Without being brusque, you still said "no comment."
- Be cautious about topics involving employee or student confidentiality, legal or police matters. Police items — employees or students under investigation — should be referred to the public information office of the police department. Your public relations director should develop a good working relationship with the police and civilian personnel of that office. Queries on subjects with legal overtones should either be referred to your attorney or should be cleared before making your statement.
- Don't answer "what if's." Don't speculate. To some "what if's" you may want to reply that you're unwilling to speculate on such an iffy topic. Also appropriate is a positive response on the subject of the question, not the question itself. For example:

Q. If your dropout rate continues to grow proportionately for the next five years, what will happen to the local work force with this decreasing fund of well prepared entry-level workers?

A. We have an excellent dropout prevention program that was initiated last year. In concert with the two-year old independent study program, we believe more at-risk students are getting the attention they need. Let me give you some examples of these successes...

The counter to this rule is — don't speculate unless it is to your advantage to do so. If legislation is pending that will have significant impact on education, it is your responsibility to become well informed on possible outcomes and to "speculate," based on reliable data, about the anticipated results.

- Don't create deadlines that don't exist. Reporters, because they deal in details, will urge you to be specific on all points. And you should whenever possible. If — on the other hand — the topic (for just cause) has nebulous timelines or parameters, don't allow yourself to be backed into creating an end-point that didn't previously exist. It's acceptable to say that the inquiry is open-ended at this point or that timelines can't be established until the committee's first report is published. Your frustration with the reporter's insistence shouldn't lead you to give him what he wants simply to get rid of him.

- In all interviews, but particularly radio and television, state your conclusion first, then your substantiating data. Having been trained throughout school in report-writing, we tend to explain our reasoning before stating our conclusion. News style is just the opposite. The electronic media is beset by time constraints that restrict on-air coverage to minutes or seconds. To assure that your position is clear — and gets aired — hit your bottom line first. "We believe this. This is why." Print reporters have more space to develop the story, but they think in this writing style and your interview will have more impact if your explanations follow this pattern.
- Do emphasize key points. Make sure you're understood. Don't hesitate to ask for the reporter's feedback on the clarity of your explanation.
- Don't talk educatorese. A mathematics learning module is better referenced as a chapter in an arithmetic text. You may be lucky enough to have a regular education reporter who understands the terminology, but the majority of districts work with reporters who are generalists and are usually reassigned just when they're coming up to speed on school district intricacies. In either case, it's best for you to translate your thoughts into lay language rather than rely on the reporter to do the work correctly or incorrectly. Newspapers and most general circulation magazines are written at a sixth to eighth grade reading level. If you lean toward multisyllabic vocabulary, try to use a simpler speaking style in interviews.
- Don't repeat a reporter's words back to him. He can use this technique to formulate your quotes and they may not be to your liking. Avoid affirmative responses to questions that begin, "So what your're saying is this..." Instead, reply with a brief restatement of your position — in your own words. In all cases, refrain from repeating a reporter's offensive language.

  Q. What are you going to do about all these goddamn juvenile delinquents?

  A. We don't have goddamn juvenile delinquents!

  Look at the quote the reporter just got. One more time don't repeat a reporter's words.
- Don't lose your temper with a reporter or become hostile, but don't allow yourself to be bullied either. Stay calm and controlled. Terminate the conversation if necessary, but don't say things you'll regret. Always remember who is writing the story. The questions that set you off won't end up in print. Your answers will.
- The decision to be interviewed must be made repeatedly as each new story evolves, but be sure to weigh both the potential harm from the interview and the public's right to know. Keep in mind that your refusal to talk won't kill a story. It means that the story will appear without your comments or observations.

Eli Lilly Company once turned down an NBC request to film inside a hospital where the company was performing drug tests on prisioners. NBC told Lilly that was fine. They would simply film a reporter in front of the hospital saying, "Here's where Eli Lilly admittedly experiments on prisoners, but we were refused admittance when we wanted to see if prisoners were being mistreated." Lilly gave in and allowed a reporter to tour the hospital. She saw no mistreatment, because there was none, and nothing negative about Lilly appeared on the air. Sometimes it pays to be cooperative.

- Don't be misled by an end-of-the-interview interest in your personal feelings on the topic. It happens again and again. In person, the reporter probably will close the notebook, put it away, shake his head sadly and say something like, "It's got to be really tough trying to stay objective when you're bound to have strong feelings about this. I don't know about you, but it sure makes me angry." This is supposed to be your cue to let down your guard and vent your deepest feelings. Don't. The interview isn't over until the reporter is out the door or has hung up the telephone. Whatever you say can, and probably will, find its way into print.
- Don't ask to see a story before it is printed. A reporter will not show it to you and it shows that you're not savvy about how her job is done. Do make yourself, or a staff person, available for follow-up questions. Or ask the reporter if a review of some material is needed before ending the interview. Methods such as these — in addition to your ability to communicate — are your tools to ensure a correct story. Then it's out of your hands. Errors do occur for a variety of reasons, but reporters are motivated to get it right.
- Don't give away an exclusive. The media are very competitive and getting the story before the opposition is part of the game. You can't afford to consistently and selectively distribute your news in this way. However, if a reporter gets a legitimate jump on a story, you can't sabotage him by calling the competition.

  On the other hand, if two reporters are working on the same story (other than a fast-breaking news story when they expect a concentration of media) be sure to let them both know. This can happen even when both reporters work for the same paper. The education reporter and a sports reporter may be developing a similar idea. They'll be grateful if you tell them.
- The follow-up call controversy. Many are taught and many more practice the habit of calling reporters to see if they've received your press release. If the postal system has succeeded, they have received yours and many others that day. Reporters on major papers tell me they sometimes receive upwards of 100 releases per day. Television and radio news people are similarly inundated. If each of those releases were followed with a

telephone call, little else would get accomplished at that reporter's desk. Reporters are very impatient with those routine calls.

I've worked out a compromise with myself in that area and it has been approved by the reporters I'm — in effect — "selling" to. Standard releases stand on their own merit. News releases should not be sent unless there's valid news to tell. (More in Chapter Five.) If I'm distributing a particularly important release, however, I telephone in advance to say that such-and-such is coming up, and I think it has potential for a good story. Details will arrive in a release and I'll be available for follow-up questions or to help arrange interviews or photographs. By not continuously harassing them with trivia, I hope to develop reporters' trust in my news judgment. Don't cry wolf unless you see the teeth.

- Beware being quotable. Herein lies a double-edged sword. Reporters and their editors like good copy. We like good copy. People who turn a phrase nicely are more likely to see their gems of wisdom in print. And it's advisable to use language with zest. It shows your enthusiasm for your work and it generates interest. The catch is that people sometimes get more involved in being quotable than in presenting a thorough, fair depiction of the facts. Be self-aware.
- Do compliment reporters on good stories, on attention to detail, on fairness in writing on controversial issues. Although reporters can detect empty flattery, they greatly appreciate sincere compliments that are based on positive performance. They don't get enough of them.
- Do know the players. Learn reporters' deadlines so you know when not to call. When you do call, ask first, "Are you in the middle of something?" Treat reporters with respect and as individuals. Make notes if necessary. Jane is an amateur cyclist. Bob and his wife are expecting a baby. Establish positive relationships. Telephone to introduce yourself and offer assistance to new education reporters. Pay a visit, having made an advance appointment, to the newspaper office to meet the editors or use community activities to become acquainted.

  But don't expect a good relationship to keep your district out of the media when there's trouble. What we expect is a fair shake and the opportunity to tell our story. We can have this when we follow the rules.
- Do re-read this chapter and rehearse your interview techniques. Practice counts.

From *The Anatomy of an Interview:* "As journalists are painfully aware, the clock is running during all of this (an interview)... Reporters sometimes are willing to 'go with what they've got.' They'll get another chance tomorrow. Executives probably won't."

CHAPTER FIVE

Definition and Dissemination

"If it bleeds, it leads."
Anonymous Editor

News is defined by extremes. It is composed of firsts and lasts, mosts and leasts, largests and smallests. It is the unusual, the uncommon. Man bites dog. One of the most frequent complaints about news coverage is that good news gets trashed in favor of the sensational. Television cameras don't show up when students and teachers report for a routine day of school. They do arrive for blizzards, floods, earthquakes, strikes and walk-outs. That's the nature of the business.

Additionally, competition is intense for news space. In metropolitan counties, education reporters may cover 30 or more school districts which are all competing against each other for an editor's go-ahead — and a reporter's time. At least major newspapers *have* education reporters. With television and radio news, you're up against the whims of the stock market, the weather, freeway crashes and political upheavals — all of which may bump important education news. To get major coverage, your news must fit the definition. It must *be* news.

Many large newspapers have tried via neighborhood editions to fill the urban gap left when towns became too large and seemingly sophisticated for the chatty hometown newspaper that we all still enjoy. Other community weeklies generally welcome the sometimes less exciting, but newsworthy items that schools can provide.

It then becomes incumbent upon school and district communicators to seek out the uncommon and deliver news to the proper outlet.

Review the list you developed for your communications mix and brainstorm valid story ideas that could be pitched to news agencies. Top personnel appointments will usually work for all print media — including a

paragraph in the promotions column of business newspapers. Look for human interest angles for other stories. We recently placed a sports feature on an intermediate school bilingual math teacher who is also a top weight lifter. Reversals work. For three years, Santa Ana Unified has sent non-school-site administrators into the classroom as teacher aides to celebrate the Day of the Teacher. For three years, news and feature stories have accompanied the effort. Another Orange County district earned a school feature when a student acted as principal-for-a-day. In another instance, a Huntington Beach superintendent startled the community and garnered a large story when she "guaranteed" her high school graduates. If future employers found their basic skills lacking, the district would provide remedial training.

Suggest that one employee at each site be responsible for funneling possible news and feature ideas to your media relations staffer. Look for news hooks. What's *the* current education topic? If yours is the first district in the area to revamp a program due to legislative change, a reporter could use it as an implementation example. What new programs are your schools implementing with regard to dropout reduction, drug and alcohol abuse, AIDS education, work experience for the handicapped, English acquisition? A first or vastly different approach to a topical subject could result in a story that will help cement your reputation as a leader — a district that deals with realities.

Holidays are good occasions for visual coverage. Newspapers and television are often eager for images of elementary children dressed as pilgrims, caroling for a school/business partner, drawing pictures of Chanukah candles or dancing at a Cinco de Mayo fiesta. Again, look for a new approach. One major newspaper won a CSBA Media Award for a photo layout based on hearing impaired students singing Christmas carols. It was headlined "The Signs of Christmas." If your schools have new immigrants, you might pitch a story based on their participation in typically American holidays such as Thanksgiving or Independence Day (if you have year-round schools).

School/business partnership ceremonies are important to schools and deserve publicity for both the school district and the business that is willing to commit some of its resources. Because of the number of school districts entering partnerships, the activity has become usual rather than unusual, but you might approach the media with a different angle. Suggest an overview story about how the partnership program has benefited schools in your district. Schools in metropolitan areas might even propose a county-wide story that would include your successes *and* those of other districts. Your Chamber of Commerce publication might use an article quoting your business partners on the rewards to business from school participation. A similar story could get good response from a business newspaper if leading

business people are quoted, or if the activities are high tech or oriented to business education.

Radio and television are required to devote time to public service announcements (PSAs), and most stations have individuals or departments who will advise or even assist in preparation. PSAs can be used to tout anti-drug c. stay-in-school efforts and present your district to the public in a proactive manner.

Significant student honors are an obvious news source, but remember faculty and staff. too. Every time you can get even small mentions of employees who serve on state committees, present papers to professional meetings, publish articles or are otherwise recognized for their expertise, you are demonstrating the excellence of your district. Use internal communiques, cable tv bulletin boards and weekly newspapers for these items. Your personnel department annually tallies advanced degrees earned by staff. Give the people credit and show the increasing knowledge level of the district. Awards to board and staff from civic and community groups also display the caliber and involvement of your people. Your PR staff might offer to provide a school news column to a local weekly. This kind of column can carry a variety of smaller but important items that might not in themselves warrant a separate story.

News abounds in your schools and district office. It only takes a commitment of time and internal communication to seek out that information and determine which of your multiple news avenues is most appropriate.

Start At The Beginning

All the work of locating a worthy story and writing it is lost if it doesn't get to the right person. Make sure your district has up-to-date media lists. No one likes receiving mail addressed to someone who left the organization five years ago. You need the names of assignment or metro editors, key reporters in various departments, telephone numbers and current addresses. Many local press clubs produce annual media directories that are at least correct when they went to press. When beginning to work with a radio or tv station or newspaper, verify the names of the people you'll be contacting.

The education reporter will be your primary contact at a newspaper, but you may have sports, entertainment, business or lifestyle features. Read these sections to learn the kinds of stories used and the names of the reporters who write them. Few people read the entire paper. As a result, it is to your advantage to place articles in various sections of the paper throughout the year.

Similarly, televison and radio offer options beyond inclusion in news programs. Interview and call-in shows on the electronic media are opportunities to communicate with the public about important issues.

Timing is important. If you want to build support prior to an official board action, remember that these shows book guests two weeks to one month in advance.

There are pros and cons to making these appearances and to selecting the most comfortable, appropriate avenue. Because the topic for an interview program is selected in advance, you have ample time to prepare. For that reason you have greater control than on a call-in program, where you are subject to the comments and questions of anyone who can pick up a telephone and call. Call-in programs can be useful to your communications plan, but they require planning and practice. Assign these appearances only to representatives who are articulate and think fast on their feet.

One benefit of radio is that you can have statistics, an outline of your points and other reference material in front of you for easy referral. You can't shuffle through papers on the set of a television program. In the case of both radio and television, though, preparation is fundamental to your success. Recording yourself on audio or video tape is an excellent rehearsal method, and your district may have the necessary equipment. These tools can also help you build your basic public speaking skills.

Electronic Media Tips

While preparing to be a guest on a television or radio program, consider the following tips:

- Be on time. A live show will go on with or without you. If you are late for a taped program, you will tie up technicians, the host and studio time.
- Be flexible. Broadcasters work in a constant state of tension. The more understanding you are of delays and interruptions, the better the chance you'll be invited back.
- Don't rely on the interviewer's questions to cover the points you want to make. You needn't answer only the quesitons asked. Practice turning questions to subjects you want to discuss.
- Never answer questions with just a "yes" or "no." Expand on your answer to make your point.
- Call hosts by their first names. The audience considers them friends. You should, too.
- Ignore studio technicians. Concentrate on the host.
- Try to become familiar with a program prior to your appearance. This will give you a feel for the show and host.

When appearing on television, these added tips will help:

- Don't swivel or move excessively in your chair.
- Make soft, smooth gestures. A raised eyebrow at the wrong time can counter everything you've said.
- If you cross your legs, cross them at the knee. If you rest your foot on your

leg, your knee may bob in and out of a close-up.

- Look at the speaker. If the camera catches you when someone else is speaking and you're looking around the studio or at the floor, the audience will think you're bored.
- Television is a visual medium. If visuals — props, slides, videotapes, models — help to tell your story, bring them to the studio. But remember that the producer or director will make the decision as to whether your visuals can be used. Accept their decision — they are in charge.
- Do not wear hats, shiny jewelry, or striped, plaid or white clothing. Hats shadow the face. Shiny jewelry reflects into the camera lens. Plaids and stripes reproduce poorly on the TV, and white simply glares on the screen.

The Telephone As A News Tool

The telephone is one of the most important pieces of news equipment. Expect the person who handles your day-to-day media relations to spend a considerable amount of time with a telephone growing from his ear. At Santa Ana Unified, we use the telephone as a PR measurement and reference tool, as well as for news dissemination.

When I became the district's first public relations officer a few years ago, we began a permanent log of incoming media calls. The effect of PR is sometimes difficult to quantify and I had been charged with improving positive media coverage of the district. One way to track media interest is to tally the number of times they contact the district for information. In my first month there were five calls. Since then, there have been months with more than 100 calls. A monthly media report which lists news releases and incoming and outgoing media calls goes to the superintendent to keep him advised of the level of activity.

The log also tracks the subject of calls so we can, months later, locate a reporter who called about a specific issue and might, therefore, be interested in a related subject. If the building were to burn, the telephone log is the first thing I would rescue.

Many releases of information are better suited to the telephone than the written form. Feature placement is a prime example. Unless you've pre-arranged the authoring of a by-lined piece, it's a waste of time to write a five-page story to mail to a major new outlet. Reporters write their own features. Instead, gather the important — and correct — facts of the story and the angle that will produce reader interest. Use the telephone to sell the idea to a reporter or editor.

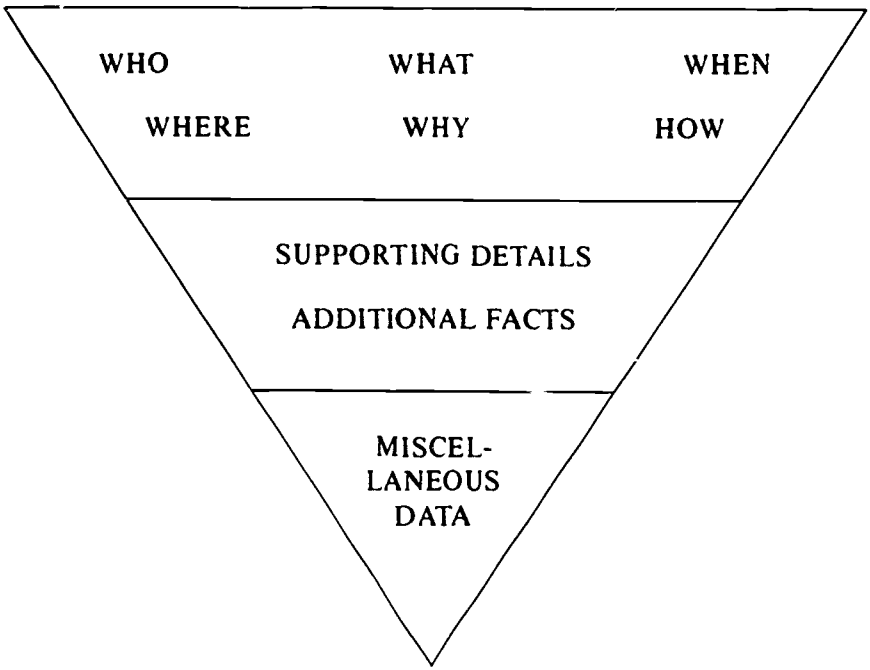
Always remember: The release of news, whether by telephone or in writing, should be to all appropriate media. Favoritism doesn't work — it backfires. Features may be offered to one source, but not always the same source. By using the telephone to pitch a feature, you can determine interest and, if none exists, call the next person on the list. Your time will

be used more efficiently.

You may also use the telephone to test an idea on a reporter. If the item is not really news, you've conserved time that can be used more productively elsewhere. A friendly reporter may also suggest another approach to the story that would make it newsworthy or another section of the paper in which it would work. Reporters can teach you about news development and judgment if you listen and don't overburden them with questions.

The News Release

In our discussion of talking with the media, you were advised to begin with your conclusion — main point — then elaborate with substantiating information. This is called the inverted pyramid style of writing. News releases are always written in this style, as shown below.



News stories, and therefore releases, are written in this way for two reasons. Readers go through newspapers like a surfer at the beach — they skim across the surface and catch a few good waves. Because the public doesn't read every story, every word, the lead (first paragraph) must give them both the meat of the story and catch their attention so they'll complete the article. Additionally, when a story must be edited for space, the editor should be able to cut paragraphs from the bottom and leave the story intact. Your news release should meet this test. Don't save important information for the last paragraph. You may never see it in print.

We write news releases like published news stories to make it easy for reporters and editors to use our work with little effort. Some smaller papers will use a good release word-for-word. Your staff writer should have a copy of the Associated Press Stylebook which delineates accepted capitalization, punctuation, abbreviation and use of titles. News style rules differ from the writing rules taught in English class, and journalistic style should be used for news releases and other district publications. When preparing your releases, follow these guidelines:

- The *who, what, when, where, why* and *how* are the essentials. They must be in your story and as many of them as possible should be in the lead paragraph.
- While including all pertinent data, keep the release as short as possible. Never mail a release that's more than two pages.
- Keep paragraphs short. Four sentences are average. A well structured one-sentence paragraph can work.
- Write concise sentences. Vary the structure, but don't allow yourself or your staff news writer to ramble. Devote one read-through of the release to crossing out all unnecessary words. Declare war on *a, an, the,* and *that.* Most are useless.
- Action verbs are preferable.
- Be sure that all names are spelled correctly.
- When a person's name is first mentioned, use first and last names and identify the person by title, position, grade level or other reason for being included in the story.
- On second reference, use last name only.
- Spell out numbers from one to nine. Use numerals from 10 and up.
- Avoid beginning a sentence with a number.
- If you must begin a sentence with a number, it should be spelled out.
- Don't use a question as your lead. It's a cop-out for not knowing what the lead really is.
- Rarely use questions in a release. Use exclamation points even more rarely.
- Don't editorialize. If you want to say that this is the best approach in modern history to a particular problem, attribute the statement to someone whose opinion is valid. Example: "This is the best lobbying effort I've witnessed from a school district," said Assemblywoman Simone Smith.
- Don't use extreme words like *unique.* A reporter once told me that he frequently trashes news releases that have the word unique in the lead paragraph. He doesn't even read further. Maybe it's not fair, but it's a common prejudice among news people.
- Alternate between using direct quotes and paraphrasing comments.
- Spell out months of the year when they stand alone. Abbreviate when the

month is followed by a date. Example: "The January board meeting..." or "The Jan. 10 board meeting..."

- Don't abbreviate days of the week.
- Use contractions. They're less formal and add to readability.
- Don't double up by using day and date (Friday, May 10). Newspapers have their own rules for using either day or date. Give them the date —correctly — and they'll make it right for their publication.
- Remember to target your story. Find the angle, then quote the people that make it newsworthy for that outlet.
- Avoid technical jargon. Write to be easily understood.
- Know deadlines. Some sections of the daily paper are printed in advance, and weeklies may work one or two weeks in advance. Time the mailing of releases so they arrive on time.

News Release Mechanics

- Use district letterhead stationery or a letterhead specifically designed for news releases.
- Type all copy double-spaced. (This permits room for the media to edit.)
- Use only one side of the page.
- Leave space at the top of your first page for reporter or editor notations.
- As with letters, date news releases.
- At the top left of your page, indicate the date your release may be printed. You will generally use "FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE." Embargo news for a specific release data only when essential. Editors say they are obliged to honor these instructions, but I prefer planning delivery — even if it must be done by messenger — to coincide with the acceptable release date.
- At the top right, include the name and direct telephone number of the person to be contacted for follow-up questions or assistance. Occasionally, it's advisable to use two names.
- Don't justify or hyphenate. It visually distorts the length of the piece and makes it more difficult to work from. A hyphen seen is often a hyphen typed.
- Use one-inch margins.
- Don't break a paragraph from one page to the next. Go to the next page at the end of the last whole paragraph that fits on the page.
- If the release is more that one page, write "-more-" at the bottom of the first page.
- Indicate the end of the release by typing "-end-", "-30-", or "- ### -".
- Each release should appear to be an original. If you have a good copier, you may want to type one original, then copy onto letterhead.

NEWS RELEASE

Barnabus Unified School District
5678 Elm Street
Yourtown, CA 12234

Edward B. Educator, Ed.D
Superintendent

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Jan. 1, 1990

Contact: John Smith
(916) 555-5555

MONROE NAMED BARNABUS UNIFIED SUPERINTENDENT

YOURTOWN, CA — With 27 years of experience in education, Dr. Maurene Monroe of Beta Heights became Barnabus Unified School District superintendent by unanimous vote at the board of education's Dec. 31 special meeting.

"This has been a lengthy and thorough search process," said board President Richard Wright. "We found the best person for the job and wanted to make it official before moving into the new year."

Monroe's five-year superintendency at neighboring Beta High School District had won attention for the district's steadily rising test scores, student achievement and employee morale. For the last four years Beta has settled teacher and classified employee contracts by June, and the district placed first in a county-wide 1988 parent survey ranking productive schools.

-more-

—SAMPLE NEWS RELEASE—

Barnabus Unified School District, page two

A native of Ohio, Monroe received her bachelor's degree at Ohio State University and her master's and doctoral degrees from Best University, California. Barnabus' new superintendent began her education career as a science teacher, served as principal of Gamma Intermediate School and Rho High School and was assistant superintendent of instruction before her appointment as Beta's superintendent.

Monroe is president of the California Superintendent's Council, author of *Effective Educators* and chairs Beta Chamber of Commerce's education committee. She is on the County Girl Scout Council's board of directors and is a member of Suchandsuch Civic Club. In 1988 she was named Woman of the Year by the metropolitan press club.

The mother of three is married to John Monroe, a local physician

-30-

NEWS RELEASE

Barnabus Unified School District
5678 Elm Street
Yourtown, CA 12234

Edward D. Educator, Ed.D
Superintendent

Feb. 15, 1990

TO: Editor or reporter's name

FROM: Spokesperson's name

SUBJECT: Fundraiser

2 p.m., March 1

Fancee Hotel Ballroom

Sponsored by Alpha Unified School District PTA Council

HOW: Briefly note unusual aspects of the fundraiser, celebrities to attend, other "grabbers."

PURPOSE: Scholarships for Alpha's 1990 graduates

$10,000 in scholarships to five students awarded in 1989

Goal: $15,000 in 1990 awards

CONTACT: Name and telephone number of spokesperson and PTA Council president

The Fact Sheet

Fact sheets are simple and direct. They may be used as follow-ups to telephone releases, press hand-outs at board meetings or news conferences or, when the occasion warrants, a stand-alone release.

Fact sheets are always one page. They're written in memo form and are, in a word, succinct.

Although agenda backup material for board meetings provides thorough explanatory information, reporters may have difficulty in quickly pinpointing the basics they need. Distilling this information into a one-page fact sheet will assist in telling the story correctly. I highly recommend them as backgrounders for important board meeting topics.

The Press Conference

The press conference is the best way to give news simultaneously to all appropriate media, but Cutlip and Center's *Effective Public Relations* warns that justification for this event seldom exists. Because reporters are strapped for time, the subject of the news conference must be substantive enough to warrant the expenditure of hours. After sponsoring one or two insignificant press conferences, your credibility sours. Media attendance at subsequent press conferences may suffer.

One general guideline is that the information to be released should be better suited to discussion than the one-sided statement of fact that a press release provides. If the topic is complex or very important, a press conference might be appropriate. Releasing information in this way allows the district to have all the experts in one room for statements and interviews. Charts may be used for diagrams and comparisons. A joint announcement by district and union of a tentative contract agreement is an appropriate reason for a news conference — particularly if the agreement was difficult to reach and/or both sides desire a show of unity.

A pre-board meeting press conference on a controversial topic will help present the details of your reasoning and, therefore, negate some inaccurate or emotional counter-arguments. School closures, attendance boundary changes and budget cuts are examples of the types of issues that can benefit from this treatment. In holding these press conferences, you are afforded the opportunity to clearly explain plans and proposals to the media prior to the meeting. In addition, the greater access to full media coverage during the afternoon helps communicate the news in a widespread manner. (This increased coverage can also be a reason to hold an early press conference to release important *positive* news.)

Set-Up Tips

- If wire services and the major television stations show up for the big news, don't forget your weekly newspaper reporter. Treat them all with the

same attention and courtesy.

- The best way to issue press conference invitations is by telephone. If the list is long and time is short, write a brief script and have several staff members make the calls.
- The second best way to request press conference attendance is by hand delivering announcements similar in form to a fact sheet.
- The timing of press conference notification is determined by the news. In an emergency you may have to give same-day notification. Try to advise the media two to four days in advance.
- Choose a location based on two considerations: proximity to the majority of news outlets that will attend, and appropriateness to the subject.
- Choose the size of the room carefully. Compute the number of people, including staff, plus television lights and cameras, displays and any necessary tables. Based on this, select a room that neither crowds nor dwarfs the assembled group.
- Whether your speakers are at a table or a standing podium, visualize the area through the camera's eye and create a photogenic setting. Watch out for plants, flags or wall hangings that in a photograph may look as if they're protruding from a speaker's ear. One of my favorite pictures was taken of a convention speaker in a hotel ballroom decorated with heraldic symbols. Several feet behind the newsmaker was a coat of arms featuring a shield and crossed swords. More than one photo showed the speaker with a sword through his head. Watch your background.
- Television cameras need space at the front of the room. Leave an open area for them with as much seating as possible on both sides so the view is not blocked for other attendees.
- Personal preparation is also required. All those who will speak or who may be called on should be briefed on anticipated questions and the parameters of their response.
- If time permits, staff should prepare a press packet containing various backup materials. When a press conference begins with the reading of a prepared statement, copies should be placed in the packet. A fact sheet summarizing the details is especially important when referring to budgets, test scores or other subjects containing many numbers.
- Press handouts should be distributed before the conference begins.
- Coffee, soft drinks and doughnuts are acceptable if they're not the focal point. A news conference is a working event, not a reception. Media receptions or luncheons work well under the right circumstances (such as introducing a new superintendent), but we shouldn't try to mix hard news with pleasure.

The Employee Public

Employees shouldn't be the last to know. News that warrants a press

conference deserves to be distributed to employees as well. If you have a telephone news line, record a summary of the release. The fact sheet prepared as a media handout can easily be turned into an employee advisory that's sent to each employee or posted in employee lounges. Ideally, employees should receive notification on the afternoon of the news conference.

There is no magic number of press releases or telephone calls that defines media success. You will have slow as well as heavy news months and there will be periods when internal communication takes precedence over external efforts. Armed with tools of news selection and dissemination, strive for balance that regularly utilizes the spectrum of your communications mix and touches all of your publics.

CHAPTER SIX

Crisis Communication

In writing for public relations practitioners, DuPont's PR director said, almost tongue-in-cheek, that he did not believe in crisis communication: "It's the same as day-to-day communication, only more so."

To a large extent, he's right on target. Media lists, good press relationships, spokesperson designation and management training in interview conduct must all be in place *before* the crisis hits so your district can survive.

In his chapter on crisis management in *Public Relations — What It Is And What It Does*, Michael D. Tabris, director of corporate commmunications and governmental affairs for Occidental Chemical Corporation, commented on the need for prior, positive media relations in handling emergency communication:

"I have emphasized the absolute necessity of developing good relations with the news media and addressing their requests promptly on a day-to-day basis. If your organization has a reputation for candor and openness, you will find that this perception carries over to a crisis. If the company is regarded as uncooperative, your efforts to cultivate the trust of the media during a crisis — especially when critics are impugning the organization's credibility — will be futile. In this regard, it is important to avoid adopting a siege mentality — that is, 'us versus them' — in which the news media are regarded as adversaries and treated as such. The media must be regarded as both a target public with an important and legitimate interest in the subject and as a conduit to reach other important publics... An operation that conducts itself openly implies that it operates in an ethical manner; an organization with a reputation for reticence or concealment will find it hard to establish credibility when it is most in need of trust from the media."

When the crisis hits — and one inevitably will — you and your

management team must already be comfortable that the structure is in place which will allow them to address the emergency. If contingencies for crisis management are not in place. urge staff to conduct a strategy session now while there is time for preparation.

Preparing For the Inevitable

Knowing that a crisis may not wait until we're all predictably at our desks, we must be prepared to contact the necessary people regardless of time or location. Board members should have the home telephone numbers of all key administrators, and administrators should have a directory at home of all employee and school numbers. Reporters who cover the district regularly should have top management's home telephone numbers and know who is on 24-hour availability. Our local reporters appreciate my home number appearing next to the office number on my business card. I'd rather take the chance of receiving a few unnecessary calls at home than take a chance on not being contacted when it's critical.

I was grateful for my collection of home telephone numbers one Friday evening when I received a call from district security advising me that a bus driver (the employee of our contracted bus service) had held a busload of special education students as hostages. He had terrorized them with various threats, including the possibility of blowing up the vehicle with all inside. Fortunately, the incident had a happy ending. By the time I was called, the children had been safely returned to school where site personnel were assisting families during police interviews. A suspect was already in custody (and later convicted).

Because others had my telephone number at hand, I was called quickly. And because I had the numbers I needed — without wasting time with directory assistance — I was able to talk with the superintendent, notify the special education director, receive additional information from the affected school's administrators, and flesh out answers to questions I was soon to receive. Reporters called and I was prepared to relay the district's response to the incident and plans for psychological assistance (to begin the next morning) for the affected children and their families. Requests for specific details of the episode were, of course, referred to the police. Teamwork and telephone numbers allowed district personnel to operate from their homes in sharing information and planning.

Other events are more predictable and allow for the accumulation of what I referred to as my "portable office" during recent, difficult contract negotiations. When strike or sick-out rumors abound, your media specialist should gather into a working folder information such as the following:

- The number of certified employees
- The number of association members
- The most recent contract offers from each side

- A list of schools and the number of teachers employed at each school. (If a strike or sick-out occurs, this list should be updated at least twice a day by the personnel department regarding number of teachers absent, number of substitutes in classes and number of unattended classes. Your spokesperson will also need to know how principals will handle combining classes that as yet have no substitute.)
- The current list of reporters' names and telephone numbers.

Our contract difficulties attracted many reporters that I rarely worked with, so my secretary used our media log to develop a complete list of names and numbers of those covering the evolving story. I quickly learned there was more information to be included. Elementary and secondary divisions provided me with descriptions of their provisions for student classroom activities during massive teacher absences. Because they were well prepared, I had additional solid information to share with the media.

Board members and key administrators should anticipate these crises and gather the information they will need at their fingertips both at work and at home. Your crisis plan should also include provisions for the regular sharing of information so that all affected departments will have the data they need to perform their jobs.

School-site administrators need advance direction about their responsibilities during a school crisis such as the report of a missing child. The first is notification. The police, division superintendent, superintendent, district security and the public information officer are at the top of the list. The superintendent's office should advise board members of the incident before they hear it on radio or television. Emergencies require the participation and cooperation of many groups of people. Media specialists should free principals from specified communications burdens so principals may respond to the serious demands being made on them.

Most police departments will agree that when working on a school related case, the police PIO should respond for his department and the school PIO should speak for the district. Reporter questions regarding details of the event under investigation itself should be referred to the police. School officials should be particularly careful during a crisis that they speak through one designated voice. It's easier for the many participating district employees to update one person rather than many; it provides clarity and lessens confusion; and it helps the media by making one person available to work with them. The media will certainly want to interview other district personnel. The PIO should arrange those interviews as they are appropriate and as administrators are available. Remind staff that clearance is required to talk with the media.

In a highly charged situation, there won't be time to debate communication philosophy. Administrators must understand established procedures and the actions the media will take during emergencies. In his

discussion of crisis management, Tabris said:

"A part of establishing good media relations is creating management awareness of the realities of the news media. This is not to say that top executives must become public relations experts. Rather, it is to suggest that one of the most difficult problems in a crisis will be the establishment of realistic expectations and objectives for the communications efforts. Unless management understands such realities as deadlines, limited space in the print media and limited time on the air, the need to cater to public appetites for the dramatic and sensational — as well as the growing tendency for the media to view themselves as the protectors of the powerless against the powerful — it will be impossible to obtain agreement on how to respond when you are under fire... Another important preparation is to encourage persons in management positions to be available as spokespersons on a regular basis and to provide training for such persons to deal with the media."

Campus-Based Emergencies

The media relations goal should be twofold in a campus-based emergency: Appropriate information should be channeled to the media, and the media should be prevented from unnecessarily disrupting the educational process.

One way to help maintain control is by designating a press room. Each school and the district office should have primary and secondary locations noted in their emergency plans. The press room should be at the front of campus and as close as possible to the office to limit access to students from non-school personnel. There should also be telephones available. As reporters arrive, they should be directed to the press room and advised that briefings will take place there. Your spokesperson should be in the room frequently to update reporters.

The police may also set up a command post on campus. They may request use of a room, portable building or patio area. They may also bring on campus a police van or large vehicle similar to a mobile home from which to operate. Police cars will be parked on campus and an area may even be roped off. Television crews, as they arrive, will also bring large vans that are likely emblazoned with the station's call letters.

All of this uproar — in addition to the strain of the actual emergency —will be the environment in which your administrators must operate and in which children will attend school. Of course, a present danger on campus would bring about the dismissal of classes. Administrators need to know what to expect.

Hand-in-hand with the certainty of the media's arrival will be the onset of telephone calls from parents and neighbors who have heard rumors or who have seen the police activity and are simply curious. The crisis plan

should allow for calling-in additional clerical assistance as needed to handle telephones and assist the principal. Your communications staff should immediately prepare a brief statement for distribution to all persons answering telephones. The script should be concise, low-key, reassuring and relay the basis for the school's concern:

"There was some confusion in the park next door which may have involved one of our students. As a precaution, the police are looking into the incident. We hope it will be resolved soon."

If the matter is not quickly resolved, you may want to instruct personnel to respond even more briefly:

"The event is still under investigation. I'm not at liberty to say anything further."

Good record-keeping will prove useful. Secretaries should log all incoming calls as they are identified by the caller — police, parents, school neighbors and the media. You may need the information for call-backs. The results will be useful in training other site administrators and in fine-tuning the original crisis plan. The log will also serve as a thermometer of outside interest.

Three schools in Santa Ana Unified School District have been faced with missing child incidents. In one of the situations, the elementary student's murdered body was later discovered. Not only did the school have to combat emotional stress, it also had to attempt "business as usual" in the face of continuing police presence on campus and intense media coverage. The lessons learned under fire by those principals were later shared in two separate workshops to aid other administrators.

In ongoing situations, the principal of the murdered child stressed the importance of delegating responsibilities for the school's day-to-day management. He explained that the principal's time will be devoted almost exclusively to the crisis — and that the daily routine can be better assured by handing over those responsibilities to another administrator or lead teacher. In a one-administrator school, additional management support should be sent in from another site.

Access to the school office should be limited to essential personnel to eliminate excess traffic and confusion. He told other principals to make sure that the victim's personal or school belongings are not disturbed before the police examine them. He also learned the value of up-to-date records such as emergency cards, cum folders, attendance books and class schedules. Because police will want to review much of this material, all of these become even more important during an emergency.

"Maintain an anecdotal record of all events, telephone calls and responses — including dates and times," he said. "Student interviews should be on tape and kept as uniform as possible. This is to assist in the investigation as well as to provide protection and documentation if the case

goes to court."

School administrators remained in close contact and gave emotional support to the young girl's family. Communication within the school family was also important. Administrators cleared their calendars of previous commitments and were highly visible before and after school, at lunches and recess. They believed their presence was calming and also made them accessible to students and staff who wanted individual time with them. Daily briefings to staff and frequent bulletins to parents assisted in stifling rumors. The police department cooperated in holding an evening meeting for parents and neighbors to allay their fears of danger for other children and to update them on the investigation's progress.

The event was traumatic for students and staff. Administrators who spent their days displaying strength and comfort for others found that they needed to spend time with each other, family and close friends to vent their frustration and feelings of loss. The district's special education department quickly put together a crisis intervention team to address the emotional needs of students, staff and parents. They assessed the situation and provided individual and group counseling, classroom discussions and larger assemblies as needed.

In the first few days of this kind of emergency, the media will be busy with the unraveling of the story. They will want to interview the parents, board members, principal, teacher and classmates. Of key importance here is our responsibility to guard the privacy of students. Unless an unusual situation dictates otherwise, school personnel shouldn't give permission for student interviews on campus. The media will also be interested in how the school handles the emotional trauma of it students and staff. Having this component in your plan is a plus for the district.

If the investigation drags on with no big news, such as an arrest, reporters are forced to become more inventive in order to provide the daily stories their editors want. This is when you and your staff must become extremely cautious. It is our role to provide necessary, appropriate information, but we must avoid being used to promote emotionalism.

Be particularly on guard with leading questions like "How did you feel?", "What do you really think?", "What if...?" More than any other time, you must refrain from speculation.

While these communication guidelines are especially pertinent to major crises, they also apply to minor incidents. Any injury or event on campus that brings out the fire department, police or paramedics requires communication action. District officials should be notified and the board should expect a brief report before such an incident becomes publicized. Through a public address message or a bulletin, the principal should on the day of the incident – tell staff and students the exact nature of the problem. Most situations are much less exciting than the rumors that

develop. Before imaginations run wild, and before parents begin to call, tell the troops what happened.

The following is an example of a staff memo that could be utilized after an incident.

I'm sure that you and your students are aware that emergency vehicles were on our campus earlier today. I want to assure yuu that the situation is under control and everything is fine.

Matt Jones, a science teacher, became ill as he was leaving his third-period class. He fainted in the hall, and we feared that the incident might be serious. As a precaution, the fire department paramedics were called and they summoned an ambulance. Mr. Jones was transported to City Hospital where he was treated and released from the emergency room. He was advised to rest at home for a couple of days, but he should return to class by Monday.

Let me repeat — Mr. Jones is doing well. On routine advice from his doctor, he is resting at home and will return to class by Monday.

Please read this memo to your students.

The Big One

We're probably lucky that recent media attention has been directed more than ever on earthquake preparedness. Because of that focus, many of us have been forced to develop, revise or extend school earthquake planning. Most of us are novices in that arena, but we all have access to those who aren't. Your local law enforcement, Red Cross and other emergency preparedness agencies have emergency plans that will impact your schools. You need to know the content of those plans and be a part of their development.

The board and top administrators might initiate a "crisis summit" meeting to assure that these plans dovetail rather than conflict. These xperts can also provide input into developing individual school and district-wide plans. Now is the time to catalog the services that will be provided to schools, the way in which they will be provided, and expectations these agencies will have of your schools. You should also ask these experts about volunteer groups that may offer emergency assistance, because some will come more highly recommended than others. Knowing the difference will affect your planning.

In a city-wide emergency, the designated spokespersons for schools, fire and police departments, and city government will be called on for various responses. These staff people should also have an advance plan for sharing information with each other and with the public. The group might find it advantageous to establish one dissemination point with the others filing periodic reports to a citywide spokesperson.

When plans are finalized, let everyone know. Specific responsibilities

will be assigned to individuals at school sites and at the district office for coordination. All these people should receive in-service training on the scope and details pertaining to their jobs. Schools are required to have annual earthquake drills. Administrators also need rehearsals and oppurtunities to discover gaps that might exist in the plan.

Parents will be comforted to know that their schools are prepared. They need to know details of the plan, such as whether you will dismiss or hold students after an emergency. Parents should be asked for additional names of family or neighbors who might pick up students — and they should be encouraged to keep home and office telephone numbers and addresses on file with the school up-to-date.

All local agencies involved in crisis response should be informed about your completed plan. The news media should also be made aware of the district's formalized plans. The unveiling of a detailed earthquake response plan at the site of a complete school drill is an excellent opportunity for a press conference. A "crisis summit" meeting could generate pre- and post-meeting news releases or a post-meeting news conference spotlighting all the officicals —and showing the combined planning efforts of the district and other agencies. Publicizing these proactive efforts enhances the public's perception of the district and it lets the media know what to anticipate in emergencies. If the "big one" comes, they, too, will be close at hand. Most of the techniques and caveats included in other sections of this chapter will serve well in a variety of emergencies including natural disasters.

We must learn to think about the unthinkable. As a board, it's your responsibility to encourage management to envision possible campus emergencies and ready themselves with planning, training and rehearsal. Utilize the many resources available within your own management team and call on outside assistance in advance trouble-shooting. With most of the incidents we've discussed, there is only one chance to do it right.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Fine Art of Complaining

Omar Khayyam must have known something about journalism. He wrote, "The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ, moves on." So it is with a reporter who puts one story to bed and moves on to the next — while the stories, one at a time, receive breath on the printed page and take on lives of their own. Newspapers in toto or as clippings live in files and libraries and microfilm and the minds of readers. When stories are favorable or fair, we welcome this chain of events. When an error occurs, the ramifications spread out in damaging circles like ripples in a pond. Just as creating a positive communication climate is a skill, knowing when and how to complain is a necessary art.

Michael D. Tabris, in *Public Relations — What It Is And What It Does,* said the following about correcting the record: "Previously reported information, no matter how erroneous, tends to become a 'matter of record' and thus self-perpetuating. Misstatements, distortions, and false charges, unless corrected, tend to become part of the background in continuing coverage of the story. Until the record is corrected, you will be forced to live the nightmare over and over again."

There is a ladder of sorts to the complaint process. You need to know where to jump on board so you don't break your own neck in the process. Using the most gentle interpretation of "an eye for an eye; a tooth for a tooth," be sure to fit the form of the complaint to the error in question. Your objective is dual — to assure that a correction is made, and to maintain a professional working relationship with the medium in question.

I asked a colleague in the Fourth Estate for his opinion on the complaint process. Immediately agreeing on the need to set the record straight, he also cautioned, "Never try to shame a newspaper. I have to confess that we're a very thin-skinned bunch and we tend to have long corporate memories." And there's good reason for that, he explained. Letters of complaint,

especially from board members and superintendents, are kept on file. Forever. Like a perpetual time bomb re-exploding each time someone new accesses the file.

With perhaps a tinge of embarrassment, he told me about a Hatfield and McCoy relationship that his paper and a school district have had for an untold length of time. At some point in history, a top official of the district had become enraged about what he perceived to be a general lack of coverage of his organization. His reaction was a series of irate telephone calls throughout the paper's hierarchy and a scathing letter to the editor-in-chief. The word came down from on high: Not another word about that district was to appear in print. "Not even if it's bombed."

The paper's reaction wasn't even close to the realm of fairness, but it's a reality to contend with. The media holds some of the deck's high cards and we have to play the game with that knowledge. The reporter's parting advice to me regarding complaints was "be temperate."

Know what *not* to complain about. Don't attempt to scold your reporter for a headline you don't like or a photograph you believe is unflattering. Except on smaller papers, reporters don't write headlines or take photographs. If reporters do double as photographers, they rarely make the final selection. A problem with a headline that is wildly misleading or erroneous should be addressed to an editor. I suggest calling your reporter's editor. Depending on the paper in question, that person's title might be metro (metropolitan) editor or news editor. Find out. State your objection unemotionally; explain the negative results of the misdeed; then ask — in a non-threatening way — "What shall we do to correct the problem?" Remember, you're seeking the correction — not the emotional satisfaction of ranting and name-calling.

Even in dealing with a correction that doesn't involve your regular reporter, it's a good idea to touch base with her before moving up the chain. By doing this, you demonstrate your knowledge of departmentalized responsibility and you prevent any surprises or awkward circumstances for your reporter.

I know several district officials who bristle under the rules of media fair play. "They get to do practically anything they want, and we have to play by the rules," they say. "Even if we get a correction, some damage has already been done."

There's a lot of truth there. It's as if our boundaries of comportment were established by the same rulesmaker who managed the War of Independence from England: "OK, you English have to wear bright red coats and stand out like sore thumbs and you have to march in straight lines out in the open where you can get knocked down like bowling pins. You patriots, on the other hand, can wear clothes that blend into the shadows — and you can clip in and out of the bushes and sneak up on the other team." The rules don't

always look fair, but they're still the rules.

Misquotes are a sensitive area and they're hard to prove. If you're being interviewed about a potentially controversial subject, you may choose to have a member of your staff present as a witness. Many reporters today employ tape recorders to assist their note-taking. You may also tape the interview — in a way that all parties know a recorder is being used - so you both will have records of the conversation.

If a quotation is blatantly wrong, call the reporter as quickly as possible and ask for a correction. Remember, however, that we're each emotionally attached to our own words and may over-react. Test the offending article on a few people you trust to tell you the truth. If they do not take serious exception to the quote, it may be better to ignore it than to engage in unnecessary confrontation. After seeing the article in print, you can't say, "I didn't mean it to sound that way." This is why printed copies of important statements should be provided to the media.

Do complain promptly and calmly about errors in fact. Call the responsible reporter; point out the error and provide the correct information; then request a correction. If you call before deadline, expect the correction in the next issue. Under normal circumstances, the matter can be resolved with minimal damage to the district or the reporter's professional ego. This is an ongoing relationship and burning your bridges can only damage your public reputation and the district. The reporter should be aware that you will neither ignore mistakes, nor hang him for them. Fairness is a mutual responsibility.

If, however, a reporter makes frequent mistakes or fails to respond promptly to correction requests, you must report the poor performance to his editor. An editor is a supervisor who may not know about sloppy work without your feedback. Just as you would document problems with one of your employees, you should have your facts together before approaching the editor. Present your case in a telephone call that is followed with a letter detailing your conversation. A vague feeling of dissatisfaction won't make your point effectively. Proof that is firmly and calmly presented will generally result in corrective action.

One school district recently received a page-one reproach for supposedly squirming out of an unpopular program by blaming another agency for losing the necessary paperwork. The reporter had interviewed officials at both organizations and still had no proof to substantiate either claim of the other's responsibility. The district said the documents were lost, the agency claimed they had not been received. Rather than writing a simple "he said, she said" story in which no conclusion is drawn, a falsely accusatory story was printed. Members of the public called the district to question and complain. When it was remembered that a check had accompanied the papers, the district accounting department searched its bank statements

until the canceled check was located — complete with the endorsement of the agency in question. Equipped with xerox copies of both sides of the check, a district spokesperson (and a witness) visited the reporter and called the editor. The newspaper published an article the next day exonerating the district.

Other avenues for complaints are also available. Some newspapers have ombudsmen who investigate reader questions and respond in their own columns about the cause of the error and any correction action that is to occur. Letters-to-the-editor and op-ed (the page opposite the editorial page) pieces are other ways to present the district's position. On some issues, such as the missing paperwork story, it may be appropriate to utilize a dual approach. After the follow-up story, it might have been appropriate for a few parents to write letters-to-the-editor about the hazards of conclusion-jumping. Be wary, however, of overkill. And keep in mind that reminders of newspaper error are also reminders of the allegation or misstatement.

As with crisis communication, your success in handling the correction process is largely a reflection of your overall reputation with the media. If you are recognized as a reasonable person with good judgment, your requests will be handled far differently than those of a constant nit-picker. Your willingness to call attention to a mistake should be matched by your ability to compliment reporters on their work.

School boards and their districts must accept their share of responsibility for media relations. We must provide accurate information in a timely manner, maintain necessary documentation and behavior on interviews and releases, and observe district and media protocol. We can't take all the credit for good media coverage and lay blame for negative results. There exists a balance based on preparation, professionalism and recognizable district priorities that will result in mutual respect and fairness. With these building blocks in place, complaints become just one, unemotional facet in productive media relations.

CHAPTER EIGHT

You And Your PIO

Managing media relations gives the public information officer (PIO) the rare opportunity to be an irritant to virtually everyone — colleagues and media alike. While the PIO may be saying "no" to a reporter about premature inquiries on an important story, she may also be urging board and administrative candidness with the media on a controversial issue. I, for one, was comforted a year ago to read in a PR journal that not only should the public relations practitioner not be a "yes man," but should more appropriately assume the role of a "no-man."

As with any specialist you consult, your PIO must — to be worth his salary — have the knowledge, confidence and *permission* to disagree. When planning a media campaign, interview, publication or like activity, your PIO must be able to point out possible pitfalls and wrong turns — and ask the hard questions before a reporter asks them. Simply put, the public relations director should be your communications devil's advocate. And you and district staff ought to be sounding boards for the PIO on possible PR programs and events. From the public relations practitioner's standpoint, there's nothing more satisfying than a professional relationship built on trust and mutual respect — one that allows for healthy debate in problem solving or strategy planning.

None of this translates to permission for blatant argumentativeness. Your PIO should, within the confines of propriety and privacy, have full reign to express opinions and advice. That's the important counseling aspect of public relations. But the PIO must also have the wisdom to know that advisers advise and others make the final decisions. All management employees must support the ultimate decision.

To achieve the global perspective which allows for advance public relations planning, the PIO should be a member of the superintendent's cabinet and report directly to the superintendent. Remember, public

relations can't reach its potential effectiveness when it's an afterthought. The PR considerations of an issue should be addressed when you see the problem coming, not when the picketers have filled the board room. Cabinet membership also helps keep the PIO advised of upcoming programs and events that deserve publicity. Many good stories have been lost because someone forgot to tell the PIO. Good communication begins inside the organization. Yes, the communications specialist should be aggressive in seeking out district news, but there are likely more divisions, departments and schools than PR staff people. As a result, that aggressiveness may take the form of establishing channels for the flow of information and periodic checks with news sources. And, still, a good story may be lost without the habit of including the PIO in the internal communications loop.

There should be sufficient trust between the superintendent and public relations officer to permit the sharing of confidential information about a developing story or issue. If that faith does not exist, you have the wrong PR person.

As the district's "number two" spokesperson, the public relations director speaks for the superintendent and publicly conveys his image, personality and stance on a number of issues. This role can't be satisfactorily performed if the PIO reports to any other level of administration. To report to anyone else places a filter between the PIO and superintendent which can only be a disservice to the district. It's something like the party game in which a whispered joke is passed from one person to the next and is barely recognizable at the end. More is at stake here. When the public relations officer transmits district messages for publication, it makes more than a little sense to begin with precise communication between the superintendent and PIO.

In the April, 1986 issue of *Executive Editor,* Superintendent Ronald K. McLeod of El Paso, Texas wrote in an article titled "What I Expect From My P.R. Man": "Report directly to me. School bureaucracy already places enough hurdles in the path of clear communication without adding a circuitous pipeline between P.R. director and superintendent."

Throughout this handbook I've referred to the communications practitioner by many titles: public relations officer, public relations director, public information officer and communications specialist. Some districts use titles such as community relations officer, specialist or director, and still others, assistant to the superintendent for community relations or public relations. The choice of a title may be used to reflect your district's emphasis or need. Public information, for instance, may infer a media emphasis whereas various community relations titles connote emphasis on the planning and managing of parent, neighborhood, business and other programs. Public relations or communications titles are more general in scope and may be to your liking if you plan wide-ranging responsibilities for

that position The job performed is certainly more important than its title, but you may elect to label the position in a way that clearly reflects your expectations. More important is the placement of the job within your organization so that its scope and responsibilities are evident.

You obviously want someone with training and experience. A bachelor's degree in communications, journalism or public relations and five years experience is standard. Because of the amount of attention the media gives school districts, look for someone with experience in handling media inquiries and/or actual experience as a reporter.

Newspaper advertisements are generally effective, but may also draw many unqualified candidates who will slow down the screening process through the sheer volume of paperwork. Try contacting your local chapter of the following organizations that will advise their membership of your job opening: Northern or Southern California School Public Relations Association; Public Relations Society of America; and International Association of Business Communicators. Each of these organizations also has an accreditation program for its members based on number of years in the business in addition to written and oral exams. Knowledge of applicants' successful accreditation should tell you more about their skill level.

The decision to hire a public relations practitioner should be weighed in the same manner as any other non-classroom job need versus cost and the cost of doing nothing compared to the cost of doing something. If the funds simply aren't there for a full-time person, try an alternate approach. Two small districts might agree to share a communications staffer who has specific duties for each district. Agreements would have to be reached regarding pre-empting one district's routine assignment if an emergency arises at the companion district. Another alternative is the public relations free-lancer or small communications firm that would handle specific tasks (news releases, newsletters, special events) and, or agree to be on-call for crisis management.

As you would with any other high-level administrator, expect a lot from your communications officer. It's not an eight to five job. There will be crisis communication, publication deadlines and late-breaking stories and press inquiries – in addition to meetings and community involvement. Expect creativity and new ideas. Expect complete loyalty to the district. Expect a team player, just as you would with all administrators. Because your job is tough, the PR director's communications activities should support your goals and help provide information to appropriate publics to explain the district's activities and vision for the future.

After an emphatic defeat at the polls, a Southern governor said that he had learned an important lesson from the voters. "It's not enough to *do* a good job," he said. "The public must also *perceive* that you're doing a good job."

Perceptions count. The PR director of an Eastern ski resort distributed a news release that disclaimed any connection between the town's reputation for excellent ski slopes and the fact that its leading factory made 50 percent of the country's wooden crutches. Perceptions count. Are we going to be known for the good slopes or the crutches? Let a communicator help.

Appendix 16

END

U.S. Dept. of Education

Office of Education
Research and
Improvement (OERI)

ERIC

Date Filmed

March 29, 1991