



**NSPRA**  
Electronic News Service for  
NSPRA Members Only

# Counselor

**NSPRA COUNSELOR**  
March 2005



## **The Battle for Democracy**

***The Evidence is Clear: It pays for public schools to spend more on communications***

**By Nora Carr, APR**

One of the great ironies of school leadership today is that you can do a great job educating students and communicating with parents, and still miss 78 to 80 percent of the people upon whose support public education – and your livelihood – depends.

That's because the vast majority of people who pay taxes today in most communities small and large, don't have school-aged children. This means that we have to start paying more attention to school public relations and marketing, or pay the consequences.

The private sector understands this. Even in a down economy, corporate communications and marketing budgets dwarf school public information resources to the point where any comparison is laughable.

Yet, more than any other institution, public schools are the lifeblood of our democracy. If we truly care about public education, why wouldn't we spend more time, attention and money on telling our story and involving the public in our schools?

### **Getting more strategic**

If we're going to turn the tide of public opinion regarding public schools, we're going to have to get more strategic and sophisticated in our approach to communications.

Today's consumers are the savviest and most demanding in history, having been saturated with sophisticated advertising and marketing techniques since birth.

Parents have high expectations in terms of home-school communications, customer service and tailor-made education programs. While anyone who doesn't have children in your schools is going to be highly influenced by family members, neighbors, friends, co-workers, Realtors and the news media. The days when we could count on kids' backpacks as a primary communication channel are long gone.

Engaging such a wide range of stakeholders in the work of your schools requires a strong background in strategic public relations planning and management. Shaping public opinion and winning back customers is both an art and a science. Today's school public relations professionals need to know how to use research to develop effective strategies, craft memorable messages and develop different tactics to reach specific audiences. They need to

understand marketing and how to create an effective mix of personal communication, word of mouth, community relations, electronic media, special events, paid media and publicity.

As a management function, effective public relations and marketing requires careful planning and thoughtful execution. Focus matters, and without professional training and experience, most amateur marketers don't hit the target very often.

Experienced public relations practitioners provide important counsel and guidance on a wide range of communication issues and concerns in much the same way that your attorney advises you regarding legal matters.

Every decision you make as a school administrator is fraught with communication impacts. Your senior public relations counselor should be sitting at your right hand, as a part of your executive leadership team, helping you identify communication issues and key stakeholders, as well as potential problems and solutions.

The job of the public relations professional isn't to take bad decisions and make them look pretty for the public. The job of the public relations professional is to keep you from making a bad decision in the first place.

Superintendents don't usually lose their jobs because they're not good educators. Typically, it's either the budget or the politics that get them, and both of those issues often trace back to misfires in communication.

If your PR person doesn't report directly to you, and if you're not seeking their counsel regularly, than you either don't have the right person in place or you don't know how to make the best use of the resources you have. Either way, you need to figure it out – quickly. Communication is too important to be left to amateurs.

### **Measuring return on investment**

It's time we stopped looking at school communications as a luxury that risks the ire of taxpayers and start viewing it as an investment in our children's futures.

In most districts, if you spend \$105,000 on better communications, you only need to recruit 15 kindergartners at \$7,000 each in per pupil funding to recoup your investment. If those 15 students stay in your district for 11 more years, that initial investment in school marketing will yield more than \$1 million.

Too often educators excuse unprofessional and sometimes downright tacky communication materials as necessary evils: "We can't get too slick or our community will say we're wasting taxpayer dollars."

First of all, slick doesn't equal effective, but neither does desktop disease where poorly worded messages parade across the page in a plethora of fonts decorated with cutesy clip art. Since perception is reality when it comes to public opinion, take care to build a brand image that truly reflects the quality and significance of the life-changing work that you do.

Quality materials don't have to be expensive. Photocopying typically costs more than offset printing, while advances in digital technology are making full color printing even more affordable.

Electronic communications, including district websites, online surveys, voice broadcasts and e-mail newsletters, enable school leaders to reach diverse audiences quickly with breaking news and important information.

Even in today's 24-7 world, face-to-face communications and word-of-mouth remain the most effective tactics, and both cost more in time than in money. And, while many school administrators view dealing with the media as a necessary evil, business leaders take their news coverage seriously and try to shape it positively at every opportunity. Schools leaders would be wise to do the same.

However, managing and deploying these tools effectively requires a strategic mindset and well-trained staff (whether internal or outsource) in interpersonal communication, media relations, group facilitation, creative concepts, graphic design, copywriting, HTML programming, database management and other technical skills.

Strategic brand building and effective public relations are purposeful, systematic and measurable. Accountability for results doesn't stop at the school house door. Yet even in today's data-driven schools, many public relations

professionals can't get a budget approved for communications research.

This is foolhardy. Investing in public relations without investing in public opinion research to shape the plan, benchmark progress and measure results is like scattering seeds on a windy day during a drought and hoping flowers will grow. School public relations professionals can deliver results, and shouldn't shy away from demonstrating their effectiveness. Yet they must be given the tools they need to get the job done. Responsibility and resources should go hand-in-hand.

However, most school communication offices are woefully understaffed and under funded – more so than almost any other central administration department or function. Consider your competition's public relations resources. Most top-tier private schools have at least a fulltime admissions director. Many also have a fulltime fund development director. Waiting lists are a badge of honor.

Public school districts, on the other hand, often find it difficult to fund one position to cover multiple schools. Is it any wonder so many public school districts face a crisis in public opinion?

### **The canary in the mine**

I believe that high poverty students are today's canary in the mine. As these students fare, so does the nation.

While principals with middle class parents, high student achievement and waiting lists may find this hard to believe, statistics tell a different story.

Given the United States' rapidly changing demographics, the enormous challenges that now seem unique to many urban and rural areas will eventually take root in suburban schools.

Unless we see massive changes in public policy (something I personally find highly unlikely) today's overflowing suburban neighborhoods and state-of-the-art schools will be tomorrow's decaying infrastructure, while today's rural landscape will be tomorrow's growth Mecca.

As our population ages, fewer and fewer taxpayers will have a direct, personal and vested interest in supporting public schools. In other words, they won't have children in the public schools. They won't have any first-hand experience to let them know that their local public schools are doing a great job. How will we reach them? How will we convince them to pay higher taxes to invest in someone else's children?

In other words, we're all in this together. Strategic communication can't solve these complex issues, but it can do a better job of placing children first on the public's agenda.

Since public schools serve on democracy's front lines, this isn't a battle we can afford to lose. Given the proposed federal budget cuts to education and human services, we need to act now. And we need the best the public relations profession has to offer.

***Nora Carr, APR, senior vice president and director of public relations for Luquire George Andrews, Inc., Charlotte, N.C., is a member of NSPRA's Communication Accountability Project (CAP) Committee.***

---

#### **NSPRA Counselor**

Copyright 2005 by the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA), 15948 Derwood Road, Rockville, MD 20855. 301-519-0496. [nspra@nspra.org](mailto:nspra@nspra.org). All rights reserved.

NSPRA Counselor is sent to NSPRA members. You may not reproduce or transmit in any form any part of this publication by any means without the written permission of NSPRA. NSPRA members may route or distribute this newsletter to their immediate district or organization's leadership team and communication staff. Further distribution is prohibited. Violators will be prosecuted.

Questions? E-mail NSPRA at [nspra@nspra.org](mailto:nspra@nspra.org) or call 301-519-0496.

Click [here](#) to unsubscribe

15948 Derwood Road, Rockville, MD, 20855