



PUBLIC RELATIONS

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS HANDBOOK



North Dakota Education Association

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Every kid deserves a great school!

Public opinion is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail. Without it, nothing can succeed.

– Abraham Lincoln

As we work to spread the word about North Dakota schools, relationships are the key to our success. Through the relationships you form with your community - local leaders, the media, parents, and the community - you play a vital role in creating opinions and forming attitudes about North Dakota public schools. Your words and actions, both during school and outside school, can help communicate important core values about our public schools. In addition, by focusing on children - by keeping the emphasis on the students, on their needs, and on their ultimate successes - you can demonstrate that our organization shares the public's priorities and goals. If you believe in great schools - and believe North Dakota teachers and school staff are working to help children succeed - you can make an enormous difference.

Public Relations: Building Relationships Handbook is a collection of tools and guidelines to help you do just that: build on those relationships through successful public relations. This collection of tips, activity guides, and resources exists to enhance your efforts to maintain and increase support for - and confidence in - North Dakota schools . . . because every kid deserves a great school!

How to build relationships

A message of positive change always wins over a defense of the status quo.

Public Relations is the art and science of creating a relationship with the public. Public Relations programs are vital to our ability to renew and energize support for our public schools. The positive relationships garnered through effective public relations will reap countless benefits in the long run. By utilizing the public relations process in planning and implementing public relations programs – i.e., media relations, member communications, community outreach programs, etc. – you will be preparing your members and your community to support the many initiatives of your organization.

Public opinions are continuously forming.

People have an opinion about your organization. What people believe – whether accurate or inaccurate – is considered to be true. Perception is reality. Positive relationships set the stage for positive perceptions of your organization and its ideals. Likewise, negative relationships usually lead to negative perceptions.

Unfortunately, once negative feelings have crystallized, it becomes difficult to reverse them. Publicly held perceptions, unless altered by your planned public relations initiatives, are like the law of physics: “A body in motion stays in motion.” However, through effective public relations, you can avoid and change negative perceptions and attitudes.

Effective public relations is your best preventive medicine.

Act on issues before you have to react to them. This approach anticipates and assesses issues before they develop, rather than after they have taken shape. By acting on issues, you define and shape public debate rather than redefining an issue. Effective public relations initiatives generate trust, respect and credibility for your Association. The objective is to, over time, create a reservoir of good will. The value of this preventive medicine cannot be stressed enough.

Building positive relationships supports union objectives.

Your local Association’s public relations program is not an end unto itself. Sustained public relations programs increase the likelihood of success for negotiations, lobbying or other community objectives. Our positions as members and leaders give us authority and responsibility, but our relationships with parents, businesses and the community give us the influence we need to get the job done. An effective public relations program is your means of contributing to community understanding, building relationships with community leaders and political personalities, and paving the way for organizational success.

Building relationships through coalitions

Coalition building is the process of combining the human and material resources of different interest groups in order to produce a desired change they are unable to produce independently of each other. Through coalition building, resources are shared and unnecessary competition is avoided. Coordinated efforts and resources produce more credibility for an issue. What's more, the contacts you make through local coalitions will lead to personal relationships you can draw upon in the future.

What do coalitions do?

Help teachers become better acquainted with community leaders and organizations.

Build stronger rapport among teachers, school staff, parents and other community members.

Identify school advocates in the community.

Create an opinion base that will prompt positive actions, such as passing a budget or referendum.

Principles of coalition building:

Build relationships, not just deals.

If you are comfortable in a coalition, it is not broad enough.

Coalition building is a two-way street; share leadership roles and information.

Set aside old fights (agree to disagree) and move on to new areas of discussion.

Create new ground; write new history.

Reproduce the coalition at both the civic and the grassroots levels.

Be there for your partners' battles.

Assume that you will need this coalition in the future. You will.

Talk to groups with which you want to build coalitions.

It is important to remember that you are building relationships for the future. There are many possibilities, but it is important that you limit your selection to a few that you feel are appropriate. Here are some groups to consider:

Parents, grandparents, and guardians of pre-school-age children and school-age children

New residents of the community

Professional and non-professional school employees

Members of school organizations (PTA, PTO, room mothers, library aides, athletic clubs, etc.)

Church and business leaders

Civic leaders

Board of education

Senior citizens

Local service clubs

Chamber of commerce

Colleges and universities

Human services agencies

Statewide organizations

The publisher or advertising manager of your local newspaper

Other community groups

Community relationships

Great schools are a product of students, teachers, school staff, parents, businesses, organizations, and community members working together. Community involvement creates the relationships necessary to build support for our public schools.

Community relations is an organization's plan for active and continuing participation within a community. This sets the tone of what an organization stands for. The community – including parents, businesses, elected officials and the general public – will judge you not only by your words but by your actions as well. Effective community relations requires listening to and recognizing the perceptions and concerns of the public. It requires accepting responsibility and taking action to correct existing problems and address perceptions.

Why is communicating with the community important?

As part of the larger community, schools fulfill important community goals. Similarly, communities offer a wide array of resources valuable to the schools and the families they serve. When schools and communities work together, both are strengthened in mutual ways and achieve successes that neither could accomplish on its own.

Community relationships help build great schools by:

- Restoring public confidence in public education.
- Generating support for, and reducing negative opinions of, your organization.
- Educating the public about your local's issues and its contributions to the community.
- Creating a desired position in the public eye.
- Addressing issues of concern to local organizations and citizens.
- Shaping public opinion.
- Developing family involvement.
- Promoting your local's image and fostering goodwill with the community.
- Sharing positive events and successes in your school.

Parent relationships

Why should parents be a target audience?

Parents and guardians are your most important audience. They have the most to gain or lose from the education their children receive. They are your natural allies. Therefore, local associations should take advantage of the opportunity to inform and involve parents in more issues and events affecting their children's education. By communicating with parents, school employees build strong partnerships that can be used to promote the common goals of North Dakota's schools.

The importance of parent-teacher relationships:

Getting parents involved in public schools is important because it affects so much – from the safety of children to the school's ability to reinforce values such as hard work, respect, and responsibility.

When parents are involved in their students' education, their children receive higher grades and test scores, have better attendance, and complete homework more consistently.

When parents receive frequent and effective communication from the school or program, their involvement increases, their overall evaluation of educators improves, and their attitudes toward the program are more positive.

Schools that work well with families have improved school morale, higher ratings of teachers by parents, and better reputations in the community.

Communicating with parents:

Provide parents with information about your association to help them perceive your local as caring about public schools. In addition, supply them with names and phone numbers of officers.

Exchange ideas about concerns and issues. Offer guidance about parenting and helpful suggestions like back-to-school checklists.

Messages conveyed to parents need to be short, easy to read and understand, and straight to the point. Avoid education jargon.

If you are asking for help, be clear and specific. Tell them exactly what you need or how you want it done. Do not assume that parents know how to help.

Be sensitive to cultural differences and special family situations. Avoid stereotyping and preaching.

Use a variety of communication tools on a regular basis. Look for ways to facilitate two-way interaction through each type of medium.

Promote informal activities at which parents, staff and community members can interact.

Media relations

Dealing with the news media is a critical component of public relations. The news media hold immense power over public policy and public opinion. Your UniServ and local associations have important messages to convey to the public, and news outlets are the best vehicles for conveying those messages about your schools.

Carefully planned and ongoing media relations programs provide proactive, positive messages to the public via newspaper, radio, Internet and television news. While your PR programs must be prepared for negative news and crises, the emphasis should be on long-term positive relationships with reporters and editors, and the your message is a proven tool that can do just that. Get to know your local media representatives on a personal basis and establish yourself as a credible and reliable source of news.

The "Information Age" has created a multitude of media that report the news. Newspapers are no longer the sole source of news. Television, radio, newsletters, and the Internet are now major sources of news for the public. Media relations programs should consider each available medium and its needs. Television news is visual and needs pictures for stories. Radio news needs an audio element. More and more people look to the Internet for information.

Remember that newspapers, radio and television are businesses run for profit. They do not exist to make organizations or people look good. They run stories that will attract viewers, readers, listeners and/or advertising.

Getting started

The most efficient way to start a media relations program is to organize a media contact team. The team is responsible for developing messages and communicating them to the news media.

Your team should create lists of the local media, including relevant reporters, news directors, and editors. This information will be a big help when you want to inform the media about an upcoming event. It is also a great way to make your first contact with the media. These fact sheets should include the following information:

- Names of reporters, editors, news directors, and television assignment editors, along with their phone numbers, fax numbers and e-mail addresses

- Non-traditional media or reporters who may cover your issues on an irregular basis

- Newscast air times and frequency

- Deadlines and advertising rates

- Miscellaneous information about reporters or editors that might be helpful

Some tips about media relations

Personal relationships are critical, so get to know your local reporters and editors, and let them get to know you. Talk to them informally or in a social setting. Take them out to lunch, have coffee with them, or talk to them at school board meetings. You want the media to view you as a credible source to whom they can always turn for accurate and timely information.

Always be honest. If you can't discuss something, say you can't release that information – or you'll get back to them – and then follow up as quickly as possible.

Speed pays in media relations. Get your releases or other information out as soon as possible. If you want coverage of an event, notify the media well in advance, and then follow up with a reminder the day before. Distribute releases quickly – by fax, e-mail, or in person.

Reporters live and die by deadlines. Learn your local media's deadlines and provide information in plenty of time for reporters to write their stories. Always return calls promptly, and if you promise to get someone information, do it quickly.

The media have the last word. Take every reporter seriously. Don't turn down an interview unless your experience has established a particular reporter is inaccurate and unreliable. Every contact is an opportunity to influence a story or show a reporter there is more than one angle to an issue.

Anticipate attacks/crises/questions. Have messages and talking points/Q&A on all subjects prepared and up-to-date.

The sound bite rules. Sound bites are quick, concise, and witty summaries of your position that reporters can't resist. Make sure you have snappy 10- or 15-second sound bites in every message. The sound bite should contain your most important point, because chances are that's all you will get in the newspaper or on the air.

Track coverage. Keep clips and tapes if available.

Reporters are busy. The more work you do for them, the better chance your position will be reflected in their stories. Give reporters written information and background data. Put usable quotes in news releases.

Don't expect every news release or tip to be used. Reporters try to cover as much as they can, but will not be able to cover every event or story you give them.

Give reporters "tips" when you can. Inside information or insight into issues will help build relationships with the media.

Communicating with the media

News releases

News releases are an efficient means of communicating with the news media.

Keep news releases short – one page is best. Reporters, editors, and news directors receive so many news releases in a day, they generally scan the headlines and first paragraph. If the headline is interesting, the story is more likely to get coverage.

Gather facts by contacting association people involved with the event or issue. Carefully construct a headline for your news release. This is the single most important part of the news release. Begin the body of your news release with a lead paragraph that summarizes the story, intrigues the readers, and encourages them to read on.

After you've drafted your news release, ask yourself if it is consistent with the message you are trying to send your audience.

News releases can be as short as a paragraph, but most often no longer than a page. Releases must contain the name and number of a contact person, both school and home telephone numbers, who must be available for calls in the day or two after the release is issued.

The contact person should be prepared to give interviews on the subject of the release. Releases must also contain one or two quotes from the association president or another spokesperson that the media can use without calling the contact person.

Distribute news releases as quickly as possible. Fax, e-mail, or personally deliver them to the media. If your media have a pressroom or boxes in a governmental building, find out if you can deliver releases there. Releases about upcoming events should be sent out several days before the event and followed up with a reminder advisory or a phone call the day before the event.

Use news releases judiciously. Don't wear out your welcome with weak releases that have little or no chance of being used. Reporters and editors will not even look at your releases if they come too often or have little hard news in them.

News conferences

News conferences should be used to make major announcements or kick off an event. Call a news conference if you are receiving a large number of media calls on a subject. A news conference would be the easiest way to answer specific questions all at one time.

Because many reporters resist news conferences, they are not always the best way to get news coverage of an issue. If you do call a news conference, make sure you have something major to announce. Be sure that what you say during a news conference is consistent with your message.

Hold a news conference in a convenient location and be aware of deadlines. Morning newspapers have deadlines into the evening, but afternoon newspapers often must have their stories filed by late morning. Television stations prefer to cover events in the morning or early afternoon. They must have their stories edited and ready to go by late afternoon. Radio stations have a variety of deadlines.

Supplement the conference with fact sheets, charts, and other materials that clarify and give background information.

Letters to the editor

Letters to the editor or opinion editorials are another vehicle to convey messages to the public. Your local paper should contain information about deadlines and length of letters or op-eds. If not, call and ask.

In general, letters to the editor and op-eds should be brief and concise. Use your message box to help you write your piece. Keep it to three or four main points and avoid personal attacks. Encourage as many members as possible to write letters to the editor during a crisis or during times of discussion about a specific issue.

Offer "exclusives" when possible.

Types of media

Print media

Newspapers are the agenda-setters. Wire services, radio, and television often draw story ideas, or even stories, from the newspapers, so they are a critical element in media relations.

Print reporters tend to be more knowledgeable, have more historical data, and are more detail-oriented than broadcast reporters. Don't assume that because newspaper stories are longer than broadcast stories more of what you say will end up in a newspaper story. More often than not, you will only receive a one-sentence quote.

Remember, it's easier to be misquoted by someone taking notes by hand than by someone who is taping an interview. Speak clearly and provide written materials.

Radio

Radio news is often overlooked as a source of media relations, and that's a serious mistake. Most people listen to radio news every day, and it is immediate and ubiquitous. It's a powerful medium that's easier to gain access to than TV or newspapers.

Radio news gobbles up lots of copy and many stories, so reporters are always looking for story ideas. Stations that carry local news often have one or two newscasts an hour during "drive time," the morning and afternoon rush hours when most people are listening. Saturday mornings also have a large listenership.

Radio reporters are generally in a hurry – they cover many stories and just want two or three sound bites and then move on. You can try to give them background and in-depth information, but don't be surprised if they're not interested. They just don't have the time. The recorder will be turned off after they get their quota of sound bites and then your chance to get your message out is over.

Make the most of your opportunity: Be sure your message is in everything that you say, even if it's not a direct answer to a question.

When you get a request for a radio interview

Find out if the interview is live or taped, the length of the interview, what program it will be on (what type of interview), who the interviewer is, the topic to be discussed, and who else will be interviewed.

Practice with a tape recorder and then critique yourself.

Keep your voice firm and friendly – smile when you talk.

Sound knowledgeable and authoritative.

Be the voice of reason.

Speak over the microphone, to avoid popping Ps and hissing Ss. Microphones are very sensitive and pick up everything. *Do not make peripheral noises: Cough away from microphone, don't rattle papers, breathe through your nose between sentences and phrases so you sound like you're gasping for air.

Always assume the mike is open or recorder is running – never say anything you don't want to go over the airwaves.

Television

Television adds the visual element to radio. Once again, sound bites are crucial. Reporters avoid “talking heads” whenever possible, preferring action shots or interesting settings. If you receive a request for an interview, try to help the reporter out by suggesting an interesting background, or offering to make arrangements for some physical action they can shoot, such as a classroom.

On camera

Be relaxed but alert.

Once the camera crew is present, assume you are being taped. (The red light on the camera means it’s rolling.)

Stand on two feet – don’t rock back and forth.

Use good posture.

Smile – look pleasant and relaxed. Smiling makes you likeable. When you’re likeable, people are more likely to believe what you say.

Look slightly upward.

Gesture firmly and close to your body.

Don’t make quick gestures or head movements.

Keep answers short and pithy. Go for the sound bite that summarizes your position.

Gently clasp your hands together in front of you – about waist high.

When you receive a request for a television interview

Practice, practice, practice. Use a video camera to practice mock interviews, or rehearse in front of other people or the mirror.

Use make-up. Have your own personalized make-up ready at all times.

Think about your wardrobe. Have an interview outfit ready at all times. Men should wear navy or gray suits with conservative ties. Geometric ties with tight patterns are best. Do not wear a plain white or plaid shirt. Blue or gray are best. White shirts with stripes are acceptable. Women should wear bright suits, dresses, or jackets. Wear comfortable shoes you can stand in comfortably for up to 15 minutes and walk in naturally.

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If you are asking for help, be clear and specific. Tell them exactly what you need or how you want it done. Do not assume that parents know how to help.

Be sensitive to cultural differences and special family situations. Avoid stereotyping and preaching.

Use a variety of communication tools on a regular basis. Look for ways to facilitate two-way interaction through each type of medium.

Promote informal activities at which parents, staff and community members can interact.

Communicating with members

As you plan member communications, think about how you can best keep them informed on an ongoing basis, and how to use your resources – both money and members – most efficiently.

What members need and want to know

Context. What is the big picture? Present the overarching situation to members.

Vision. What must we become? Explain strategy, vision, goals, and values.

Linkage. What are our stakes in the game? Outline rewards, recognition, and sense of purpose, pride, and opportunity.

Role. What is the little picture? Outline performance, measures, expectations, role impact, and competencies.

Support. How can we contribute? Present resources, tools, and information.

Types of communication vehicles

Member meetings

Face-to-face communication is the most effective method of communication, and meetings can be a powerful tool if planned and managed well. Meetings can be used to conduct business, educate/train, or exchange information.

Before you plan a meeting, ask yourself:

What is the purpose/goal of the meeting? (e.g. planning, fact-finding, training, problem solving, building membership, etc.)
Can your goal be accomplished without a meeting?

To run an effective meeting:

Stick to the agenda.
Hold the meeting in comfortable surroundings.
Provide everyone with enough information to participate.

Bulletin boards

Bulletin boards in the staff lounge provide one of the simplest, cheapest, yet most effective forms of communication. Bulletin boards are excellent vehicles for special notices and message posters. Notices should be in large, bold print to catch attention. Bulletin boards should be updated regularly so people don't get in the habit of ignoring them.

Example ideas for bulletin board material:

A list of local officers
Your newsletter
Stories and pictures from *ND Education News*
Update posters from NDEA

A calendar of upcoming events
Announcements of future meetings and other activities
Meeting minutes
Photos taken at events sponsored by the local
Petitions, sample letters to legislators and members of Congress
Material printed from ndea.org
Memos

Phone tree

A local phone tree is a fast way to communicate important information to a large group of people.

It should contain both home and work phone numbers for each person. During crises or when locals need to get people involved instantly, phone trees are particularly effective. Here are instructions for using a phone tree:

1. 1. Set up a chart with the names and phone numbers of the local president, association representatives, and members.
2. 2. Call the person directly below you on the chart.
3. 3. If you fail to reach that person, call the next person on the list. Leaving a message on an answering machine is OK, but it is still important to go to the next person so that the chain will not be broken.
4. 4. The last person on the list is responsible for calling the first person on the branch to let him/her know that the message has been received. Also report anyone who could not be reached.

Newsletters

Local association newsletter

Newsletters help give an association its identity, build its brand, and provide a common focus for members. They let members know what's happening and can be used to call for action when necessary. They help members feel good about and trust the association. Newsletters are a common thread to help keep local members unified. Remember, if you don't communicate with your members, someone else will.

Negotiations update newsletter

A separate, distinct newsletter can be used to keep members up-to-date on what's happening at the bargaining table. The most important consideration here is to get the information out to everyone as quickly as possible. You may not want to take the time to make a negotiations update publication as visually appealing as your association's newsletter. Develop a reliable distribution system and be as informative as possible without compromising your bargaining position.

Community newsletter

Community newsletters help you gain support for your schools and for your members. These newsletters allow you to communicate directly with the people who support the schools in your community. Let them know about all the wonderful things that are going on in the schools. Brag about the special projects the kids and teachers are involved in. Invite the community into the schools. People who feel a part of the schools are more likely to support them and to become invested in good public schools.

These newsletters can be mailed directly to homes (an expensive venture) or can be distributed at grocery stores and other public locations.

Electronic communication systems

World Wide Web site

You can set up your own Web site at minimal cost through your Internet service provider or a service such as America Online. Web sites are excellent vehicles for providing up-to-the-minute information and background documents. The down side is that people have to come to the Web site – you can't deliver it to them – so you have to promote your Web site extensively. Use the expertise of a technology teacher or hobbyist in your district.

Ndea.org

NDEA. Org is NDEA's Web site at www.ndea.org. It offers documents, news stories, graphics, and pictures related to education issues and organizational activities. Any information on ndea.org can be downloaded and reprinted in local association newsletters.

You can link your own Web site to ndea.org, giving your members easy access to all that NDEA offers.

The NEA home page

The NEA Web site is located at www.nea.org. It also offers a wealth of information that can be used in newsletters. As with any Internet site, including ndea.org, information can be downloaded directly to your computer for use in your newsletter. In addition, the NEA site includes extensive information on educational improvement, as well as opportunities to join discussion groups and areas devoted to educational technology, educational policy debates, and classroom tips.

Recruiting volunteers

Most associations have a difficult time finding enough people to work on association committees and projects. Here are a few ideas that can help.

Personalize. When you need workers, ask them personally. Few people will volunteer their services. This doesn't mean they don't want to help. People simply like to be asked.

Rely on friendship. Have someone the potential volunteers know and trust do the asking. People respond more positively to someone they know.

Welcome new workers. If people agree to help, welcome them. Establish the feeling of belonging and being needed early. New volunteers lose their enthusiasm if they feel neglected or taken for granted.

Reduce risk. Assign new volunteers to non-threatening jobs. People don't like to take risks. Prime considerations when assigning tasks include:

The time commitment required and the duration of the project or committee. People won't sign on for life, so don't overwhelm them.

How public the task will be. Personal risk increases with the amount of exposure individuals receive. New volunteers often won't agree to get involved in coffee klatches or other public tasks, but will do jobs where they are not visible to the community, administration, or school board.

How difficult the work will be. New volunteers can often be induced to take on more jobs if they first have a few successes to look back on. Start new workers with relatively easy tasks and build on each success. Don't ask the new volunteer to take on difficult or complicated jobs too soon.

Stress importance. Make each volunteer feel important. If members believe you're just looking for people, they'll feel easily replaceable and less responsible for doing the job.

Set time limits. Make sure each job or committee has a definite beginning and end. Let your volunteers know when they'll be finished.

Relate face to face. There is no substitute for face-to-face communication. Don't rely on e-mail, letters, or phone calls to do your recruiting job.

Be enthusiastic. Stress the importance of the work. People will respond according to your mood and presentation.

Set high standards. The members will take their cue from you. Remember: no one gets more than they ask for.

Lead with assertiveness. Deal quickly and directly with those who don't meet standards or expectations. Be encouraging and offer help, but be prepared to reassign the person if necessary. If failure is tolerated or ignored, others will either follow or drop out with a "what's the use" attitude.

Reward good work. Recognize and reward good work (publicly, if possible). Everyone likes a pat on the back, and a simple thank you from the association can go a long way.

Create opportunities. Never turn away a volunteer.

Creating a message box

Choose one or more main points (never more than four) essential to supporting your viewpoint.

Draw a triangle or box. Write your issue in the middle and one main point on each side of the figure.

Each point should complement the others and support the central issue.

They should be your top reasons for your position; list them in order of priority. If you are talking to the media, you may get the opportunity to use only one point, so make sure it's first.

State the points as concisely as possible – make every word count.

The message should be positive, if possible. It should pre-empt attacks, put the association in a positive light, and position you as pro-public education.

Create a 10- to 15-second sound bite for your main point – make it colorful and pithy so reporters can't resist using it.

If you are presenting arguments for and against an issue, create two triangles or boxes: one for each side of the issue.

Framing your message

A message is a framework for organizing your position on issues. Your message is central to the success of your public relations program. A successful message will speak for the profession's commitment to children and quality education. It will speak for education employees with an attitude demonstrating commitment to children and quality education. The backbone of the message should be the organizational position and how the association wants to be perceived in the community.

Getting your message out to the public and media requires planning, time, and discipline. A consistent, concise and clear message is essential to media relations. "Message boxes" are a system of organizing and presenting information to target audiences, including the news media. Everyone in your organization should use the same message, whether speaking to the public or other members.

Keys to remember

Keep the message simple. Avoid information overload.

Target your audience.

Keep the message salient and relevant.

Repeat your message over and over.

Stay on message.

The language you use is critical. What you say and how you say it is important.

Choose your words carefully to create the image you want. Use simple, declarative sentences.

Avoid buzzwords that can be used against you.

Resist the urge to elaborate on topics not related to the interview. New or related topics will take you off message and open up the possibility of a different – or misleading – story.

You have to make sacrifices in order to create successful messages. Use only the most essential information.

Let go of items you feel are of secondary importance.

Prioritize and concentrate on the main message. Do not allow yourself to be drawn away from the points you need to make.

Repetition is crucial for a message to penetrate. Find different ways to state the same message over and over.

Practice, practice, practice. Make sure you are comfortable with your material and arguments. Practice on a tape recorder, in front of a mirror, or with a video camera.

Your local's brand

Every organization has a unique brand, which is defined and affected not only by the messages it puts out but also by each and every interaction between the public and the representatives of the organization. Your local association's brand is essentially the relationship that you have with both your members and the public; it is the perception and reaction that they have of what the association does and the values that it represents.

Your local's brand determines the amount of attention your audiences—both internal and external—will pay to your statements and actions, as well as how they respond. Your audiences will also decide how credible a source you are and how serious they should take you based on their perception of your brand.

Strong brand relationships not only promote goodwill, but also make it much easier for your local to accomplish its goals. A weak brand relationship, however, requires that you spend more time and effort to overcome preconceived notions rather than moving forward. That is why it is so important that you pay attention to the perceptions and concerns of the public.

Newsletter design and resources

Producing a newsletter

Define your audience and your purpose. Get organized. Assign an editor, proofreaders, and writers. Assemble your editor's tools and resources.

Tap the resources of your members – get the help or advice of an art teacher, journalism teacher, and photography hobbyist, for example.

Nea.org at www.nea.org and Ndea.org at www.ndea.org also provide background materials and the latest news on education and union issues. Editors are welcome to reprint anything from ndea.org at any time.

Decide how often your newsletter will be published. Establish an external schedule for your readers. Establish an internal schedule for yourself.

Newsletter design

Choose a newsletter format and page size. We recommend that you use an 8-1/2" x 11" page size. There are three common choices of format:

Full Measure. This is an appropriate format if your newsletter is prepared on a typewriter or word processor.

Two Columns. This format is appropriate for typewriter type, word processor type, or typeset type. It is the most common format.

Three Columns. This format is only suitable if you have your issue set by a typographer, or if you are using a desktop publishing system that uses a laser printer. It is not the appropriate format for typewriter type.

Determine the typeface and type size for headlines and copy. Choose one size of type for story copy, and one size for headlines. Generally, a bold 18- or 24-point type size is good for headlines, while an 11- or 12-point type is used for copy. Be sure that the typeface you choose for your copy is plain and easy to read. Typefaces that are good for copy include:

Garamond
Palatino
Times Roman
Bookman

Use italic type sparingly. Use boldface type sparingly. Put extra effort into design. The design of your newsletter gives it a personality and makes a statement.

All pages should have a uniform look. It may be worth the initial investment to have a graphic artist design the basic template – or one of your members may have expertise in this area. Templates are also available online or in desktop publishing books.

Charts, graphs, photographs, pull quotes, white space, and other visuals can serve as effective graphic elements. Use these elements tastefully and appropriately.

Allow sufficient white space between lines and columns.

Create a variety of departments for your material – a column for editorials, one for opinion pieces, another for personnel items, a fourth for letters to the editor, and another for humor, for example. Run these departments in the same place from issue to issue.

Newsletter writing and editing

Write about issues that matter to your members. Give priority to internal association news – negotiations, grievances, representation of member interests before the school board or in the community.

Use people in stories and encourage members to contribute letters and announcements.

Stay focused. More is not always better. It is usually in an editor's best interest to be as succinct as possible. Don't include superficial "fluff" to fill space. This will only distract from your main messages.

Write catchy headlines. Headlines should lure readers into a story. They need to be bold, interesting, and eye-catching. Remember to keep your headlines short.

Don't bend the truth. Members deserve the whole truth – good or bad. Don't risk losing your credibility by bending the truth to make a point.

Reflect a professional style. Don't be preachy or sarcastic.

Be succinct but thorough. Check your copy to see if you've covered Who? What? When? Where? How? Why?

Don't forget to edit! Have several people proofread your newsletter for spelling, punctuation, correct grammar, clarity, etc.

Cut needless words and confusing jargon. Make sure you project a favorable image. Your finished product will give readers an impression of your association. Analyze your product. Review every newsletter and ask yourself: "What can I do to improve this newsletter next time?"

Crisis communication

Goals during a crisis:

- Prevent escalation of the immediate crisis.
- Restore order.
- Position the organization as capable of managing the crisis incident.
- Repair relationships.
- Prevent recurrence or development of another crisis

A crisis is any event or series of events that negatively affects the integrity, reputation, or survival of the association, a school district, or a member. A crisis could be anything from a bargaining situation to a school district issue to a safety/health issue that affects employees, students, the community, or the public.

Crisis communication is the process of managing messages, timing, and distribution channels in order to communicate effectively with the media, employees, constituencies, parents, and other community members during a difficult time.

Crisis situations are inevitable and should be anticipated; therefore, your organization should plan for a crisis in advance. Here is a sample method for handling crisis communication.

- Put together a rapid response with specific assignments for leaders and members.
- Use a rapid local communications system, making sure that key leaders are notified. Make a calling card of key phone numbers. Keep an updated mediaphone and mailing list on hand as well.
- Get as many facts as you can in person or by phone.
- Call a meeting of staff members and establish a small group of decision-makers. This group needs to determine the nature of the crisis, design a media strategy, draft news releases, and decide who will answer media calls. Have additional meetings to keep everyone updated and control rumors.
- Contain the problem, if possible.
- Designate a spokesperson whom the media can trust and who has authority to speak for the organization. Use only one spokesperson so that the organization can speak with one voice. This is crucial to the organization's message credibility.
- Establish a phone tree to spread information.
- Decide on firm times for release of information.
- Write an initial statement. Hold news conferences if appropriate.
- Establish a press center for reporters and other media if needed.
- Prevent the spread of rumors and correct misinformation by calling the media with updates.
- After the crisis, hold a staff meeting to evaluate what went well and what could have been done differently.

Crisis communication and the media

The news media play a crucial role in the communication process. People become more media-dependent because they actively seek information to find out what has happened and to learn the reasons for the problem.

Due to the heightened public interest, the media demand more information from the organization involved. The key to successful communications with the media and the public during a crisis is to become a credible, accessible source of information. You can build credibility by addressing bad news quickly; it is when information is withheld that the cover-up becomes the story.

Guidelines for communicating effectively and establishing credibility with the press during a crisis:

- Provide a constant flow of information. Communicating early and often shows that you have nothing to hide.

Be accessible. Provide after-hours phone numbers.

Deflect attention through positive action. Act immediately and turn the issue into what you are doing to ensure that it won't happen again. Just reacting to charges and defending yourself will only weaken your position.

Express concern and caring.

Be honest. Don't exaggerate, and don't conceal facts.

Never say "No comment." Say, "We'll have more information later," or "The matter is still under investigation."

Always be positive. Do not counter-attack.

Never offer a personal opinion.

Always try to be helpful.

Be familiar with print and broadcast deadlines.

Set up a media information center where reporters can obtain updated information and work on stories. Use the Internet to get the word out.

Keep a log of all media calls, and return calls promptly.

Anticipate controversial questions or attacks. Bring them up yourself before someone makes an issue of them. By bringing it up yourself, you are in control.

Prepare and provide fact sheets.

Use message boxes to stay on message.

Crisis communication and members

When a situation turns into a crisis, you may want to establish a crisis newsletter to let members know what actions are being taken to resolve the crisis. In addition, you will need to write crisis bulletins and organize face-to-face or one-on-one communications through phone trees or meetings. Remember, each message you send should be consistent.

Crisis communication and parents

During a school crisis, parents are the most important external audience because they are most interested in situations that affect their child's education, health, and safety. They also possess a basis for understanding school-related issues. Furthermore, they are the best advocates for educators if you communicate with them early and effectively.

Crisis communication and the community

While press releases help spread the word, they will only reach those who read the newspaper or happen to hear or see the information on radio or television. The only way to ensure that every resident receives your message is to mail or deliver your communications to every household. You may need to produce leaflets, fliers, and brochures to explain the crisis situation to residents.

The PR process

Planning is very important for any PR program. Think of a PR plan as a blueprint that will be used to explain a situation, analyze what can be done about it, outline strategies and tactics, and tell how the results will be evaluated. Keep in mind that there is no standard formula for a PR plan. Multiple combinations of communications tools can be used depending on the audience and the situation.

Follow the PR Process when designing your own public relations plan. Begin by deciding what issue/challenge you hope to address and what desired goal you hope to achieve. Then determine what steps need to be taken to accomplish your goal. Remember, the type of interaction you choose will be different for each local and for each audience.

Issue

What is the issue causing your local to want to do a community/member relations project? Some situations are problems that must be solved in a hurry, while others are opportunities for an organization to increase awareness, advance its reputation, or attract new members. What is your local issue?

A survey can provide you with issue data that will be useful as you plan for your internal (member) or external (community) public relations/communications projects. Once you have identified the issues that are of concern to your members or other audiences, you can formulate your own customized PR Process to achieve desired results.

Examples of issues are: "Parents don't see us as education professionals who know what we are doing"; "We need some positive visibility in our community throughout the year"; and "The media don't report on lost programs and unmet student needs."

Objectives/Desired Outcomes

What are you trying to accomplish? Do you want to inform the audience of something, motivate the audience to do something, or both? What's your desired outcome? Some examples might be "To get 75% of the parent group to attend parent conferences"; "To make senior citizens aware of the many changes in today's schools"; "To get our association's views in the local news instead of the school board's point of view all the time"; and "To win public support for school and our union goals."

Audience

Before you communicate, you need to identify who you want to reach and why. The audience is divided into two groups: internal audiences (bargaining unit members) and external audiences (everyone else: students, administration, school board members, parents, media, businesses, politicians, and the general public). Communicating with both audiences is crucial to achieving your goal. However, your communications must be customized for each audience to effectively reach them. Make sure your messages address their specific needs, concerns, and interests.

Method/Tactics

Based on the issue, outcome, and audience, what are the best methods of communication that will produce the desired results? When considering tactics for your public relations plan, refer to the "Hierarchy of communication channels."

Timetable

What is the timetable that applies to this project? Make a schedule of all the various activities in the plan. Are there key dates that need to be identified? Are there any seasonal projects? Does the project involve the media?

People and Resources

Who are the people and resources you need in order to get this project done right?

Budget

What is the budget needed for this project? Estimate the cost of each activity. Your budget can often determine what method(s) of communication you can use. For instance, radio spots are relatively inexpensive at some stations and very expensive at others. NDEA may be able to help by providing you with low-cost or free materials.

Evaluation

It is essential that you determine whether or not your efforts have done what you wanted them to do. Evaluation is the final step in any well-planned project.

By following the above steps, you can design a public relations plan that's right for your local.

Reaching out to the community

By reaching out and building strong relationships and coalitions with individuals in the community, your organization will position itself as a positive, vital force in the community.

These relationships will prove invaluable during times of crisis. The individuals with whom you form relationships can advise, help, and work with you when things go wrong and you face threats to Great Schools. The only time it may be difficult – or perhaps too late – to start these relationships is after a crisis has erupted.

There are a lot of ways to reach out to the community and build relationships. They include:

- Coffee klatches
- Speaker bureaus
- Banquets
- Open houses
- Radio talk shows
- Letters to the editor
- Fliers
- Friend of education awards
- Scholarship funds
- Meetings
- Fact sheets
- Local news media relationships
- American Education Week activities
- Read Across America activities
- Public service announcements *

** Public service announcements (PSAs) are brief announcements about community service programs, upcoming events, or ideas for helping kids. Radio and television stations rotate them in their public service segments. They are a good way to communicate information to the public at no cost. PSAs are generally very short – 30 seconds or less – conversational, and to the point. Ask your local radio or television station to broadcast or co-sponsor a PSA with your local union.*