

March 2019

ONcall

ready-to-use NEWS

Considering hiring an ex-journalist as a school communicator?

Traditional media outlets are downsizing, and more and more journalists are looking for jobs as public relations professionals. They bring valuable experience, established relationships, and a dedication to accuracy, clarity, and deadlines. They are accustomed to dealing with the ambiguity of news events.

One public official recently put it this way when he hired a newly laid-off newspaper journalist as his communications director: “It’s always been my philosophy that you should hire journalists for communication positions. They bring a well-honed eye for news, along with true journalistic integrity that keeps us honest and talking straight.”

But ex-journalists also face significant differences in their roles. Here are tips to help your new former reporter ease the transition.

Adapting the mindset

As a journalist, you’re committed to objectively reporting the news, never tilting it for or against any person, institution, or idea. Your integrity — your credibility — is your calling card. Your responsibility is to the public — readers, viewers, and listeners.

The same tenets of accuracy, clarity, and deadlines hold true in public relations. Credibility is everything. A respected PR professional never misrepresents or misconstrues a situation. The difference is that your job is to serve the best interests of your client; in this case, the school district that employs you.

That doesn’t mean you should ignore bad news or overly hype good news. Doing either will undercut your credibility, your success, and, eventually, your school district’s reputation. But now that you’re on the other side of the news equation, your role is to help the journalists and public understand how this latest development — whatever it may be — fits into the overall picture and how the school district is responding.

If it’s bad news, whether a drop in graduation rates or a financial misstep or a collapsed gym roof, your role is to provide as much detailed information as possible, to be clear about what you don’t yet know and when that information might be available, and to acknowledge the community’s concerns. That last piece might be most important. The school district must be empathetic — genuinely — to public concerns, and you are part of the district’s public face in that regard.

If your emotional skills are wanting, now is the time to work on them.

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Soft skills are important

One truism of management is that talent is overrated in comparison with self-discipline, attitude, work ethic, and the ability to work well with others. Listening — the most important but often overlooked skill of a journalist — remains just as important for a PR professional. Empathy, an equally overlooked trait, is essential. The community cares passionately about its children and its schools.

Often when bad news happens, there is a tendency to try to reassure the public by saying, “We take these concerns very seriously. We’re already doing A, B, and C.” The commitment is sincere; but without being empathetic to the situation, such statements often come across as platitudes that insult the public intelligence.

This is why it is so important to put yourself in the public’s shoes and to apply the journalist adage of “Show, don’t tell.” Tell how the district responded and let the public form its own opinion. That may go against the instincts of some district officials, so do the best you can within the constraints of your job.

Newsrooms are wacky, quirky, freewheeling places where being mouthy is generally tolerated, where disagreement and conflict are understood as part of the collaborative process, and where news priorities can change in an instant. Not so in most other bureaucracies, including school districts.

What you perceive as logical direction can come across as an unrealistic idea or a brash intrusion unless you understand the culture of your organization, as well as the micro-culture within your communications office. Regardless of how much you know about the communications business on a macro level, you must be skilled at the personal level. You must possess the emotional intelligence to work effectively, flexibly and collaboratively with your new colleagues.

As a journalist, you may be accustomed to being somewhat of a loner, working closely with a few colleagues, such as other reporters, photojournalists, and editors, along with sources. In your new role, you likely will have a wider circle of views to include, and you may have less control over the outcome. Pick your battles, especially early on; listen well; and keep your ego in check. Not everything — such as an occasional press release that reads like it’s written by a committee — is worth fighting over.

Understand timing

Journalists expect almost instantaneous turnarounds. They want editors to respond immediately to their work. After all, news is the focus. In contrast, school administrations and staffs have many competing foci. Their sense of deadline might not complement as yours.

Be patient. Calmly think of any tardy contributors or respondents — tardy by your definition, though not necessarily theirs — like recalcitrant news sources. Graciously coach them along. Like them, you also will be juggling a multitude of assignments.

Bottom line

Don’t expect a PR role to be exactly like that of a journalist. There are similarities; there are significant differences. Each job, and each workplace, has its own idiosyncrasies.