

May 2019

ONcall

ready-to-use NEWS

Schools take on responsibilities for sharing their own news

The disruption of the traditional news media has created challenges and opportunities for school districts.

Newspapers trimmed their newsroom staffs by 45 percent during 2008-2017, according to the Pew Research Center. And newspapers are not alone. In one week early this year, an estimated 1,000 U.S. journalists lost their jobs across traditional and online media.

That is bad news all around.

Fewer journalists equates to fewer reporters covering schools and education issues on a regular basis so they develop understanding, context and expertise. More stories will go untold or be assigned to journalists who lack that background.

The journalists, of course, will do their best regardless of the obstacles in their way — just as people in any profession, including education, do their best on a daily basis. But the public relies on local news coverage to keep them informed on community issues. That decline in education coverage shifts the burden to school districts to become better at telling their story.

School districts as news outlets

For some administrators and school communicators, this might be uncomfortable because it requires districts to shift from a traditional public-relations orientation to a news-gathering orientation. The difference? Viewing developments through a neutral lens and making decisions based on what the public wants to know and should know.

Your goals are to inform and to build and sustain credibility.

For example, instead of issuing a press release lauding the Hughesisms School District for launching an exciting new career-technical education program, write it as a news story that includes the good and the not-so good. Don't ignore the tradeoffs. Leave it to the readers, viewers and listeners themselves to decide whether the program is nifty or ho-hum.

This doesn't mean you have to go out of your way to find "negative" news, but you do need to be as objective as possible. If CTE enrollment is a concern, deal with it head-on in your news coverage. If that terrific new administrator of the CTE program suddenly quits, inform the public now instead of waiting until a replacement is hired. Think of what parents, taxpayers, staff and students want to know.

Implemented diligently over time, this expanded approach to coverage will enhance the

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district's reputation and stop unfounded rumors — well, at least some. The only way to beat social media is to be ahead of it.

Follow the ADCs

As a longtime newsroom trainer and adjunct instructor, I preached that journalistic writing should follow this hierarchy of importance:

1. Accuracy — Accuracy always must be No. 1. Accuracy in facts, in spellings, in every detail. But accuracy need not equate to delay. If you can't confirm something, don't say it. Go with what you can confirm.

2. Deadline — The societal concept of deadline has expanded ferociously. If you're slow to release news, social media will fill the gaps, which often complicates your life. Anymore, think of deadline as a constant instead of a specific time.

Thus, coverage of an event might roll out like this: Brief social media posts, such as on Twitter, about what is happening. Longer posts with photos on Facebook or other platforms. Short video clips for social media. All the while, you're building the information for your "print" story — the one you'll post on the school website, accompany with an overall video and/or photo gallery, perhaps include in a newsletter or distribute to local media, and post on social media.

3. Clarity — People usually are surprised that I rank clarity third instead of first. But it's most important to get the story right and to get it out quickly.

However, clarity is what ensures your work is read. Think clean writing and easy-to-understand writing, not fancy writing. Above all, don't try to be cute; it rarely works — except in one's own mind.

Your stories need not be long. Too many newspaper stories are overwritten. Think of how people could most easily digest the information you're providing. In some situations, a narrative story might be most engaging. In other instances, a quick-hit list of bulleted points would be best.

Serve the remaining journalists

The new approach I'm advocating does not fully replace your traditional role in working with journalists. They still need your respectful, helpful assistance in chasing down leads, talking to people and understanding issues.

Some will be more knowledgeable than others. The trick is to be a helpful resource without being seen as hovering.

I'm a big believer in providing one- or two-page double-spaced bulleted tip sheets that explain the key details and include office, cell, social media and email information for contacting the appropriate sources in your school district. Provide it by email as well as on paper.

If you don't know where to start, start somewhere. Change is a constant in almost any industry. Journalists and school communicators alike must continually adjust.