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ONcall

ready-to-use NEWS

Timing is everything when you share your news

“Recently.”

That word rarely belongs in school district press releases. Its use generally indicates the news release is not, well, newsy. Instead, it is outdated.

This is the conundrum facing school communicators. “Timing is everything,” as the truism reminds us. The process of producing, approving and distributing news releases can take so long as to render them utterly useless to the news media. And then people wonder why their news was not covered.

It is because the tortoise rarely wins in the battle for media coverage. The importance of the time element — immediacy — is drilled into fledgling journalists and honed by veteran journalists. News is called “news” because it’s new; otherwise, it would be called “olds.”

To illustrate the case for timeliness, I’ll offer examples from a different public institution: state government.

My state’s legislature has ended its 2019 session. For the past five months, whenever a significant bill was passed or defeated, its supporters and opponents would issue a press release within minutes. They understood the sacred element of timeliness.

Granted, those lawmakers and interest groups might have the advantage of sole-purpose communication staffs. Still, the takeaways are relevant: They anticipated what could happen, they had their information ready — much of it probably pre-written — and they were ready to go.

That is akin to releasing information immediately after a school board meeting, instead of waiting days or more. In contrast, a few days ago I received a series of press releases from a well-known state agency. The releases discussed significant actions taken by the agency’s governing board ... the previous week. As I perused the news, those press releases resulted in minor mentions, if at all. The agency’s lack of urgency undercut any claim of importance.

News media have so much to cover that they rarely have time for old news. If they covered tardy events and announcements, they would come across to their readers, listeners, viewers and competitors as outdated and irrelevant.

It is our responsibility not only to recognize that reality but also to capitalize on it. For example, news media websites try to post new content every few minutes during their peak viewing hours. A clear, concise and significant press release might quickly get posted — if sent to the right person — whereas a longer one might lie dormant until the web producer, reporter or editor had time to go through it.

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For whatever reason, agencies and organizations seem especially slow in sending press releases about awards banquets. If someone is honored that night, the press release should go out that night.

Communications staffs sometimes make the mistake of relying only on social media to get the word out. Social media are important, but don't count on journalists to be constantly monitoring your social media accounts.

Timeliness is essential, but so is time of day. Get to know when your local media outlets prefer to receive information. Pay attention to their news cycles but also meet with them — at their convenience — to get their suggestions. Some days inherently are busier than others.

In general, the more complicated the issue, the earlier in the day to alert the media so they have time to dissect, understand and interview people about it. Late afternoon interviews are less helpful because there is less time to edit the video or finish writing the news story.

Releasing bad news at 6 p.m. Friday or on a weekend used to be a common way to avoid “negative” coverage. As a journalist, I broke numerous stories simply because I recognized that possibility and deliberately worked later on Fridays — just in case. With the explosion of social media, the public jumps on announcements regardless of the time or day. Solid news coverage is needed to set the record straight from the start.

Rarely is it a good idea to sit on bad or controversial news, regardless of the day or time. The word will leak, social media will go crazy and delays will be cast as a cover-up. A longtime newspaper columnist used to tell me, “If two people know something, one of them will talk.”

Good timing also entails being aware of what else is going on, so your news will not be ignored. Each media outlet has only a certain number of staff people and a certain amount of news space or broadcast time. Even online space is at a premium when the media and the community are focused on something else. In this case, you may need to time your press release or press event earlier or later than planned.

If you are delayed in releasing news, figure out how to make it newsworthy. That is what journalists call “spinning the story forward.” That is, focusing on what lies ahead and downplaying the past time element.

For example, it would not be newsworthy that the school district started a new program a month ago or that it saved millions of dollars last week by selling construction bonds at low interest rates. Instead, tell what the program achieved during its first month and what happens next. Talk about when the school construction projects start, what they will entail and how they are expected to come in under budget, explaining farther down in the press release that the savings will arise from the favorable bond sales.

Overall, there are three questions to constantly keep in mind: Why would people care about this, what would they want to know, and when would they want to know it?

If you always think about news coverage from the community's viewpoint, even when the consequent timing is not most convenient for the school district, you generally will make the right call.

Contributed by Dick Hughes, a communications consultant who receives dozens of press releases each week from schools, governments, nonprofits and businesses. Contact him at TheHughesisms@gmail.com.