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Case study: #RideTogether, A campaign for employee relations

Multnomah Education Service District's #RideTogether campaign is an employee/internal relations campaign for the 2020-21 school year developed using the public relations four-step process: research, plan, implement (execute and communicate) and evaluate. (See NSPRA Accreditation in Public Relations Study Guide: www.prsa.org/docs/default-source/accreditation-site/apr-study-guide.pdf.)

#RideTogether includes staff-focused video content, feature stories, updates, important information for families and employee engagement initiatives like staff-focused contests.

The public relations problem statement

In the beginning of the 2020-21 school year, educators reported concerns about reopening school buildings in an employee survey, and these concerns were echoed in local news media coverage. However, some families reported they wanted students back in their classrooms for in-person instruction, mainly citing a lack of resources to support learning at home. There was a disconnect in expectations among groups and a perception of decreasing confidence.

The goal of the #RideTogether campaign is to inspire and demonstrate competence and confidence in school employees who provide excellent education services and resource support to students and families.

Research

Preliminary research is the first step to designing a campaign because it creates a baseline that informs all aspects of the communications plan. A variety of formal and informal research collected and conducted in 2020 showed the school district needed to craft an employee relations plan that also reached the families of students during the 2020-21 school year.

We found:

- Trends in the media showed apprehension of educators returning to school buildings and frustrations from families about navigating comprehensive distance learning at home.
- Employee survey results on the school reopening plans were contradictory: open feedback comments showed themes that staff had concerns about reopening and a lack of confidence in the plan, but 30 out of 59 respondents selected “yes” in agreement that “the [reopening] plan reflects the safety of students.”
- In-house family surveys showed families had a strong preference for in-person instruction.
- Conversations with local school public relations leaders reflected similar results. The

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main concerns for most districts were around schools providing food, child care, mental health support, digital learning resources (equipment, internet access, etc.) and academic resources to families.

- Regional data from the state department of education showed a decrease in student enrollments in the region, especially in elementary schools.

This analysis revealed it was important to show the competence of school employees providing services and support to families and boost employee confidence at the same time, which is the goal of the #RideTogether campaign.

As the 2020-21 school year has progressed, showing how families and school employees work together to support students has been an even more important addition to the #RideTogether campaign.

Planning

During the planning phase, which has been ongoing as the state and local COVID-19 guidelines rapidly shift, the public relations problem statement led to the campaign goal: to inspire and demonstrate competence and confidence in school employees who provide excellent education services and resource support to students and families.

The #RideTogether goal informed informational, motivational and behavioral objectives. All objectives included a measurement and a timeframe, as well as the tactics for messaging. Pro tip: Objectives also need to be realistic, so don't aim higher than what is reasonable.

This plan is based on fundamental PR principles, including understanding various audiences and objectives. A great resource that helped develop the plan for #RideTogether is Primer of Public Relations Research, Third Edition by Don W. Stacks.

Objectives, tactics and goals tend to get misunderstood and confused. Here is a summary and some examples of informational, motivational and behavioral objectives for our campaign:

- Informational objectives focus on visibility —increase visibility and awareness of staff activities to support families from 12% to 24% for the 2020-21 school year. Tactics: electronic news that is also shared on social media and the district website.
- Motivational objectives focus on what you want your target audiences to do — increase participation of principals, program leaders and staff in providing story leads and content for informational objectives. Offer opportunities for them to supply content in contests, submission calls and one-on-one communications with leaders to encourage staff participation. The goal was at least a 10% participation rate from district employees for the school year (64 employees out of 640 employees).
- Behavioral objectives focus on how you want audiences to change — for staff to feel good about the work they are doing, which can be measured with evidence of staff comments and shares on district social media. The goal was for a 10% increase during the 2020-21 school year.

Implementation

Implementation is based on activities or strategies to meet objectives and communicate messages to your audiences. There are ways to make this a two-way stream, such as asking for content to give employees a platform to share their own stories.

The #RideTogether campaign has several strategies throughout the school year.

Your First Week Back: a content call that gave staff a chance to share their experiences during the first week back to school via comprehensive distance learning and some hybrid learning modes. Tactics: The content sent in via Google Forms was used to create three videos shared via enews, social media and on the district website.

#SilverLining: a content call that gave staff an opportunity to share their silver lining to evoke optimism this school year. Tactics: A Google Form was sent out requesting content, which was used for a branded photo and quote combination for enews, social media and the district website.

#MyRideContest: staff was asked to share a photo and five words via Google Forms that show what gets them through the day as we #RideTogether and navigate 2020-21. The content was shared internally via Google Forms, and staff voted for three winners. Prizes were sent to the winners, and swag was sent to everyone who submitted content. The winning content and select entries were shared via social media.

#SelfCareShares: staff was asked to share what they do for self-care via Google Forms. Tactics: This strategy is in progress, and the content will be shared via enews video, on social media and on the district website.

General school, program and service enews: ongoing engagement and informational content. Tactics: multimedia messaging that shows how staff and families work together to support students, student photo essays in their own words and pictures, profile interviews with staff, community partners, families and students and other news as it is available. This content is distributed via enews, social media and on the district website.

Evaluation

Evaluation is ongoing to measure the effectiveness of a campaign:

- Are employees reading our enews? At what rate?
- Are they submitting content when we ask for it? At what rate?
- Who is voting on contests? How many employees participate?
- Are they responding to/engaging with content by sending email replies to enews, or by sharing and commenting on social media? Who? How often?
- Are administrators reaching out with more communications assistance requests? Who is reaching out and when? Do you see any trends?
- What are the social media metrics and enews metrics? Do you see any trends or emerging themes?
- Compare the rankings of all of this to last year: how has overall engagement increased?
- How can data tell the story that determines the effectiveness of this campaign, or any campaign?
- How have opinions shifted? Are there staff and family surveys that can report a change? What else can you use to measure change in behavior or motivation?

Regular evaluation of any communication plan will need to have flexibility and resiliency through the 2020-21 school year.

School buildings are reopening this spring. As school employees navigate the shifting environment of schools, communications professionals will continue to refine how they engage employees in a mindful and encouraging way. Fostering such a mutually beneficial partnership is the spirit of #RideTogether.