

# How To Build Public Relationships That Motivate Real Support

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Effective public relations is a process that can serve as a road map to influencing public opinion, according to this writer, who reviews that process and describes some specific, proven PR tactics.

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BY PATRICK JACKSON

**T**HE INTEREST now evident in public relations as top priority for our schools is timely—provided we quickly get past the philosophical concept and into action programs that face the practical realities of what it means to build positive, enduring public relationships.

From experience as a counselor to school systems and other educational institutions around the country, I believe these realities to be something like this:

1. Public relations is a *process*. It requires mindpower, manpower, materials, and money.

2. The outcome we want from the process is relationships. Case studies as well as behavioral science and communica-

tion theory indicate that merely communicating with school publics will not achieve the goal.

3. The goal is not favorable opinion. Nor is it positive attitudes. Many issues and institutions have had the benefit of those and still failed. We must be clear that what we are working for—the only thing that counts—is public behavior that fosters sound educational principles and benefits the school.

4. In a society so vastly overcommunicated that people by the millions are dropping out of participation in public issues, we must be hardheaded about who is apt to care enough about education to act on their beliefs. We must target these publics and—candidly speaking—not worry too much about the rest, until they show interest.

5. The evidence shows that within these publics a select few opinion leaders essentially shape the decisions and resul-

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tant behavior of the group. These are the people with whom we must build solid relationships. In addition to the media lists school districts have always kept, we must begin to keep opinion leader lists. We must know what the network of influence is—and inject our viewpoint, and our supporters, into that network.

6. School systems, school districts, and education as an ideal are too big for most people to get their arms around. At best, these are disembodied, impersonal concepts. What matters to the audiences that care about education are:

- The individual classroom (where their children and others whom they know get their education), and
- Individual schools (the ones in their neighborhood or with which they have some association).

It is here that the relationships must be built—on a level where individual concerned opinion leaders can interface one-on-one with individual teachers, staff members, students, and others.

7. Therefore, the field marshal in the effort to motivate behavior through sound public relationships must be the school principal.

This may not be welcome news to a group which has had curriculum leadership thrust back upon it: which is caught in a growing paper chase and reporting system; which is on the firing line in a number of other campaigns. But just as other institutions are moving the level of decision making and relationship building down the organizational ladder from headquarters to operating units, so must the schools.

Given the choice between responsibility for public relationships or curriculum, a strong case can be made for

the former. There are, after all, curriculum specialists, lead teachers, and others who can do curriculum building, policing, and improvement—under the administrative supervision of the principal. But who else can lead the public relations effort in the individual school?

### Going Beyond Communication

Effective public relations is a process—like accounting, curriculum design, building maintenance, and staff training. The problem arises when we confuse the process with the outcomes. Typically, the process has concentrated on framing messages, getting them written, and communicating them.

However, the beginning of wisdom in public relations is to recognize that communication by itself does not build relationships. The scholars of this subject phrase it much more harshly. They note that information by itself has almost no power to motivate attitudes or behavior.

### Two Attitudinal Barriers

Traditional school public relations programs concentrate on just communication. But there has also been a feeling among educators that even that is unnecessary, or at least suspect. This viewpoint suggests that good schools sell themselves; and that "marketing" them or actively campaigning to persuade the public of their value is somehow manipulative. Today we have evidence that neither of these positions makes practical sense.

*As to the schools selling themselves:*

Considering the rapid growth in number of students to be taught, the incredible expansion of the human body of

knowledge, and the injection of dozens of social problems never before foisted onto the schools, the American public education system isn't doing too bad a job.

Yet what is the prevailing perception? Everyone in education can give a list of individual schools which are truly excellent, and of specific teachers or classes that are outstanding.

In fact, much excellent education is taking place, but few of the "stockholders" who own the schools—the voting citizens—seem to know about it. Clearly, then, even if through some process of psychological osmosis good schools could sell themselves, they do not seem to be doing so.

*As to communication being the solution:*

There was a time in American history—up until the mid-1930s, say the scholars—when information was in short supply. This was a world in which the typical breadwinner worked six days a week, homemakers had few modern labor-saving devices, and the whole family went to church twice on Sunday. The communications techniques and media that surround us and drown us in information today did not exist.

People valued communication highly. In today's global village of intercommunication technology, people are on information overload.

Something beyond communication is required. Behavioral science studies in diffusion process show us what it is. The key concepts are flow, information, and influence.

Attention to diffusion process tells us how and when valuable public relation-

ships for education must be, and can be, built and maintained at the school level.

### Steps in the Process

The diffusion process postulates five steps in human decision making. Since public decisions are aggregated individual decisions, it is also a map to public adoption of ideas and positions helpful to education.

### The Two-Step Flow

Public relations experts call diffusion the two-step flow. In phases A and B, information is the key—to gain awareness and understanding of the situation. Mass impersonal media are most efficient avenues for this since they can reach thousands with the same message at the same time.

Thereafter, information loses its clout. Peer pressure and social acceptability take over in phases C, D, and E. Until the idea is vetted by people whose opinions we value, the great majority of Americans—at least 98 percent on most topics—will not adopt an idea. Despite our bravado about being independent, the fact is we care desperately what others think.

So strong is our need for human verification of our tentative decisions that in phase D, the highest influence is held by advocates who are rarely uninterested parties.

Psychologically, we require another human voice, sometimes almost any human voice, to push us to accept our own emerging decision or to turn us away from it. We heed and want opinion leaders in our confusing, overcommunicated world.

PHASES	The Diffusion Process: The Flow of Information and Influence Toward Decision Making					
	A. Awareness	B. Information	C. Evaluation	D. Trial	E. Adoption	F. Reinforcement
	Learns about an idea or practice but lacks detail	Gets facts, develops interest, sees possibilities	Tries it mentally, weighs alternatives	Social acceptability, experimentation	Full-scale use, adopts it	Continued commitment
INFLUENCES BY PRIORITY	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Mass media and impersonal message forms</li> <li>2. Experts and agencies</li> <li>3. Friends and neighbors</li> <li>4. Opinion leaders and advocates</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Mass media and impersonal message forms</li> <li>2. Opinion leaders and advocates</li> <li>3. Experts and neighbors</li> <li>4. Friends and neighbors</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Friends and neighbors</li> <li>2. Opinion leaders and advocates</li> <li>3. Experts and agencies</li> <li>4. Mass media and impersonal message forms</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Opinion leaders and advocates</li> <li>2. Friends and neighbors</li> <li>3. Experts and agencies</li> <li>4. Mass media and impersonal message forms</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Friends and neighbors</li> <li>2. Opinion leaders and advocates</li> <li>3. Experts and agencies</li> <li>4. Mass media and impersonal message forms</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Appropriate mix of mass media and interactive techniques</li> </ol>
	<p><b>Significance:</b>            Note that <i>impersonal media</i> (print, broadcast) cease being effective after Phase B, when <i>personal media</i> (people, experts, opinion leaders) take over as the need for psychological support and social acceptability replace the need for information.</p>					

### Application: Principals Are It

Central office public relations people can handle the first step. Their communications programs will get subjects on the agenda of key publics, and can provide the information those groups seek to determine whether the topic is really relevant enough to pursue.

But no central staff can build strong relationships with most opinion leaders, advocates, friends, and neighbors. These people live somewhere specific—and that is in the school community. While some may be willing or will want to interact with superintendents and school boards, many—probably most—can only be effectively reached in their neighborhoods.

This means the key public relationship builders must be principals and the teams of teachers, staff members, students, and parents they can recruit from their individual schools.

Board members and superintendents can and must formulate public relations goals and policies. If they are wise, they will do it participatively with principals and their public relations teams.

Central public relations departments can facilitate, provide professional services, and counsel on strategy.

But the rubber meets the road at each individual school, where the principal must carry out the tactics. The wise will seek guidance from their public relations departments. But then the responsibility is theirs.

### Typical Tactics That Work

One-on-one contacts, group events, and public participation get the emphasis because they build relationships . . . with *opinion leaders* . . . of tar-

*geted publics*. As a result, these activities offer the best platform for motivating positive behavior toward the schools.

There are three types of desired behavior: to do something, not to do something, or to give consent to let the schools do something.

An example of the first type is for opinion leaders to be positive supporters for education by speaking up in their circles of influence. Often that is all it takes to have a mutually advantageous school-community bond. On the other hand, it is difficult to forge such a bond if opinion leaders are not talking up the schools. And impossible when they are in opposition.

Among many proven activities that provide the personal touch necessary to build relationships are these:

- *School PR Teams*—call them CR (community relations) if you prefer. Members can take an active role in identifying and reaching out to opinion leaders and target publics. These teams are best when they work to an annual plan.
- *Business Advisory Committees*—to get executives and small business owners actually involved in the school. Such committees have unlimited uses.
- *Grandparents Day*—seems to work wherever it's tried, especially when children without their grandparents available adopt new ones from the neighborhood.
- *Open Houses*—dozens of kinds and purposes to choose from; be creative. When they are well-planned and details are attended to, no activity can surpass them.
- *Alumni Associations*—or at least re-

unions. These groups are underutilized by secondary schools.

- *Neighborhood Relations Visitation*—where principals or CR team members meet with major opinion leaders. Such visits are usually held twice a year, and provide an unequalled chance to communicate, listen, share, suggest helpful behaviors, and learn what's really felt "out there." Businesses call this stakeholder management or constituency relations.
- *Education Fairs*—give retailers and vendors a way to reach parents and others with educationally valuable products and services under the auspices of the school. Many find the pre-Christmas season ideal.
- *Localized Surveys*—can be done and tabulated by volunteers or PTA members, as long as the questionnaire and the sample meet basic standards. Some schools get volunteer professionals to help develop the survey. There is no substitute for neighborhood data, and no substitute, either, for letting local people know by action that you care about their views and suggestions.
- *Schools as the Local Meeting Place*—get clubs, organizations, and

events to use your facilities, whether once a year or regularly. Your staff can serve coffee and doughnuts as well as anyone, and you have the widest choice of rooms. Consider how universities are drawing new audiences to campuses through their student unions. After all, the people you invite *own* the school. It's mutually advantageous to get them inside occasionally.

To get started, try this: Convene a task force of internal and external opinion leaders. Charge them with drawing up a mission statement for your particular school. Then have this group—or another batch of opinion leaders—convert it into a motto.

Get area businesses or foundations to contribute to a fund that will put the motto onto the front of the building, on printed materials, and such. Then use all the techniques available to get your neighborhood to consider what your mission and motto are—as evidenced by these participatively produced statements.

Now the interested parties have noticed you, see that you are different than the kinds of schools they have been hearing about, and are intrigued. The stage is set.

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### Where Does the Money Come From?

Where do public schools obtain money for hardware and software purchases? According to TALMIS, a New York City-based independent market research company, districts provide 46 percent of the money for school hardware and 58 percent of the funds for software.

Other sources of funding include the federal government and the local PTA.

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