How to Become Media-Savvy

Positive coverage of our schools in the media is often viewed as an oxymoron. Low test scores, dropout rates, and campus violence are what make the headlines, while the day-to-day successes of students and staff go unrecognized. As effective leaders, principals need to master the art of working with the media to accurately portray what is happening on campus. Developing “media savvy” ranks right up there with teacher evaluations and student discipline in the principal’s administrative tool belt.

When I was a new principal, I was determined to show the public what a great job our school staff and students were doing. Every Monday morning, I made it part of my weekly routine to notify the editors of our two community newspapers about the upcoming happenings at the school—awards assemblies, guest speakers from the community, science lessons, and the occasional field trip or assembly. I listed dates, times, contact phone numbers, and suggested photo opportunities. Seldom did I receive as much as a phone call in response.

“If you have a school crisis or issue, be proactive. Have information on hand about your school...that is accurate and...positive...”

Learning How to Play the Game
Not to be discouraged, I made an appointment with the editor of one of the papers, expressed my staff’s concerns, and asked if he had any suggestions as to how to get more accurate and frequent coverage of news at our school. He said one of the problems was that the paper was understaffed and didn’t have anyone to write “fluff” stories.

I then asked if he would be interested in receiving photos and stories already typed and ready to go, to include in his paper as space allowed. He readily agreed to the idea and told me how to submit material.

The next week I followed his instructions and we had our first “good news” photo and caption in print. One of our students had saved another student from choking and was presented a special certificate by a local police officer. With camera in hand, I photographed the presentation, asked the boy’s parent for permission to submit it to the local paper, and it ran the following Wednesday.

A week later, after one of the paper’s few remaining reporters quit without notice, the editor actually called me to see if we had anything to submit. He needed to fill pages. Several of our students had just won honors in the county writing contest and, after contacting their parents, I submitted their writing. The editor was very thankful for the help and our school was now seeing some positive coverage for the first time.

By developing a positive, working relationship with the newspaper editor, he called me when a school crisis occurred rather than sending a reporter. I was able to make a general comment on behalf of the staff so that it was not necessary to contact anyone else.

What You Need to Know
To get more media coverage for your school, contact your local newspapers and get the following information:

■ What are their deadlines?
■ What are the names and e-mail addresses of their contact persons?
■ In what format do they want electronic submissions? Do they prefer text files, Word documents, or some other format?
■ Do they want articles sent as attachments or cut and pasted into e-mail messages?
Can you send photos as attachments or do they prefer to scan them?

With this information in hand, make sure to include in your annual notification to parents a place for them to give permission to use their child’s name and photo in school news articles. Keep a list of parents who decline permission and check it before submitting material for publication.

Positive news about your school does not always have to be written by you, but it should always be approved by you before being submitted. Encourage staff members, students, and parents to submit material to you for possible publication.

It’s a good idea to have a digital camera on hand to capture school events. (It can also come in handy for documenting vandalism or accidents.)

The Value of Media Relationships

If you have a school crisis or issue, be proactive. Have information on hand about your school and its program that is accurate and portrays the positive side of what you do.

If your school receives positive coverage of an event, have students write thank-you notes to the reporter or editor. If the media regularly publishes positive information about your school, invite a representative to receive recognition at your annual awards ceremonies.

Developing media savvy is an important part of a principal’s job, but there’s no reason why it can’t also be fun and rewarding.

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