

# Practical Public Relations

## Making Your School Stand Out Despite Limited Financial Resources

By Garrett W. Nudd

was headed for the Department of Motor Vehicles to renew my car's license plates for another year when my cellular phone rang. The caller I.D. told me it was my boss, the director of public relations for Southern Adventist University.

"How soon can you get back to the office?" he asked.

"In about 45 minutes," I replied, wondering what was so urgent.

"Make it 30 if you can," he replied.

He told me that a television reporter and cameraman were heading for the school, seeking reactions from former student missionaries on the shooting down of a missionary plane over Peru on April 20, 2001.

"How did the reporter know to call us?" I asked.

"Well, over the past few months, she's worked with us on several different stories, and one time I casually mentioned our student-missions program," said my director. "We've really been developing a positive relationship with that TV station, and I want to do all we can to help them out."

That evening, on the local 10 o'clock news, we had a great three-minute clip with reactions from several returned student missionaries, as well as a short promotion for our university.

The coverage was free. We didn't ask for it. But we got it, and that's what counts.

### Competing With the Big Guys

Each year, multibillion-dollar corporations and profit-driven conglomerates spend millions of dollars to enhance their image.

**Although money goes a long way toward reaching a target audience, dollars don't create positive public perception—people do.**

Daily the media are bombarded with advertisements and messages from companies trying to outdo their competition. And many cases, those who outdo must out-spend.

Indeed, so much money is spent on image and perception by such organizations that it leaves those of us in the non-profit sector asking, "How do we compete?"

In a perfect world, we would all have unlimited capital and endless resources. Adventist schools would enjoy the same opportunities as wealthier companies and organizations. But while some wait for the unlikely day when this will occur, the rest of us assess the odds and take proactive measures to answer the challenge.

For any business or organization to succeed, it must nurture a positive public perception. But through the grim reality of insufficient funding shines a ray of hope. Although money goes a long way toward reaching a target audience, dollars don't create positive public perception—people do. People who understand the media and public perception are an invaluable asset to schools with limited budgets.

Successful public relations boils down to *communication*. Schools that communicate with their external publics in some organized way enhance their chances of getting better public support, minimizing criticism, learning the values and priorities of their community, and receiving ideas that will help them educate students better.<sup>1</sup>

Many schools and small organizations fail to realize that developing good community relations doesn't have to be a budget-breaker. The secret to positive public perception is practical public

relations. Stop viewing the media as adversaries, and start seeing them as partners.<sup>2</sup> Fearing the media or treating them with contempt or cynicism will put you at a direct disadvantage to those who understand and work with the media. Creating and maintaining positive media relationships may ultimately lead to success for your organization.<sup>3</sup>

### Media Relations

Perhaps you think that the media are not interested in your small school, they just want to cover sensational stories, or what the media calls “hard news.” However, the majority of the media are very people-friendly. After all, their job depends on finding stories, and what better way to do that than through people? Probably the most effective way for educators to improve school-press relations is to get to know reporters on a first-name basis.<sup>4</sup> This will open the door for positive publicity.

Reporters and publicists have one powerful, shared goal: They both want to make the front page with colorful, interesting stories that are accurate, creative, and effective.<sup>5</sup> If you want your school in the public eye, a newspaper or television reporter can help you achieve that goal.

### The News Release

A news release is probably the most cost-effective way of publicizing your school. A well-written news release can be the mother lode of your public relations program since it will be published free of charge and can lessen the overall cost of advertising.<sup>6</sup>

Depending on the magnitude of the news or event, you may want to send more than a simple news release. Look for ways to “dress up” your news release. Put it in a nice folder, accompanied by brochures and other information relevant to the news or event you want to promote. However, make sure that the news release is in the

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front of the package and easy to find.

Call the reporter and set up a time when you can stop by his or her office to drop off the package. While there, you can give the event an extra pitch.

Be polite and not overly aggressive. Don't irritate the reporter, or he or she will never want to cover anything you do ever again.

Be sure to follow these rules when writing an effective news release:

- Start by defining the *who, what, when, where, why, and how* of the event. Once you have answered those questions, you are ready to begin.
- Limit your news release to one sheet of standard-size white paper.<sup>7</sup>
- At the top of the page, include a contact name and telephone number.
- Write the news release in the inverted pyramid style, putting the most important facts at the beginning and less-important facts toward the end.

### Practical Public Relations

Although the news release is one of your most effective communication tools, practical public relations requires more than this. It involves managing the public perception of your school or organization through creative measures, despite limited means. Whatever your public relations budget, you can promote your school effectively.

*Public Relations Involves Everyone:* Everybody involved in an organization plays a significant role in public relations. From the faculty to the school board members, from the principal to the students, each person makes an impact for the school.

*Parental perceptions:* In elementary schools, it is important to cater to the desires of the parents. Since they are the ones paying tu-

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ition, they need to feel confident that their children are in the best school and that they are getting their money's worth.

Elementary school faculty should occasionally send home handwritten notes or call parents to praise their children's work. Parents are more accustomed to receiving disciplinary notes and will welcome this recognition of their children's good behavior.

Staff members and administrators should respond promptly to telephone calls and written correspondence from parents and people seeking information about the school.

Put yourself in the shoes of the parent who calls and leaves a message for his or her child's teacher on Monday. Finally, on Friday afternoon, just before the weekend, the teacher returns the call. By then, the parent has already expressed his or her frustrations to other parents, and the damage has been done. Negative perceptions and attitudes run rampant when customers feel they are ignored or treated rudely. However, excellent customer service leads to superior public perception.

*Public perception in the community:* Perhaps the biggest challenge in creating positive public perception is with the students themselves. The public tends to see students as personifying the characteristics of an institution. This is true both at public events and

## **The secret to positive public perception is practical public relations.**

when a child walks through a neighborhood on his or her way to and from school.<sup>8</sup>

Training young students to act or behave in a certain way is more the role of the parents than the faculty. However, when planning a field trip or some other event outside the classroom, school personnel should talk to both students and parents about the behavior they expect.

*Perceptions of current or potential students:*

Secondary students may have a little more influence than younger children in choosing what school they attend. Many teenagers decide on a school because of the influence of their friends. However, having an adult from the school take a personal interest in young people can have a powerful positive effect on potential students and their parents. When I was choosing a high school to attend, one of the academy faculty members called and asked if he could come over and visit with me and my parents. We went over my class schedule, and he answered our questions. I felt great about the choice my parents and I had made.

Another inexpensive tool that creates positive perception in the minds of potential students is hosting a visitation day. Boarding schools should make this an overnight event when they delight visitors with exciting events and programming. Let them play basketball in your gymnasium, eat in your cafeteria, and practice with the

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choir or band. Be sure to give them a positive experience of life at your school.

*Hire a college student intern:* Since employing a seasoned public relations professional is probably not in your budget, hire a college student for the job. There is nothing better than a young mind full of ideas and eager to succeed.

Begin by contacting the journalism and communication department at your local college and ask about the possibility of having a public relations student complete an internship for a semester. Most college students are willing to work for little or no pay just to build experience and gain contacts.

The intern's responsibilities should include projects like creating and maintaining an accurate media list. He or she should also create a local VIP list that includes community leaders, local politicians, and the best-known reporters or news anchors in the local market. This list will be useful when you want to invite people to special events or promotions.

Other jobs such as creating news releases or media advisors can also be handled by the intern. The only catch is the need for a friendly faculty member who is willing and committed to supervise the intern. Occasionally, an overzealous intern can do more damage

than good. Be sure he or she understands your school's mission and constituency, and provide oversight of his or her work.

*Secure a spot on a morning television or radio talk show:* Think about what sets you apart from the competition. Is someone on your staff an expert on children with disabilities? Is your school utilizing a cutting-edge reading or mathematics program? Is your school active in a particular charity effort? Do your students consistently score in the top percentile in a certain area? If you can answer "Yes" to any of the above questions, then you have found your niche.

Now comes the fun part—pitching it to the media. Continue to cultivate those media friendships by providing reporters with a story. Once you have their attention, inquire about being a guest on a morning call-in television or radio show. Another option might be authoring a weekly or monthly column in the local newspaper. Naturally, the column cannot always be about your school, but having your photo and byline attached will create positive promotion for your organization.

The benefits are twofold. First, the media will benefit from your expertise, and second, you and your school will benefit from the positive publicity. Again, the key is to use the media as your partner.

*Capitalize on media slow times:* When it comes to charity events and benefits, one of the busiest times of the year is the Christmas season. The news is filled with stories of schools, churches, and various organizations participating in events that benefit the sick, poor, and homeless.

Why not hold your benefit after the holidays? Schedule your fund-raiser or benefit for March or April, after the news glut has waned. Utilize the story-starved media to get the community involved.

One of the most effective charity events is a school performance.

# Creating and maintaining positive media relationships may ultimately lead to success for your organization.

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Whether music, drama, or another type of performance, such events go a long way in reaching the community. When parents and friends witness an educational demonstration, read a student publication, or watch a skilled performance by pupils, they are often surprised that youngsters can do so well. They tell their friends and acquaintances in the community. The cumulative effect of such favorable publicity will influence the attitudes and opinions of many people.<sup>9</sup>

A dinner-theater benefit is usually well received by the community. Formal invitations should be sent to potential guests three to four weeks before the event. Be sure to ask guests to respond in advance so you will know how many plan to attend. Tell them upfront that the proceeds from the event will benefit adult literacy, cancer research, or whatever charity you have chosen. By doing this, you will be able to set ticket prices higher and treat the event as a fund-raiser. Don't limit the guest list to parents and church members. Include community leaders, news reporters (let the reporters in free), and other distinguished guests. This is the time to refer to that VIP list created by your intern. Don't leave anyone out. Consider personal delivery of the invitations to selected people you especially want to attend.

Have the students prepare and serve the dinner under the direction of a faculty member. Immediately following dinner, the students can begin their performance. Expect a few minor flaws in the program because they are amateurs. However, you will probably have a delightful evening that parents and guests will talk about for weeks.

Even after all the preparation, performance, and clean-up, there's still more to do. Let the media know how much money you raised and what cause it will benefit. By contributing to and taking an interest in the community, your school will develop a reputation as a fine neighbor and a worthy civic agency.<sup>10</sup>

*Publicize your publicity:* Once you get the publicity, let others know about it. At Southern Adventist University, the public relations department is building on an idea we received from a conference in Florida. Every time the university is mentioned in the media—whether newspaper, magazine, radio, or television—we report this in a four-page newsletter called *Southern Sightings*. The publication is distributed to faculty, staff, and others involved with the university.

Our goal in publishing the newsletter is to encourage positive self-promotion on campus. Ultimately, we hope that students and faculty will see the public relations department as a bridge to the media. By making everyone aware of stories and events, we will be able to pitch additional story ideas to the media and generate positive coverage for the university.

## Conclusion

In promoting your school, capitalize on your strengths, and be creative. However, don't bombard the media with frivolous news releases and telephone calls trying to drum up coverage. Good reporters will recognize a good story when they see one.

Like any relationship, media relationships take time. Look at the media as your partners, but be patient. If you let them do their job, you will gain their favor and be far ahead of the competition. ☞

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## REFERENCES

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