MANAGING YOUR SCHOOL’S REPUTATION

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There’s not much point being a great school if nobody knows that you exist or understands what it is that you do really well.

Likewise, doing the ‘right thing’ to manage an issue or a crisis within the school is essential but not nearly enough if your school’s hard-earned reputation is to be upheld outside of the school campus. You need to demonstrate and convey your good management.

My presentation this afternoon will look at two aspects of public relations and communications:

1. Public relations and communication planning for all the good things that your school does every day and every week of the year
2. Public relations and communication planning in an incident, issue or crisis that suddenly but all too inevitably can confront a school

The two essential properties of all communication, reputation and issues management strategies are, not surprisingly, preparation and simplicity.

A well-run and well-constructed school community will have formalised and confirmed plans, procedures and protocols for the development and performance of curriculum, staff, students, liability, insurance, enrolments, fees, revenue and fundraising, risk, compliance, information technology, building maintenance. I could go on.

Not all schools, however, adopt the same rigour when it comes to formalised and confirmed public relations strategies, communication plans and protocols for communication management around the myriad incidents, issues and crises that inevitably challenge a school.

For some of you this afternoon I may well be telling how to suck an egg. If so, I’ll be finished in 45 minutes. If not, listen up. I also want to keep this as practical as I can. I will do my best. Promise.
Our firm, Ball Public Relations, has worked with the Association of Independent Schools of SA since 1997 when it was the Independent Schools Board, the old ISB.

We have on many occasions been referred to a member school to assist with a crisis, an emerging issue or problem.

Even those schools that are well prepared always benefit from external perspectives from people such as me who have, to put it bluntly, been there and done that.

My presentation will be in two parts. Firstly, we will look at a typical public relations strategy to promote a school. Then, secondly, we will look at the basic precepts for considered and timely communication management in an incident, issue or crisis.

You often hear it said that “perception is reality.” What does that mean?

Points to confirm: Even if inaccurate or unfair, it’s the reality that you must confront if that perception is about you and what you do. It’s not necessarily accurate or fair.

How might it apply to and / or affect you and your school?

Points to confirm: Parents and, for want of a better term, consumers of education, make decisions about a school based on their perceptions and what they know about you and your school.

Why, then is perception so important?

Points to confirm: If they think you’re so-so and the school is no better, they probably won’t choose you. If they think you’re great and the school is too, they very likely will choose or recommend you. Also, for parents that have a positive perception of your school, your leadership and your teachers, it shapes the way in which they work with you in the education of their child. Your student.

There are few, if any, truer maxims for a school, especially where parents and families can decide or elect whether to be join your community. Perceptions are formed and will have an impact on your school.

You and your school can positively shape perceptions inside and outside your school community.
Typically, a public relations strategy is developed in a structured process:

- Research – identify all relevant facts and issues
- Identify audiences
- Identify all those who influence your audiences – that includes teachers, all of whom on top of their professional duties need to understand and know where they fit in a public relations strategy
- For media, confirm who speaks to the media
- Define the goals – enrolments, retention, solid branding, a sense of community
- Identify messages and points that need to be conveyed
- Select the appropriate medium to communicate your message – for example, social media, traditional print, television and radio, a letter, a video, paid advertising, presentation, forum, tour, brochure, newsletter
- Train and equip everyone for the role they perform
- Allocate a budget
- Decide on appropriate measurement
- Review and amend
- Maintain a communication plan or calendar of all the activities, events and opportunities that will be communicated or promoted

I mentioned teachers. Teachers often will not immediately see themselves as having a public relations role but, when you think about, they are critical to public relations success. Public relations must be authentic and must reflect reality. That is where the teacher comes in. Anything you do to promote the school in the media or other avenues must be validated by the behaviour of every teacher and employee.

Think of the ‘moments of truth’ where existing and prospective parents and other school audiences confirm their perceptions at each and every contact or point of interaction.
This is when and where perceptions are created, shaped or confirmed. What might some of these be?

- Meeting
- On the telephone
- By email or letter
- A diary note
- New student affirmation call
- Beginning-of-year greeting call from home group or class teacher
- Visiting the school website
- Receiving a school newsletter
- Walking through the school
- Watching on-campus interactions between staff and students and their parents—such as students and parents being called by their name and students showing genuine respect
- Reading, viewing, hearing or sharing an article in the media
- Seeing advertisements
- Attending a school event
- Watching how students in uniform carry themselves and behave out in the community
- And, laugh not, over-hearing or eavesdropping on you or school staff as you relax over a meal or a coffee anyone around Adelaide—this is Adelaide, after all!

Each of these is a ‘moment of truth’. Most have a teacher or employee front and centre.

Each of them falls into two categories of equal importance and, as we will see, they are interdependent in that they rely on each other for credibility and validation.
There is micro—such as a meeting or other form of personal contact—and the macro—such as a media article, advertising initiative or the school website. The micro and macro must mesh with consistency of message, tone, policy and performance.

That means you and the school must together walk the same talk. Everything that you do as an individual or the school as a corporate entity does or says must mesh.

To be respected and remembered, you and your school need to convey values within a brand that is easily recalled. It is the prism through which opinion is formed.

Brand is a word much-loved by people in businesses such as mine but we might also think of it as your identity or reputation. Once people accept your identity and what you stand for, the extent to which they accept, dismiss or question information and comment about you will occur in the context of your identity or brand.

If they are pre-disposed to accepting the notion that your school is a great place for children to grow into great young adults, everything they hear or see about you will be checked against that expectation.

In all professions, the professional practitioner is the most credible marketing advocate or shaper of opinion and decision. In education, teachers are the most credible marketers and opinion formers for education and a school. They know what they’re talking about and they are believed.

This marketing does not start and finish at the development office, the enrolment office or the principal’s office. Marketing, when you think about it, is actually everything we do every day in our dialogue with the consumer—the students themselves and those that have participated in the decision for your school to educate them.

Advertisements and news releases alert the consumer or raises their awareness in a particular area but the heavy lifting is done through the daily routines—teaching, getting the tuition bill right, sending grades and student information to the right person and, indeed, every one of those ‘moment of truth’ interactions.

Consumers who have had a good experience will talk about it and positively influence others. A bad experience also will be shared and probably with even greater impact.
Everyone is responsible for advancing the mission of the school. Everyone, therefore, contributes, performs, markets, recruits, fundraises and teaches. Students, parents, grandparents, benefactors, alumni and wider communities share the experience.

Great marketing, like effective learning, occurs when there is structure, an expectation of collaboration and sharing, commitment and passion—total belief by those that deliver and by those that consume.

No single person can do it alone. **HENDERSONS/SAFETY OFFICER… NON SINGLE PR OFFICER**

A school is no place for a silo. We all really do have to know what each is doing and how we advance the mission. Good marketing must not sell; it must inform the purchase or engagement and must be consistent from all members of the organisation. It must never be a façade; it must be a door. That said, education is never a business.

It may adopt business principles and apply them to the educational setting but education is just that—education and not-for-profit or a better definition might be not-for-loss and marketing still applies in this setting; particularly in a very small town such as Adelaide with its high level of competition among many schools.

What we do and say must also be authentic. If we, as a public relations firm, promote something from within a school, it must accurately describe or faithfully reflect what is experienced and what really happens. It must be authentic. If it doesn’t mesh it will be counter-productive.

**Developing messages for schools… you tell me? DISCUSSION**

Confirm the inclusion of:

- Values
- High quality teachers
- Modern, quality facilities and ICT
- Great community
- Co-ed or single gender
• Small classes or, at least, right-sized classes
• Constant communication; no surprises at parent night
• Offers a wide range of learning/subjects options
• Great grounds / facilities
• Wonderful learning environment

Let’s now turn to some of the essential elements of good communicating.

**Listen**
This is the critical first step in marketing and sound communication. If we don’t know our target audience and don’t hear what it is that concerns them, we can’t help them or ourselves.

**Know what to articulate**
A school leadership has four things that need to be addressed and embedded in the culture: ‘Who we are; What we stand for; Why it matters, and; Where we’re headed’. Everyone in the school community must be able to articulate the answers and know that these are the pivot points for all decisions and statements that reflect our identity or brand and our values to create the momentum to our goal.

**Consistency in message**
Consistency in messaging is essential in conveying the basic tenets of a school’s mission and what distinguishes it. Conflict in messaging is worse than no message. It causes confusion and undermines confidence all round.

**Commitment**
Without the support of the faculty and the teachers, most (if not all) external promotional initiatives are doomed. If they do not mesh with the reality and the experience and are not endorsed by the practitioners, they will surely fail.

**Credibility**
When the principal, the development director and the admissions director speak positively about the school, people expect it. When a teacher or a parent talks about how good the school is, people believe it.
FOR STAFF AND TEACHERS... COMMUNICATE WITH PARENTS BEYOND THE FORMAL

Do little things big
For example, when a prospective family is shown into a classroom, the teacher must be personal, smile, welcome warmly with a handshake, look them in the eye and explain what you are doing and what everyone is learning and why they love being in this class and love learning.

Vigilance
If you suspect a student is unhappy or might be looking around at other schools, be responsive and report it straight away. If you see something that jars with you, tell someone in the school; not outside the school. Remember, if it’s good, share it everywhere you can. If it’s bad, tell the person responsible and get it fixed. And the important thing here is to also see it through to resolution.

Managed dialogue
- Make sure that communication from the school to its community features each of the four Ps: positive, personalised, proactive and partnership.
- No matter where they are, staff and teachers are always on duty influencing all those that hear them. Every little bit counts from car park, sport, pub, restaurant, reception to a Sunday BBQ
- Never criticise the opposition - it plugs them, creates a forum for negative comparison, concedes that they are the competition and, worst of all, diminishes you
- Always communicate on their terms and in ways that they can absorb and understand the information you want them to have and use

Communication tips
Let’s look now at some tips for good communication and how you can lead that communication to your desired goal.
Never commit to a meeting/discussion without having planned your objective, how you can make the other person feel comfortable and how you can keep the discussion open towards the goal. Have notes prepared if needed.

When you’ve got bad news or an issue with a parent/student, don’t forget the sandwiches—start positive (first slice of bread), introduce the difficult bit (the filling, in this case the beef), end with a positive on how we go forward (the second slice of bread).

Where it is undesirable to do so, avoid any repetition of negatives except to confirm the concern or issue. Try to use U-turn words such as on the contrary, that is one view but our view is to take you into your positive statement or the path to a solution.

Don’t avoid questions but don’t feel obliged to answer it on the terms of the interrogator. If you want to set it in the appropriate context, do so. For example, John Howard / Kerry O’Brien on balance of trade/interest rates.

Watch out for personal opinions in corporate or organisational contexts—they don’t exist and simply are code for you not really agreeing with your school. You often hear it in the media as the questioner seeks to create or confirm conflict. Don’t air publicly your private differences. Take them to where they can be fixed, don’t let them develop negative momentum that serves no-one, least of all you. This extends to saying things like not my call. Once someone says something like that, it wedges them and others in the school. If you are pressed, you can say that you support a policy without saying you voted for it or directly agree with it.

Don’t criticise other schools. All schools have their place and do things differently. That’s what makes choice so important.

Use questions as springboards to your agenda. Q=A+1.

Set the agenda; it’s much easier to define something on a clean slate.
- Never make a parent feel that a problem with their child is their fault. This is not a blame game. It is a team effort. A teacher who bonds with a parent bonds the family to the school. This is what creates the desired educational triangle of school, teacher and parent to best serve the interests of each child.

- Leadership and staff should be accessible but on their terms. Therefore, if you get an email or telephone call that requires prompt attention, contact the person who needs you to acknowledge you have received their message and let them know when you can get back in touch. Often a day or two later is acceptable.

- Never argue. However, you are the educational expert and you are entitled and should respectfully disagree if appropriate. For example, understand your view and you make your point very well, however, in my experience/some research recently has shown that

- Use the ‘bridge’ and ‘flag’ techniques during discussions.

- Don’t be afraid to buy time.

- Don’t worry about angry people. It’s a secondary emotion. The real issue lies underneath. Get to it. Don’t take the anger personally.

- Never tolerate bad behaviour. Terminate a bad interaction going nowhere with an offer to reconvene when we’ve had a chance to sleep and think on it. Avoid discussing issues over email. Telephone calls or a meeting are best and most efficient to achieve a resolution.

- If the situation is that bad, take a time-out and re-convene. It gives both parties some thinking space and enable you to get back and collaborate inside the school.

- Follow through to make sure that even a referred inquiry is satisfied or resolved.

- Never over-commit or promise something that you cannot deliver or are not sure that you can deliver.
DIFFICULT PARENTS
(Adapted from Dr Debra Condren’s checklist for dealing with difficult employees)

To finish off, let’s look at some thoughts around managing difficult parents. This probably is directed at principals and teachers but you may find it useful.

- Separate, in your mind, the person’s role as parent of your student from their difficult personality. Count yourself lucky not to be in a personal relationship with them and focus only on the professional relationship that you need. Don’t engage on an emotional level, don’t get into arguments and don’t allow yourself to be goaded.

- Use self-deprecating humour. This is disarming, particularly to difficult personality types. The ability to laugh at yourself is a key indicator of emotional intelligence or the ability to connect well with other people. Connecting and listening are two key skills of good communicators. Being a good communicator is critical in managing a high-demand parent.

- Never take it personally. Recognize that this person is likely having difficulties with similar themes in many other spheres of life. It’s not about you. It’s about this person’s prickly personality. This will help shield you from becoming emotionally reactive or stressed.

- When an issue hits the fan, listen, don’t argue. Say, “It sounds like you’re very concerned about this,” or, “Do you mind filling me in on your thoughts on how we can better deal with this?” Show that you are paying heed to their feelings. In turn, the parent will finishing venting sooner and be more receptive to what you or others have to say.

- Ask for clarification. Making sure you’ve heard the person correctly goes a long way in keeping communication clear. “So, if I’ve got this right, it sounds like you’re saying that we need to take another look at this approach that we are pursuing.” Or, “Just to be sure we’re on the same page, are you saying that you think we need to change course in order for us to cut through this problem?” This technique gives the parent a chance to confirm that you’ve heard them correctly or refine their message. It will also mollify the parent sooner, giving you a speedier opening to get to your objectives.
In a stalemate, rely on the old standby, ‘We don’t have to decide this now.’ Or, ‘Let’s sleep on it and get back to it later.’ Or, ‘Let me give that some thought and revisit it next week.’

Say your message in as few words as possible. Brevity is better heard and remembered.

Don’t repeat yourself. Even if you don’t get an acknowledgment from this difficult parent that, don’t try to drive your point home by saying it again a different way. You could say it 50 times and be there all day and a stubborn person probably will never meet you half way.

Periodically ask, ‘Am I making sense?’ This lets the touchy parent know you are just as interested their input than in being heard or being right.

Maintain an ‘open door’ policy. When parents, particularly difficult personality types, feel that you are approachable, they are more likely to keep the lines of communication flowing and less likely to let things reach boiling point vent with others not immediately connected with the issue; this is when rumours start. When teachers are available, parents are less likely to take advantage of that policy, particularly if the teacher adopts good communication skills to get an issue on the table so that both parties can quickly move on.
Issues / incident / crisis communication

Let’s now turn to the second part of my presentation – the management of an incident, issue or crisis.

I want to play for you two television news interviews arising from two different issues or crises.

The first of these happened just this year in Memphis, Tennessee. A drug dealer, trying to evade police, barged into a day-care centre.

Here’s the live television interview. Listen closely to the child-care director, Terry Oliver.

**PLAY TERRY OLIVER, DIRECTOR OF A DAY-CARE CENTRE**

What did you think? Yes. She definitely got messages. Think, though, about the audiences who would be especially interested in what she has to say.

The centre had a system that could have prevented the man from entering but did not use it. Why? Ms Oliver says that the centre is “a viable business”. That message was repeated frequently, as was, *Our staff perfectly executed our plan.*

No one, child or adult, was hurt, Ms Oliver says. But, were they just lucky?

How would parents of the children in this day-care centre feel, knowing the door never had to be opened at all? How about prospective parents? Can a day-care centre put business ahead of safety? Especially when there obviously was enough forethought to keep the door locked and have an intercom. Indeed, is it best characterised as a business – certainly not if it was a school?

This is a perfect example of just how important it is to first identify your audiences is before you develop messaging and open your mouth. Maybe Ms Oliver was not telling the truth. Is there not the possibility that the safety protocol was not activated and she was covering up – why did they decide to install an intercom, anyway?
Ms Oliver’s approach in the interview was tactically strong and executed with strength and grace but was strategically flawed—fundamentally corrupt, even. She would not be able to keep this up in the face of prolonged public scrutiny. I think it is transparently self-serving and speaks over her audiences. She should have told the truth.

Here’s another. This occurred in 2006 at the Beaconsfield Mine, Tasmania, when miner Larry Knight was killed and two others Todd Russell and Brant Webb were trapped underground for almost three weeks.

Hundreds of media converged on Beaconsfield and this news conference was conducted the day before Todd and Brant were rescued. The interview is with Mine Manager Matthew Gill.

PLAY MATTHEW GILL

Discussion—the word he wouldn’t utter, the response to Richard Carlton’s last question, stop when answered, start with prepared statement, one question at a time, use own language, control expectation, pause, terminate properly, people first.

No two issues or crises are ever the same. You cannot plan a set-piece media response for every crisis or issue that may confront your school.

There are, however, guiding principles to help prepare your school and its people and help present your school and your information in the media and to your audiences. None of this guarantees that you will emerge unscathed.

Always remember that the media affects public perception. Perception may not be accurate but it is the truth. Your approach to dealing with the media must, therefore, be organised, disciplined, assertive and timely.

Perhaps the most important thing to note in advance of an emergency, crisis or issue is that good and clever schools build public goodwill every day of every week of every year. You should communicate with your audiences continuously to build a reservoir of goodwill and understanding. It is all about establishing and maintaining your reputation. At the outside of an incident try to keep people informed ahead of media coverage:

- Staff—I talk to them immediately—they must never hear anything second-hand or from outsiders
• Parents and other such stakeholders and audiences

• AISSA or anyone else that might be approached for comment or endorsement

• Neighbours

• Local media

• Religious leaders, civic leaders and influencers

• Authorities

All of this helps to create an environment of trust and expectation in which what you say in an emergency or crisis will be received, considered and acted upon.

DEVELOPING A STRUCTURED APPROACH

The structure of an emergency/crisis/issues communication management should enable a school to take the initiative, control the information flow, tell the story the way it wants it told and tell it first.

1. Be prepared
Nominate an Issues Management Communication Team (IMCT). Its membership typically will be drawn from the principal, school chair or nominee, relevant senior managers, communication adviser (internal and/or external consultant) and legal counsel.

2. Get the facts
Find out what has happened, why, its impact and what is being or can be done.

3. Take control of the information flow
Centralise all information through the IMCT. Appoint one spokesperson and make sure there is one back-up in the event of unavailability. The spokesperson needs all current information. S/he must be accessible to media. Make sure media know how to reach them. Make sure that media see the spokesperson as the best, reliable source of information. Do not allow the spokesperson to be intimidated or unduly influenced by legal counsel or organisational managers. The IMCT decides what is to be released to media.
4. Take the initiative
Don’t wait for media to ask. Tell the story yourself.

**DISCUSSION:** Why?
If you tell it right and tell it first, it will very likely be reported accurately. If you are not first, others will speculate in your absence.

5. If there is bad news, tell it all and tell it fast
Don’t string out bad news. It chips away at your credibility. If you try to withhold some bad information, it almost certainly will eventually come out and consign you to the death of a thousand cuts.

6. Tell it straight
Tell it like it is. Be credible. Don’t create grounds for media to dissect what you say or challenge your qualifications. If you have made a mistake, make an apology but don’t make excuses.

7. Tell what you know when you know
Don’t wait to cross every “T” and dot every “I”. Events unfold too rapidly. If you miss a chance to make your point because you don’t have all the facts, the chance may be missed for ever. Don’t worry about information changing. If you wait for perfection in information, it may never come. It is okay to say to media that ‘this is the situation right now... I will update you and keep you informed as it develops’.

8. Let it be known what you are doing to fix the situation
When there is a problem, the public wants to know what is being done and whether someone is taking responsibility. Once they know that, they will almost invariably vest confidence in the leader. Keep telling people that you are responsible, accountable and fixing it.

9. Take the story to your key audiences
Make sure that your staff, employees, parents, community, peak associations and suppliers hear it first from you. Don’t rely on media to carry your message. Let your key audiences judge the media coverage against what you already have told them.

10. Do what is right
People will trust you and give you the benefit of the doubt if they think you are doing the right thing.
Let’s now look at some first points and rules to guide your conduct and that of your school when dealing with media during a major issue.

**Think before you speak**
Everything you say to a reporter can be quoted. Do not start speaking until you know what you are talking about and what you want to say. Know your agenda and your objective before you open your mouth. Work out your agenda and your objective quickly because you do need to speak. The leader must be seen.

**Be honest**
You do not have to tell everything. Everything you say must be the truth.

**Show compassion**
If someone has been killed, injured, hurt or suffered in any way, express sorrow and empathy. You do not want to admit liability but you must show humanity.

**Don’t be defensive**
If you are defensive, you look guilty.

**Stay cool**
If you lose your temper, it shows and it says something that you don’t want to convey. A reporter is neither friend nor foe. Think of media as a conduit to your audience.

**The pause isn’t yours**
If you need to take a breath or think for a few seconds before answering, do it. A brief silence is vastly preferable to a damaging statement. The pause belongs to the interviewer, not you.

**Watch your body language**
Faces and body language convey emotion and can either prejudice or reveal more than what you say. If you are seated, lean forward and pitch your face into the interview. Maintain eye contact with the reporter. Never look at a camera lens. Ignore it. Be pleasant, no matter how provocative the question. The reporter simply is doing a job.

**Be human**
People don’t believe large organisations. People believe people.
Show that you care
First impressions count. Media communication is no different. Make sure everyone knows that you care and will take positive action.

Think like your audience
You will know your audiences a lot better than the media does. Use this to your advantage. When you speak to media, speak to your audience and remember that the impression you convey is far more important than being right.

Stick to your values
Always remember what it is for which you and your school stand. Your first responsibility in the media must always be to your constituency, community and those who rely upon you.

Do the right thing
You must want to do the right thing before you can talk about it. If you want positive media publicity, make sure that you warrant it.
IN SUMMARY… A TEN-POINT CHECKLIST

Always remember that journalists and their editors are used to crises and emergencies. They report on them all the time. It often is what defines news. Media know what they want and how to get it. You may have had very little, if any, experience.

Here are 10 points against which to checklist in your dealings with the media in an emergency, crisis or major issue.

1. Prepare a concise media crisis/emergency communication plan. It should briefly outline how you will handle the media during the first hours. Share it with those who need it.

2. Nominate one spokesperson and one back-up. This essential to consistency of message.

3. Brainstorm up to five to 10 potential issues or crises. The leadership of the school should briefly discuss and record how they would deal with each. Notate also clear processes on who needs to be told and kept informed. This must be part of a structured incident communication plan but keep it tight and easy to enact.

4. Confront the issue. Don’t hide. Face media as quickly as possible and openly. It might be the one time that you least want to speak to media but it is the one time that you must.

5. Have all the facts. Have around you a team that can gather and marshal information.

6. Deal with every media question. That does not mean giving the answer they might want. Return media calls promptly.

7. Never lie. One lie destroys all media credibility for ever.

8. Don’t babble.

9. Never speak off the record. If you can’t say it on the record, why say it at all? Don’t speculate. Avoid jargon.

10. Speak to your audience, not your peers.
REVIEW OF GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- Put people first
- Deal with the issue quickly
- Speak with one voice
- Reinforce the school’s values in all communications
- Be forthcoming
- Be assertive
- Show compassion
- Focus on the most important aspects
- Demonstrate that you are moving to resolution
- If you don’t know, say so. Do not speculate or guess
- Do not blame
- Inform the school community—internal and external
- Use identical messages for all audiences
- Respect the media’s legitimate duty to inform the public
SUMMARY

Preparation

- There is no excuse for lack of preparation
- You can buy time from the media. Do not respond immediately

Simplicity

- The ‘keep it simple’ principle
- Don’t swamp the media with volumes of information. It is more likely to turn the media off or confuse them
- Keep your message simple. Whether you are writing a media release, or preparing for an interview, your message should get to the point

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