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Improving Media Relations

The media is only interested in reporting the bad things that happen in our schools." "Bad news sells newspapers. That's why they never write about the good things that we do in our schools." "The news media purposefully misquotes us." "No matter how many times we call the newspaper to tell them of the good things we're doing, they never show up unless there's a problem." These are examples of the responses educators often give when asked about their relationship with the news media. It is clear to see that very few educators consider the news media to be their closest allies. In fact, in many cases the news media is seen as the enemy.

This chapter is designed to dispel what is often a great misconception about the news media and the important role it plays in maintaining positive, productive school-community relations. It is written to show that school leaders can help their schools in dramatic ways by refusing to adopt a defeatist attitude when dealing with members of print, audio, and video media. Finally, this chapter will demonstrate how school leaders can and should use the news media as an ally in spreading the good news about education. It all begins with a change in attitude, though. In order to cultivate positive relationships with individuals who report education news to your community, you must first accept that these individuals want to report events as accurately as possible. You must understand things from their point of view, and you must refuse to accept the negative feelings that so many educational colleagues have regarding the so-called media monster.

It may appear as though this chapter ignores those rare situations in which the media descends upon a school rapidly and in mass. These times, known as crisis situations, require even more skill and careful planning, for they do not allow educators to take time to think and craft a careful response. For this reason, they are omitted from this chapter and are, instead, the subjects of Chapter 10.

All the News That's Fit to Print

Although there are some general guidelines that are applicable to relationships with a variety of news media sources, the focus here is on working with the press. Although our means of communication continue to develop and change rapidly, the newspaper business remains one of the major sources of information about schools that typical taxpayers receive. By following the communication tips suggested throughout this book, the best school leaders will give taxpayers in their communities many other means for receiving this information. However, as many studies continue to demonstrate, local newspapers remain a prime source of information about our schools. As many people believe, this will become even truer in the future as the number of taxpayers with children in our schools decreases. It is really quite simple. The astute school leader must develop skills for working with members of the print media in order to increase the likelihood that the information printed is accurate and beneficial to the community.

When the Reporter Initiates the Contact

Being an effective school administrator is a difficult and time-consuming undertaking. As such, there are many occasions in which a newspaper reporter may contact the school leader at a very inconvenient time. This brings up a dilemma. If the busy administrator refuses to speak with the reporter, then the reporter may be forced to write a story with less than accurate information. If, on the other hand, the administrator agrees to speak with the reporter in the middle of a chaotic day, then the chance of the administrator speaking inaccurately increases as well. For this reason, it is vitally important that the administrator be open and honest in confronting this dilemma. Comments such as, "Gee, Hannah, you caught me in the middle of several things that are demanding my immediate attention. Could I call you back later this afternoon?" are very appropriate and far better than saying, "I'm too busy to speak with you now." Although both comments deliver the message that the reporter caught you at a very inconvenient time, the first one demonstrates far more commitment to the importance of the reporter's questions than does the second one. It is perfectly acceptable to let news reporters know that you are extremely busy and unable to speak with them at the moment. It is unacceptable and unwise, however, to lead reporters to conclude that you do not think their questions are important.

After all, news reporters have legal rights to much of the information they ask for. Because school districts rely on public funds for support, newspapers have as much of a right to report news relative to schools as they do to report about any other government agency. Failing to recognize this and give reporters the information they desire has caused many school administrators unnecessary grief. In addition to the harm they have caused to the

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relationship between their school and the newspaper, these administrators have shown the public that they are dishonest and that they have some information to hide.

Sometimes, honestly telling a reporter that you are extremely busy at the moment but that you will call back later is not enough to delay the conversation, as you would like to. Again, it is important to try and understand the reporter's dilemma before rushing to judgment. The reporter may be facing a deadline, and may, therefore, be in need of an immediate response. However, the question he or she needs a response to may be one that you want to ponder for a moment to ensure that you give the best response possible. This creates our second dilemma.

Because I am not overly astute at giving accurate, thoughtful answers off the top of my head, when I was a school principal I always liked to have a couple of minutes to formulate my response to a reporter's questions. Knowing that in virtually every instance the reporter's deadline was not so imminent that he/she could not afford me a few minutes, but that he/she rarely recognized this, I always instructed the office staff to respond to a reporter's telephone call in a manner similar to this: "I'm sure the principal would be pleased to speak with you. Although he is unavailable at the moment, I will give him this message and I assure you that he will call you back within a few minutes if at all possible. Could I tell him what your call is in reference to?"

Notice the polite tone of that response. It lets reporters know that the principal considers their telephone calls to be important. It promises reporters that their telephone calls are given top priority. Furthermore, and arguably of greatest importance, a response such as the example above gives the principal time to thoughtfully formulate a response to the reporters' questions. Then, when the principal does return the telephone call, he/she is in much more control of the conversation than he/she would be if they had been caught off guard. The principal is now much more likely to give an accurate response, and except in the most extreme circumstances, the reporter is also likely to meet the imposed deadline.

An important caveat in being open and honest is to be sure that you deliver on what you promise. With this in mind it is critical to remember that office staff members should be strongly admonished not to promise a return telephone call if the principal is going to be occupied for a prolonged period of time. Making such a promise but then failing to follow through can be far more damaging to the school's relationship with the media than simply stating up front that the principal will be unavailable for a prolonged period of time. Simply put, if you or one of your staff members say you will return the telephone call, then you must do as you have promised.

A third dilemma that educators often find themselves in involves a newspaper reporter asking them a question for which they do not know the answer. This is obviously damaging in a situation in which the educator ought to know the answer, such as an incident involving a student injury while the

educator in question was in charge. Sometimes, however, the educator does not know the answer to the reporter's question because the reporter is asking the wrong person the question. An example would be if a reporter contacted a school principal to discuss the results of recent statewide standardized testing, but the principal had not yet received the scores. In some school districts there may be a delay between the time in which the central office administration receives information such as test scores and the time in which such information is passed on to the building level administration. In a situation like this one, the building level administrator could not possibly comment on the scores. This does not mean that the administrator should hide from the reporter's question. Instead, he/she must choose between a couple of options, all of which necessitate honesty and openness. Either the administrator can tell the reporter that they have not yet seen the scores but they will call the reporter as soon as they do, or the administrator can refer the reporter to an appropriate person at the central office who has already seen the scores. The specific response given depends largely on the school system's organizational structure, the wishes of the superintendent and board, and whether or not the communications plan is centralized, decentralized, or coordinated, as discussed in Chapter 1. The significant thing to remember is that the reporter is entitled to a response.

When the School Leader Initiates the Contact

Being proactive, that is, taking initiative and not first reacting to situations, is almost always preferred over being reactive. Although it is obvious that many situations require a reaction from the school leader, many reactions can be avoided if the school leader is aware of everything that is going on around him or her and is proactive in dealing with situations before somebody else brings them forward. This concept or paradigm is obviously applicable in dealing with members of the news media. Of particular focus here, let us once again examine our dealings with newspaper reporters.

When asked to give advice to new or aspiring school administrators, I always instruct them to make contacts with local newspaper reporters and to learn their names so that they may be addressed in familiar, friendly terms. Remember, as mentioned earlier, all school leaders must begin looking at members of the media as friends. Local newspaper reporters perform a valuable service to your school's community. Additionally, because they have the power to reach so many people in the community with their words, it is more than reasonable to assume that everybody wants the reporter's words to be accurate. By establishing a friendship with reporters, the school leader is offering to assist them in making their words about the school as accurate and informative as possible. This requires a high degree of proactivity. A savvy school leader cannot afford to wait for the newspaper reporters to initiate contact so that they may be assisted in reporting accurate information.

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Because in many cases school leaders do not treat the reporters as friends, reporters are not likely to call just to ensure that their information is as accurate as possible. Instead, if school leaders wish to have some influence over the information reporters have printed in the newspaper, then they must be proactive in communicating with reporters on a regular basis.

As mentioned earlier, many educators regularly complain that newspapers are only interested in publishing bad news. Additionally, these educators bemoan, newspapers never give coverage to the good things happening in our schools, even after we initiate the contact and inform them of positive events. Although there is some truth to the fact that bad news often helps sell newspapers, it is both inaccurate and unproductive to take strongly the position that newspapers are not interested in our good news. Instead of taking such a position, which is not likely to increase our schools' positive news coverage anyway, school leaders are well served once again to try and understand the position that reporters are in and the highly competitive business of selling newspapers.

With these points in mind, school administrators need to be proactive and contact their local newspaper every time something is happening in the school that they believe warrants press coverage. We must all understand that the media will be unable and perhaps unwilling to give news coverage to all of these events. However, by contacting them every time something newsworthy is happening in their school, administrators can dramatically increase the odds that their school will at least receive some positive media coverage.

Involving Staff Members in the Process

With all of the tasks that school leaders must attend to, is it really possible to contact the media every time something newsworthy is happening in our schools? The answer to this question would most likely be "No" if the school leader were responsible for uncovering all of the newsworthy events and singlehandedly communicating them to newspaper reporters. This is not the case if the school leader involves other members of the school community in this important aspect of creating positive school-community relations.

Teachers can be involved in this plan in the following way. Each month the principal could pass out a form (Exhibit 7-1) to teachers asking for a list of upcoming newsworthy events in their classroom. This form should then be returned to the principal by the specified date so it can subsequently be forwarded to local newspaper contacts. Depending on the arrangements made with the newspaper reporters, the principal or his/her designee may need to prioritize all forms received before sending them to the reporters. However, in my experiences, reporters are quite happy to receive the information in any way the school will provide it. These people really do want to write newsworthy stories. Newspapers with blank pages rarely stay in business!

Exhibit 7-1 Newsworthy Events Reporting Form

Please list any events taking place in your classroom during the next month that you feel deserve local newspaper coverage. Include a brief description of the activity, the location, date, and time it will be taking place, and contact information so the reporter can easily reach you.

1. Event: _____

2. Location: _____

3. Date and Time: _____

4. Contact Information: _____

A similar form could be given to other members of the school community. The kitchen staff could report such events as nutrition month, special menus designed by students, or human-interest stories highlighting one of the cafeteria staff members. The custodial staff could report on maintenance upgrades or students caught doing their part to keep the school clean and attractive. Finally parents, who are usually community members themselves and consequently read the local paper, can highlight upcoming PTO, PTA, or Parent Advisory meetings. The sky is the limit!

If it is up to the school principal to generate all of the information, as it is in many of our schools, then it is easy to see why such information does not get communicated to the news media. When the principal involves all members of the school community, though, so much more information can be collected. People responsible for certain areas in the school think of newsworthy events that the principal may otherwise miss. Additionally, the responsibility for collecting information is shared among all stakeholders. This helps reinforce the point that school-community relations are everybody's responsibility. Finally, the news media will be flooded with more information than they can possibly print. This leaves them in control of reporting on events based on their newspaper space availability. They are much more likely to fill in a small part of a page with a nice picture and a caption if you have informed them in advance of the opportunity than they would be if they needed to discover it on their own. They are likewise more likely to devote a major section of their newspaper to an event that you informed them of in advance.

SHOWCASE

Working with the Media

This story comes from David Conrad, who served as Music Director for the Manteno School District in Manteno, Illinois.

"We recruit parent volunteers from our music program to work with the news media. They send press releases about concerts, fundraisers, and special events. They have also written feature stories about the performing groups and student achievements. Generally, the publicity parent will work with me using e-mail. Sometimes, we write the copy together. At other times, they simply ask me to proofread the release and check for accuracy. In both cases, we write back and forth over e-mail until we are satisfied with the work. I recently created a media web site to train future volunteers. I explain how to write a press release, how to 'sell' the story, and how to deal with photos, interviews, and quotes. Media relations have become an integral part of our booster group's culture. Parents have provided valuable help to me and our school, and they understand the value of media relations to our organization."

A key point not to be missed here is that this information should be sent to the newspaper at regularly scheduled intervals. Whether it is once a month or every other week is not as important as the fact that the newspaper reporters can anticipate the arrival of your information when planned. Nothing is more reassuring to the local education reporter than knowing there is a school they can count on regularly to send in newsworthy information. The early bird, as the proverb goes, gets the worm. Therefore, it is equally important to communicate events that your school has planned before other schools in your community send such information to the newspaper. Examples of occasions when this is important are the annual red ribbon campaign events and holiday concerts and pageants.

The News Release

Another important tool in an administrator's school-community relations arsenal is the news release. News releases give newspaper editors all of the facts they need in a concise page that is easy and quick to read. As is the case with the form depicted in Exhibit 7-1, a goal of an effective news release is to make it as easy as possible for the reporter or editor to include

the information you sent in an upcoming issue of their newspaper. Therefore, the news release should be written to include only the necessary information. Who, what, where, when, why, and how should all be addressed in the initial paragraph. Contact information, should the reporter or editor need to gather further information, should be clear and apparent.

For specific information about how the newspapers in your local community like news releases to look, don't be afraid to ask the editor. Usually, the editorial staff of a newspaper is more than happy to discuss information with school officials that will create a better match between what the school system sends to the paper and how the editors like newspaper copy to look. The following are a few generally acceptable rules:

- The story should be prepared on white or light paper, 8½ by 11 inches in size.
- News releases should be typed, double- or triple-spaced, on one side of the paper.
- The date that the release is being sent and the date you wish it to be published should appear at the top of the page.
- The name of the person sending the news release, the person to contact for more information, and the school name, address, and telephone number should appear at the top of the first page.
- Copy should begin about one-third of the way down the page so that enough space is available for the editor to write in a headline.
- The news release should be limited to two pages unless unusual circumstances are present.

Exhibits 7-2 and 7-3 show examples of news releases. Notice how in both of these examples all pertinent information relative to the event being discussed is shared in the initial paragraph. This serves the same purpose as the form in Exhibit 7-1 in that it gives the newspaper reporter enough information to decide if coverage of the event is warranted. It also serves other purposes, though. If written well, the news release can stand alone as a short filler, or it can be accompanied by a photograph for an even larger human-interest story.

Communicating through Local Radio

In many communities across this country, there are local radio stations. Whenever I travel, I like to tune in to these stations to learn something about the community I am visiting. When I do this, I rarely hear anything being



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Exhibit 7-2 News Release—Upcoming Event



Rome Free Academy

500 Roaming Lane
Pride, PA 14352
(315) 336-0071
(315) 338-4260

Mr. Roaralot, Principal
Mrs. Kingofthejungle, Asst. Principal
Mr. Wanna Playagame, Activities Director

February 26, 2010
TO: Daily News Editor
FROM: Usta Roaralot, Principal
RE: News Release

Mr. Jeffrey Simba's sixth grade technology class will launch the rockets they have built Wednesday, March 15, to celebrate the completion of their unit on rocket science. The explosion of fun will take place on the schools football field from 1:30 PM until 3:15 PM

If you are interested in obtaining more information regarding this special event please contact me, either at school (315) 336-0071 or at home (315) 337-8235. You may also contact Mr. Jeffery Simba at school between 8:00 AM and 10:15 AM.

broadcast about local schools in the area. The main exception to this is the advertisement of local high school sports competitions. One reason this may be so is that school leaders are often unaware of the methods for communicating via this exciting, widely tuned in to medium.

Listening to the radio does not require a considerably heightened level of attentiveness. Many people actually use the radio as a background device, similar to what is known as white noise. Reading the newspaper, on the

Exhibit 7-3 News Release—Past Event

Clover Middle School

2358 Flower Lane
Daisy, VA 25316
(804) 569-8590 Fax (804) 569-8591
rosedaily@pasturek12.org



DATE: January 22, 2010
TO: Media
FROM: Rose Daily
RE: Media Release—Breakfast with Dr. Carnation
For immediate broadcast/publication

Dr. Robert Carnation, superintendent of Pasture County Schools, served breakfast to the teachers and staff of Clover Middle School on Monday, January 21, to celebrate Clover's 100% participation in the county's United Way campaign. This is the fourth year in a row that Clover has had 100% participation.

Breakfast fare included eggs, bacon, fresh fruit, freshly baked cinnamon rolls, juice, and coffee. Dr. Carnation was assisted in the kitchen by other central office personnel.

.....
For verification or additional information, please contact Rose Daily during school hours, 7:30 AM to 3:30 PM.

other hand, does require a bit more consciousness on the part of the reader. In Chapter 8 the concept of three different kinds of readers, ranging from those who read every word at one end of the spectrum to those who briefly skim through pictures and headlines on the other, will be explored in greater depth. For now let us suffice it to say that newspaper reading, for many individuals, requires more of the participant than does listening to the radio. Although it is true that most people listen to the radio with a different level

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of awareness than they employ when they read newspapers, the fact is a vast majority of Americans tune in to radio broadcasts on a daily basis. For this reason alone, radio is a medium for communication that school leaders ought to pay attention to.

Spreading the Good News

One way in which school leaders utilize the power of radio is as a means for sharing upcoming school events with the community. Holiday concerts, school-wide fundraisers, academic fairs, and athletic competitions are just some of the events that can be broadcast through radio. Most radio station program directors are more than willing to air announcements of these events at no cost to the school district. This is particularly so with radio stations that market themselves as being voices of the community. Check with your local radio station program director regarding their particular policies for airing these announcements.

Public Service Announcements

Public service announcements, similar in their intent to commercials, are short pieces designed to inform and sometimes persuade the public to feel or act in a particular way. Most radio stations, much like they do with less formal announcements like those mentioned in the preceding section, will air public service announcements written by local school districts free of charge.

Public Service Announcements (PSAs) can be used for the following purposes:

- To inform the audience about a particular idea or belief of the school community
- To conduct a campaign to generate understanding and/or support of a project requiring community support or participation
- To advertise an event honoring educators, such as American Education Week
- To highlight a school program or series of programs

When writing a PSA, it is important that it be written exactly the way it should be broadcast. Because the radio announcer will most likely be reading the PSA over the air in the precise way it was written, it is wise to read PSAs you have written yourself to see how they sound. Practicing with an audience, even if it consists of one loyal advisor, is excellent advice. PSAs are rarely edited by radio station personnel before they are read over the air.

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PSAs are similar to news releases in that they contain pertinent information (who, what, where, when, why, and how). It is not as critical that these things are addressed at the very beginning though, as is the case with a news release. This is due to the fact that the tone of a PSA should be conversational. A conversational tone permits the writer to exercise a little bit more poetic license, making the PSA sound more like it is part of a conversation than a quick, to the point news release sounds.

The most effective PSAs are written in simple sentences, free of jargon. The most important information, such as dates, times, and contact people, should be repeated more than once in the announcement. It is also wise to write more than one PSA about the same event, each one of a different length than the other one. Giving a radio station a 10-second PSA and a 30-second PSA about the same event, for example, increases the likelihood that they will have an opportunity to use at least one of them. Only sending them a 30-second announcement greatly diminishes your chances of having it read, particularly if the station has only 20 seconds of free airtime in which to make the announcement. To assist in determining the length of your PSAs as you begin writing them, use these approximate numbers of words:

10-second PSA – 25 words

20-second PSA – 45–50 words

30-second PSA – 55–75 words

60-second PSA – 130–150 words

Exhibits 7-4 and 7-5 show examples of PSAs of varying length. Notice that both of these examples are double-spaced, typed in all upper-case letters. This is one additional step that makes PSAs easier for the radio announcer to read.

Exhibit 7-4 10- Second PSA

ON WEDENSDAY, DECEMBER 15 AT 7:30 PM, HARRISON
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL LOCATED ON SYCAMORE STREET WILL
PERFORM THEIR ANNUAL HOLIDAY PROGRAM. THE EVENT IS
OPEN TO ALL COMMUNITY MEMBERS.

Exhibit 7-5

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Exhibit 7-5 30 -Second PSA

ON WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 15 AT 7:30 PM, THE STUDENTS OF HARRISON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL WILL PERFORM THEIR ANNUAL HOLIDAY PROGRAM. THIS YEAR'S PROGRAM, ENTITLED "THIS IS OUR STORY" WILL INCLUDE A SPECIAL VISIT FROM SANTA CLAUS HIMSELF. THE EVENT, SURE TO PUT ALL WHO ATTEND IN THE HOLIDAY SPIRIT, IS OPEN TO ALL MEMBERS OF THE COMMUNITY. HARRISON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL IS LOCATED AT 4562 SYCAMORE STREET, BETWEEN 2ND AND 3RD AVENUES.

Lights, Camera, Action!

Although not routinely utilized in all communities, many school leaders have known the benefits of television for delivering messages to their constituents for some time now. These individuals have utilized the television medium for public service announcements, much like those broadcast via radio and for more personalized opportunities to be interviewed on the air. For the latter purpose, television cannot only be a powerful communication tool, but one that requires careful preparation and attention as well. Unlike with radio and print media in which your words are all that is important, on television appearance is significant as well.

To enhance this point, consider what we already know about nonverbal communication. As discussed in Chapter 4, most of what we communicate is done through nonverbal means. Therefore, it is critical that school leaders are highly aware of their nonverbal behaviors during a television interview. Although the message you are attempting to communicate may be a good and worthwhile one, negative nonverbal communication can severely inhibit its communication. This is especially true if the television personality conducting the interview is respected and admired by the public. In these cases, establishing positive rapport with the interviewer and appearing comfortable in his/her presence is critical. Because viewers trust the interviewer, they will be much more likely to trust and be receptive to somebody whom they see as a friend of the interviewer.

Maintaining an open posture, as discussed in Chapter 4, will help to create the appearance that you are open and honest. Again, this is not suggested as a gimmick. You probably are a very open and honest person. Because so much is communicated through nonverbal means and because so many television viewers may not be at all familiar with you before they see you on the air, the suggestions made by your nonverbal gestures become that much more important.

Consider for a moment the presidential debates from the 2000 presidential election. Much of the public opinion about the two candidates generated by these debates was based, at least in part, on their nonverbal behavior. These behaviors became the parody of many late night comedians and comedy shows, such as *Saturday Night Live*. Al Gore was depicted as being smug and condescending, whereas President George W. Bush was shown to be confused. These descriptions of the two candidates may have been entirely unfair. However, in the television arena it's not just what you say, but how you say it that matters.

It is equally important, as is the case with PSAs, that the tone of your responses appear conversational. To calm nerves, many people decide that it would be best for them to read prepared statements. However, to the television viewer, this is considered impersonal. Television is a very personal medium. It is best to find other ways for relaxing and to respond to questions in a conversational tone. This is not to imply that it is unwise to prepare responses to questions that you expect to be asked. The reverse is actually the best advice. Just do not read your response verbatim to allow for a conversational, less formal tone to be maintained.

When considering the tone of your response, do not ignore your vocal tone and intonations. A monotone voice will almost guarantee that viewers will tune out. A voice with enthusiasm and appropriate vocal inflections, on the other hand, will be far more likely to hold the viewer's interest. When you add some volume behind your voice, it gives the impression that you really believe in and mean what you are saying. This dramatically increases the likelihood that other people will believe in your message.

The old saying that you never get a second chance to make a first impression is worth acknowledging here. The first impression television viewers have of you will often be their lasting impression. Therefore, when asked a question, make sure that you are able to get to the main point of your response within 15 seconds, or preferably within 10 seconds. That is often all the time the viewer will allow you before deciding that you really do not know what you are talking about. Continuing along the lines of making a positive first impression, consider very carefully what you wear for a television appearance or interview.

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You Look Marvelous

Although it may not be fair to judge a book by the appearance of its cover, many television viewers will judge you, at least in part, based on your personal appearance. Consider the following advice, offered by the National Association of Broadcasters (1984):

- Wear suits or dresses of soft, medium colors. Avoid sharply contrasting patterns and colors.
- Keep jewelry simple and uncluttered.
- Men may require a little powder on a bald head or on the face if their skin is exceptionally oily.
- Women should avoid heavy makeup and the overuse of lipstick.
- To relax throat muscles and nerves before going on air, participants should yawn or stretch their body as they would if they were tired.
- Avoid unnecessary movements or gestures. These may attract the attention of the viewer and distract from what is being said or done.
- Move more slowly than normal—quick hand and body movements are difficult for the camera to follow.
- Also look, listen, and speak to the person conducting the interview. An exception would be if you have a key point to say directly to the viewing audience. In that case, it is appropriate to look directly into the camera.
- Resist the temptation to look at yourself on the TV monitor in the studio. This can be very distracting to the viewer.

Although fashions may change and what is out of style one day may be all the rage the next, the suggestions above are far more timeless. Although it is perfectly acceptable to acquiesce a bit to current fashions, it is unwise to deviate much from what is customarily acceptable as a more conservative form of dress. It is important to note also that additional information about what types of clothing are appropriate for the market in your area is wise to get from the program director of the television station conducting your interview or coordinating your appearance.

Exhibit 7-6 summarizes key points to remember when making television appearances.

Exhibit 7-6 Eight Keys for Successful Television Appearances

1. Dress neatly and in soft, medium colors.
2. Sit up straight and do not squirm in the chair.
3. Enunciate clearly; do not hurry through your responses.
4. Avoid all educational jargon.
5. Speak in simple, straightforward words and sentences.
6. Look directly at the person interviewing you unless you look at the camera to make a point directly to the audience.
7. Be enthusiastic, pleasant, and positive.
8. Act naturally. Remember, you are not playing a role.

Do Not Feed the Monsters

Far more often than not, the media is not the enemy. Instead, they are a collection of responsible individuals charged with keeping the community informed about our schools. Because we all care so deeply about our schools, we probably want the public to be very well informed about what we do and how we do it. Remember this always when dealing with the media and you will find your dealings to be far more pleasant than if you approach the media as an adversary.

This being said, there are certainly times in which members of the media do not behave well and act as the monsters many educators claim them to be. Because it is difficult to ever completely change another person's behavior, we are wise to simply learn how to deal with this monstrous demeanor. In attempting to do so, ask yourself the following question: "How can I tame the media monster so that my school and its accomplishments are represented fairly and accurately to the community?"

Be Proactive

When thinking of the role proactivity plays in successful school-community relations, we often focus on concepts such as "taking initiative," "not reacting," and "being forward thinking." Each and every one of these ideas is a powerful and important aspect of proactive behavior. As such, school leaders are prudent to incorporate them into their daily interactions with the media and with everybody else in their school communities. However,

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being proactive in all of its forms involves even more than these ideas. Being fully proactive, that is, devoting our own selves to a true manifestation of the meaning of proactive, does so much more in assisting educators who are forced to deal with the occasionally monstrous media.

Stephen Covey, in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective Families* speaks of a time many years ago when he came upon a paragraph that profoundly influenced his understanding of the concept of proactivity:

Between stimulus and response, there is a space.

In that space lies our freedom and power to choose our response.

In our response lies our growth and our happiness. (Covey, 1997, p. 27)

If we examine this paragraph in light of the stress created when we are forced to deal with monstrous media members, it ought to become clear that the resulting stress we experience is a direct product of the choices we make. So, in order to deal effectively with the media and tame the monster when it rears its ugly head, educators must make good use of the *space* that Covey refers to.

Educators cannot control the attitudes and behaviors of the people they encounter on a regular basis. Nor can they control the ill-timed questions that may come from the media. They have complete control, however, of how they choose to respond to these stimuli. The freedom created by this choice ought to empower educators, not stifle them. For those who aspire to educational positions of leadership, as readers of this text most likely do, the imperative to be empowered is that much greater.

There is an old saying that you attract more flies with honey than you do with vinegar. When the media is behaving in a monstrous way, it may appear as though vinegar is running through their veins. Remembering that you have the choice to respond with honey and not the vinegar you have been fed is one more example of the power of proactivity.

Finally, to conclude the sermon about proactivity, a sermon that ought not be taken lightly, I ask you to examine one more reason why proactivity is a great aid in taming the media monster. As a school leader, you will undoubtedly experience moments where you will feel as though you have truly been attacked. Some of these moments, although we expect them to be less frequent, may come at the hands of the media. In their quest for a story, the media may lash out at you and bite like a snake. The human impulse in such instances is often to bite back. A proactive person resists this temptation for he or she knows that biting back will only make matters worse. Remember, it isn't the snake bite that does the serious damage; it's chasing the snake that drives the poison to the heart. Therefore, do not chase after individuals who cause you to feel angry. Take the bite, and move on.

We All Make Mistakes

Despite the best efforts of the members of the media and the school administration, there will be times when errors are made in news reports. These are not opportunities to say, "I knew those media people were out to get me"! They are, instead, times to contact the errant reporter and inform him/her of the mistake that was made. Good news reporters do not like mistakes to appear in their news stories any more than we do not like mistakes in our work. By making a personal contact to inform the reporter of the error, the wise administrator increases the likelihood that the error will be corrected and that future efforts will be avoided at all costs.

Parting Shots

The media, regardless of the demographics of your particular school community, are important parts of your community as a whole. This is true whether we enjoy positive relationships with them or not. Therefore, the best advice, followed by thousands of positive, proactive school leaders across

SHOWCASE

When the Media Gets it Wrong

This story comes from Dr. David W. Haney. "Following a school board meeting, the local newspaper introduced its article with a header that stated: 'Haney looking to curb summer school classes.' A review of the tape recording of the meeting verified that my report to the school board emphasized the need to complete an assessment of the summer programs to determine if some summer school programs were having a negative impact on enrollment during the regular school year. After consulting with the school board president, the determination was made to use the opportunity to strengthen relations with the editor of the newspaper rather than belittle the staff writer. We also shared the official minutes with the editor of the newspaper who acknowledged that the headline could leave the wrong impression. He asked me what I wanted him to do, and my response was to inform the reporters that they could call me at the office or at home to seek clarification or obtain additional information whenever the need arose. The decision to act in a positive manner paid off. Relations between the school district and newspaper strengthened; numerous times after that incident the editor wrote editorials supporting school board decisions."

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this country, is to embrace the media. Getting along with, respecting, and valuing the media can take school leaders far toward their quest to communicate positive things about their schools to the rest of their community. This is not to say that the media should not be admonished when they behave inappropriately. To the contrary, as leaders in the community, educators, particularly administrators, have an obligation to inform the media when they are out of line and are failing to accurately assess situations and provide the community with factual information. It is imperative, however, that school leaders perform this role in a manner that builds bridges and strengthens relationships. There are communication techniques and directives throughout this text that, if taken to heart, will assist educators greatly in this regard.

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Understand that different types of media require different techniques and methods for successful communication. Although all media in your community share a common obligation to serve the community as providers of information, the differences between print, radio, and television are great. As such, school leaders need to practice unfamiliar tasks like writing news releases, crafting PSAs, and preparing for interviews. Honing your skills in these areas will benefit you greatly as you ascend to even greater leadership roles within education. Do so while employing and adopting an attitude that the media is an ally. This is arguably the single best piece of advice in taming the media monster.

Finally, consider the dozen helpful tips from Ordovensky and Marx (1993). These twelve tips are alluded to throughout this section. Enumerated here, they underscore many significant points to remember. School leaders who utilize these tips will certainly enhance their school's relationship with the media.

1. Get to know the members of the media on a first-name basis.
2. Be readily available to reporters. Return telephone calls promptly.
3. Be honest, sincere, and straight in giving reporters the facts. Protect your credibility.
4. Extend reporters the same courtesies as you do other visitors.
5. Avoid educational jargon.
6. Be helpful, but don't suggest how the reporter should report the story.
7. Make the faculty, staff, and students available to reporters. (If students' names or photographs are to be used, be sure to obtain the parents' permission first.)
8. Give the media advance notice of newsworthy events.
9. Piggyback stories when possible. Pointing out another story besides the one the media will cover may pay off in an additional story being reported.
10. Nothing is ever "off the record."
11. Never ask the reporter to show you the story before it is published.
12. Take the time to say "Thank You" when your school gets good coverage.

Chapter Summary

- The idea that the media, as a whole, is only interested in communicating negative news about our schools is a grave misconception.
- A paradigm shift is needed to allow educational leaders to begin viewing members of the media as allies.
- In dealing with newspaper reporters, honesty really is the best policy.
- Much of the information that reporters request about our schools is information that they are entitled to have by law.
- Regularly sending information about school events to the newspaper in forms such as news releases can dramatically increase the likelihood that your school will receive increased press coverage.
- Communicating via radio is a rarely used, valuable tool for informing the community about your school.
- As with news releases, writing public service announcements requires skills that any educator can strengthen through practice.
- It is vitally important to consider body language, dress, and appearance while being interviewed for television.
- Educators must be proactive in dealing with any members of the media.
- Sometimes the media can be like a monster. Strong human relations skills and increased proactivity can tame this media monster.

CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

I Think It's True What They Say About the Squeaky Wheel

"You're just going to have to face it," teacher Sandra Miller said. "Even if you are the greatest principal in the state, you can't perform miracles. Locust Valley Elementary School has always gotten more press coverage than we have. There's no reason to think it will ever change."

As principal of Brownsville Elementary School, you fear that Ms. Miller may be right. For the past 4 years, you have tried diligently to lead Brownsville to greatness. Test scores had improved each year, parent involvement was at an all-time high, and your staff and students seemed more than content. Why hadn't the press noticed?

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As you ponder this, Superintendent Shirley appears in your office doorway. Superintendent Shirley never visits the schools. "What is he doing here, and what have I done wrong?" you wonder. The Superintendent breaks the silence.

"I want to begin by telling you how pleased I am with the progress you and your staff have made here at Brownsville. You all should be very proud of your accomplishments. I am concerned however, Superintendent Shirley continues, about the public perception of this school. It seems that every morning when I pick up the newspaper, I see a story about Locust Valley. Why can't I see a picture of a Brownsville student staring back at me each morning? Then maybe the rest of the community would know what a good place you've got here. Do you realize how important it is that we look good to the community?"

Questions for Analysis

1. What would be your initial response to Superintendent Shirley?
2. Describe steps you would take to increase the media coverage at Brownsville Elementary School.
3. What role could teacher, Sandra Miller play in your plan for improving media coverage?
4. Would Superintendent Shirley have a role?
5. How would you assess the degree to which your plan was successful? How would the success be made known to Superintendent Shirley?