

Marketing

By Geoff Barton

Which clown was it who said “There’s no such thing as bad publicity”?

I have a feeling John Prescott wouldn’t entirely agree, nor former retail tycoon Gerald Ratner, nor indeed the 25 or so headteachers estimated to have been sacked last year following bad Ofsted reports.

A better formulation might be: “All publicity is publicity”.

Whilst there might be a sense in this of Basil Fawcett’s “stating the bleeding obvious”, it’s an aphorism that we ignore at our peril.

What I mean is this. You can spend as much as you like on a fancy school brochure or – new trend – promotional DVD, but if local residents watch students pouring out of your gates in trainers, baseball caps and lighting up in a fog of cigarette smoke, then you’re unwittingly gaining some negative publicity. It’s publicity that we might not want but it is, nevertheless, publicity.

It's one of the first things you learn as a new headteacher – that there's a powerful symbolism for the local community and the staff and pupils at the school in showing that the place is under new management. Being visible at the least attractive school gates, being seen to bring the students on site on time and seeing them off site – all of this will send out important positive messages. It's a form of stealth public relations (PR), a way of trying to shape the perceptions of your community towards your school.

So one of the essential skills of the modern headteacher – alongside the zillion others not necessarily listed by the National College for School Leadership – is how to manage the public relations message rather than being buffeted by events and other people's perceptions.

For me the starting point is the recognition that almost everything we do in schools carries with it a message. Some of it we can control – such as press releases, parents' evenings, our website - and some of it feels beyond our control – such as pupils' behaviour on buses, closure because of snow, the cock-up of an examination board that rebounds on our students, and so on.

In this article, I'm going to suggest that we can - and should – control more of the community's perception than we might have thought. I'm also going to suggest that rather than being a peripheral part of the role of headship, managing PR is dead central. You can't afford to get it wrong too often.

And in an age of mixed messages about the status of schools – should we be competing with the school next door or working in collaboration? – you owe it to your students and parents to see that the school has the best possible public profile. Indeed, in some communities your survival may depend on it. This means getting in the local newspaper on a regular basis, but also managing the covert messages which define a school's reputation through hearsay and gossip.

In this article I focus on cover PR - what you can do to create a positive media profile for your school.

1 Make PR someone's responsibility

Some schools traditionally gave someone a management allowance for churning out regular press releases. In the new post TLR-era, that's hard to justify. It's also not necessarily the right approach. The trouble with

any such posts scattered across the staff – whether it’s publicity officer or literacy coordinator – is that they can create disparate and unconnected roles have little real impact. It makes it too easy for others to say that PR or literacy are someone else’s responsibility and to do nothing about them themselves.

With public relations, in particular, you can’t afford to reduce the role to an administrative one. It needs someone proactive, someone who has clout. This rather points to the headteacher, or another member of the leadership team where there is a pretty clear brief: get this school noticed for the right reasons as often as possible. At our place, this means every week. We aim to be in a newspaper or on radio with some reference to the work of our pupils or staff once a week. That, as you can imagine, doesn’t happen by accident.

2 Know your local media players

It’s essential therefore to be proactive. If you’re serious about wanting to raise the public profile of your school and to show it in a positive light, then you need to work at it. You need to know the names of the key reporters on your local newspapers and radio stations. You need their contact details in your mail address book. You need them on side.

When a recent, potentially-damaging story broke at our school, one deputy head said that he could hear the Barton wheels of spin grinding into gear. The final story proved to be something of a PR triumph for us because the reporters tend to be supportive of our work.

We have cultivated that relationship over a number of years. It's easy and mutually beneficial. For example, you might invite the local BBC radio reporter or newspaper journalists in to see the school at work (individually, of course, not as a group). Suggest some activities they might like to see. Give them a tour of the school. Use every opportunity to link your school with a national story. The media relies on an endless conveyor belt of topicality, so jump aboard. If there's a national campaign about healthy eating, show how your school links with it. If there is an emphasis on parent learning, suggest examples of the ways that your school works with parents. In other words, do some of the work on behalf of the local media: provide them with examples of good local practice which illuminate national stories. A very short and specific faxed or emailed press release on a topical issue can be a gift to a journalist – and in turn to you.

An effective school newsletter is essential and its influence cannot be underestimated. It is of course a powerful feel-good device for your parents and students, showcasing their achievements, keeping parents informed, sending out your key messages. It needs to have a simple but attractive format, some images, and text that is clearly aimed at a general audience (ie not too wordy, not academic, but light, entertaining and informative). It needs to carry a regular column by the headteacher.

But there's one other critical requirement of a newsletter: getting it read by opinion-formers. If your newsletter is printed every month, sent home by pupil post, and then forgotten, you're missing an opportunity. It needs a wider audience, a circulation list of key readers who may only be tenuously connected to the school. I'd suggest this list should include:

- Your governors
- Any sponsors or associated businesses
- All local media (newspapers, radio and television)
- Local councillors / the mayor
- Your local MP
- Anyone else who might play a key role in your community

With an easy-to-read format, lots of sub-headings, short paragraphs and occasional photographs, underpinned by a relentlessly upbeat tone, you'll find that a regular newsletter sends out powerful messages about your school. You'll also be surprised just how often the local media will pick up on issues, wishing to cover them in greater detail.

Make sure also that the newsletter appears on your website, so that parents who don't receive it through the "pupil post" are able to easily download it.

4 Be available for comment

The media is always up against deadlines, just as we are in schools where we are driven by a culture of end-of-lesson bells, report timetables, resignation dates. Yet the media find us relentlessly difficult to get a response from. Their complaint is that they phone and leave messages, then rarely get a response.

Again, if you're serious about raising the profile of your school, give a commitment to guarantee a comment or opinion on any issue within an hour of them contacting you. When there's a national education issue, the

press will be seeking a local response. If you're confident in your principles, happy to speak in soundbites, and supported by your governors, make yourself available. The effect will be that you and your school become associated with what's happening nationally – a school that's at the forefront of developments, rather than insular and treading water.

5 Understand websites

Let's be honest: most school websites are dismal. They often look naff and are usually out-of-date. I looked at one this morning which carries a welcoming message from a headteacher who left three years ago. The secret of a good website, I'd suggest, is clear and logical construction, access to lots of information, and topicality.

First, design. If your website is important to you, get it professionally designed or if you have someone on your staff team who really is talented in this area give them the time to do it properly. What you don't want is a site of garish colour schemes, multiple font styles and animated clip art. Every element needs to reinforce the kind of school you are – professional and orderly; forward-thinking and not stuffy; informative and entertaining.

Pack as much information as possible onto the site, and make it the source of your master copies. In other words, the calendar on your website should be the definitive school calendar. If any dates change, they change on that document first. This is how you can ensure that the website becomes trusted and authoritative, by establishing it for pupils, parents and staff as the central resource for school information. You might include:

- Forthcoming events
- Policies and procedures
- Vacancies
- A photo gallery (provided you've navigated the labyrinth of photo permissions)
- Staff and governor lists
- Pages for sport, health and arts
- Your complaints procedure

The absolute key, though, is that the homepage is updated each week, that someone in the leadership team sits down with the web administrator for ten minutes each week (Monday morning is a good time) and updates the

message. In this way you keep the site relevant and topical, with the added effect that it will be noted more by search engines which identify new content.

All of these are ways of managing a process that can otherwise leave us at the mercy of bad news stories, unfortunate events and unsupportive reporters. That's not to say, of course, that bad things won't turn up from time to time, such as the malicious parent who heads straight to the papers with a complaint about your school. But even that will prove easier to manage if the groundwork has been done and relationships with the media established.

The bigger challenge – managing the covert publicity of your school - is something we'll look at next time. Meanwhile, let them presses roll.

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