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ABSTRACT

This guide offers those who wish to establish a charter school some of the fundamentals of accessing, establishing relationships with, and working with the media. The first step is to appoint a key spokesperson or contact authorized to speak to the media and then give that person your school's mission statement. When dealing with the media, it is important to know media traits and communication vehicles. Newspapers, for example, should be given a story at least one week before a release date. The media person should always keep in mind the medium, remembering that newspapers are made up of photographs, graphics, and text in a static format, whereas television is a visual and moving medium. Once that distinction is understood, then how the news is packaged should be carefully considered. Tips on writing a news release for newspapers and radio are offered, and media spokespersons are advised to answer the questions of "Who," "What," "When," "Where," "Why," and "How." Many news outlets also appreciate being sent a media kit that contains a collection of related information and may include background material, a fact sheet, photographs, a reproducible logo, slides, or other materials that print and electronic media use in reporting stories. (RJM)

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Founding Charter Schools:

A BASIC GUIDE TO WORKING WITH NEWS MEDIA

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FOUNDING CHARTER SCHOOLS:

A BASIC GUIDE TO WORKING WITH NEWS MEDIA

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A WORD ABOUT CHARTER SCHOOLS, THE NEWS MEDIA, AND THE PUBLIC TRUST

Charter schools bring a new concept to public school systems, and along with that comes a special need to communicate the varying natures of charter schools—and your school in particular—to several audiences important to their founding and continuation. One of the most important audiences is the news media because, to a large extent, they affect, shape, and may change public opinion. And, let's face it, public opinion moves legislatures, school boards, and a host of people and processes that influences our lives.

Furthermore, as a part of *public* schools, charter schools carry a specific responsibility in developing open, forthright, and cooperative relationships with representatives of the news media—such as reporters, columnists, and commentators—who themselves tend to feel a public-trust responsibility. Taking on that mantle from the start goes a long way in helping important constituencies to understand charter schools—and in particular *your* charter school—with media presenting significant communication channels that create, shape, and forge public opinion.

Because charter schools are the "new kid on the block," there is a huge communication job to be accomplished. When working with the media, it's best to surmise that they know little or nothing about charter schools, and start at Chapter One, Paragraph One, to help them understand what charter schools are in general, and the goals, objectives and priorities of your school in particular.

This guide is not a primer on how to found a charter school. But for those who are intending to establish a charter school or are well along in the process, this guide offers some of the fundamentals of accessing, establishing relationships with, and working with media to forward your goal.

Frankly, carrying out media relations masterfully is a lot of work—even for professionals. It takes planning, clarity, perseverance, and responsiveness. Neglecting to take care, however, is foolhardy because media relations are often a critical part of ensuring that the founding and operation of your school are successful. And, by the way, you don't need to be a great writer to get your story out. But you do need to communicate clearly and accurately, however, and having a fundamental understanding of media and the appropriate tools will help you to do just that.

PRACTICAL ADVICE

First Things First

"The secret of getting ahead is to get started," Mark Twain is reported advising, by breaking complex, overwhelming tasks into smaller ones that you can indeed manage, and then getting started on the very first one. So, let's start.

Key Spokesperson

Appoint a key spokesperson or contact authorized to speak to the media. This person should be articulate, within the inner circle where decisions are made, and savvy about saying just enough, but not too much (blab, blab, blab), or too little (Yes, No, I don't know). Sometimes knowing what *not* to say is vitally important.

The key spokesperson might be the chair of the founders committee, part of a public relations/marketing committee, or a sole person taking care of communications. The point is to have an accessible point-person that news media can contact for comments, clarification, responses, or quotes. (Once a school is up and running, however, the school-based leader or designee should be the primary contact for media.)

Key Messages

What are the important elements about the charter school that you want to communicate? *Write them down*, come to agreement within the group, and select *the most important* few to convey. Everyone involved in a leadership role should know them cold, and the messages should roll off the spokesperson's tongue as naturally as in a casual conversation with a good friend.

Because of the infancy of charter schools, most of the general public simply don't understand the concept, the purpose, and the laws that enable them. And of course the laws enabling charter schools are different from state to state, and not all states have charter school laws, although the number is growing. So there's a pressing and particular job that must be done in crafting effective messages that set a context to foster an understanding of your charter school. When building concise messages about the purpose of your charter school, it's in your best interest—and the public's—to include the sense of the following statements within your key messages:

- Charter schools *are public schools*
- Charter schools are *not* related to vouchers
- Laws covering civil rights, health, safety, public disclosure, and other federal and state regulations pertain to charter schools as with all public schools
- Charging tuition to attend charter schools is *not* permitted
- A *certain autonomy* in structure, curriculum, and educational emphasis of a charter school is exchanged *for accountability* in student academic achievement
- Your school's mission statement

MEDIA TRAITS AND COMMUNICATION VEHICLES

There are several excellent ways to communicate with media. When you're starting out, you first need to identify *who* you are supposed to be communicating *with*. Overcome that terrified feeling and make that cold call to the newspaper, television station, and radio station. Very nice people typically answer the phone, and after you explain who you are, they'll tell you whom you need to contact and how to do it.

Once you know the appropriate contact person, get in touch with them to find out how they prefer to receive information. Reporters are typically busy people, and it's helpful to them to have material delivered in the way that's most useful. If you can arrange a face-to-face meeting with the reporter, that is the very best way to begin to build a relationship. Don't be offended if the reporter declines the opportunity to get together. They often don't care to meet unless you've got something hot. (And, by the way, whenever you call a reporter, always ask first if they're "on deadline" and if so, leave your number. Sometimes reporters give short shrift because they're under a deadline and the call has interrupted them. Many reporters now have voice mail, so leave a message if that's the case.)

And while we're talking about talking with reporters, it's wise to remember that news-media reporters *report*. Unless you want to *see it* in a headline or *hear it* on the air, *just don't say it*. Make it a rule; you won't be sorry.

Newspapers

Newspapers of general circulation fall into two categories: dailies and community weeklies. Daily newspapers publish six or seven days a week; print international, national, state and local news; and tend to serve a regional geographic area. Community weeklies may publish once, twice, or three times a week; serve one city or locale; and restrict coverage to news and features related primarily to that area. If you have a local community newspaper, it will likely be more interested in your news than your state's major daily. A two-paragraph story on an inside page in a daily may be a front page headline in your community newspaper.

Here are some tips to help you work with newspapers:

- A newspaper prints news, not history; timeliness is essential. Generally, a story should be submitted at least one week before a release date; however, certain special departments or sections of major newspapers may require significantly more time. Immediate or "spot" news of major importance should be submitted immediately. Stories about routine events are seldom used after the event is over.

- A story may not be used *before* a release date specified, but may be used anytime afterwards, at the discretion of the editor. If a release is for immediate use, put FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE at the top of the first page or FOR RELEASE: Today's Date.

- Send news releases to the right place. Large newspapers, such as metropolitan dailies, usually have bureaus or offices in outlying areas. If your school is located in that area of coverage you'll save time by connecting directly with that bureau. If you really have no idea, or if you're in doubt, send your release to the Editor or the Education Editor; from there it will be channeled to the correct desk. It's best *not* to send the same release simultaneously to two departments of the same newspaper. It looks like a ploy.

- Here are some cautions. Don't phone to ask:

  —If you can submit a story; just send it in
  —If the story arrived
  —When it will be used
  —To speak to the editor
  —To complain because the story wasn't used

The best way to determine what types of news are used by a newspaper is to *read* that paper. Be guided by what it prints.

Radio and Television

While a newspaper can add pages in four-page increments if required, a radio or television station can't add even one more minute to the 24-hour day. Because of this limited air time, competition is keen for radio and television coverage.

Your activities may be news if they are unusually interesting in human interest appeal to large broadcast audiences, or if they have specific news value. (Yes, you may read the latter as meaning *controversial*!)

Keep in mind that television is a *visual* medium and stories that will be good film opportunities are more likely to get on the air than routine activities. When dressing for television appearances, be very careful of color combinations. Some reds and blues, when put together, will "vibrate"—that is, appear to move. An expanse of white next to the face will tend to make you appear washed out. Avoid busy prints and checks.

Radio news stories, written for a *listening* audience, are generally brief accounts of something that is worth the air time. Radio frequently gets interviews over the phone, and you may not always be sure that you're being recorded. Ask. If you're not prepared, tell the radio-news reporter that you will call back shortly. Take time to organize your thoughts and maintain composure. *Don't let their hurry-up need for a story lead you into a misstep that you'll regret.*

Talk Shows. A radio-show format known as the "talk show" has grown in popularity and influence over the past decade. Initially a national phenomenon, it has given rise to local talk shows, many of them of high quality that provide a forum for public issues and concerns, offering both sides as listeners call in with their points of view. If a high-quality show is on-air in your area, you may consider it a good medium for your topic. One way to find out if tnis is

the case is to call the show's producer or send a letter. Be aware, however, that this environment requires extensive knowledge, an articulate presentation, and a quick mind to respond "off the cuff" where little time can be given to thought and reflection. In radio, careful reflection is called that dreaded "dead air."

Cater to Differences

There are indeed several clear differences between newspapers, radio, and television. You must understand and cater to those differences. A local story in a community newspaper may get 700 words and a photograph; in a large daily newspaper 250 words and no photograph; 20 seconds on television; and 10 seconds on radio.

You'll do well to remember that newspapers are made up of photographs, graphics, and text in a static format; television is a visual and moving medium—they're looking for action (moving pictures) and graphics; and radio is an aural medium—people listen and their minds create the picture. It's important to think about how you need to communicate and with what, as well as knowing the messages and content that you want to communicate.

PACKAGING YOUR NEWS

Here are some typical communication vehicles, how to produce them, and how to use them:

News Release

The most traditional vehicle is the news release. The same release can be used for all media with minor changes for radio and television. Here is the best approach for the inexperienced: Start with the facts and stick to the facts. Use the proven technique of answering the questions of **Who, What, When, Where, Why and How** to make sure all the bases are covered. Although you may not need to answer all these questions, they are helpful prompts. It is a good way of organizing the first couple of paragraphs to make sure the most important information is closest to the top of the release. You can add explanatory material in subsequent paragraphs.

Writing your news release is not the time to attempt to amaze with verbal gymnastics. The "hook" should be your news angle, not "cute or clever" prose. Best to write it straight, write it factually, and include all the basics that the editor, or the reporter to whom the story may be assigned, needs to know. A simulated release follows as an example of the following format to ensure that the basics are covered.

- Put the important factual information in the first two paragraphs.
- Type your release on letterhead if it exists, or on plain white paper if you don't have letterhead.
- Double space.
- Always include a contact name and daytime phone number.
- Localize your release for the community newspapers. One way to identify people and/or events is by telling the name, street, city/locale.
- Spell out numbers from one to nine, then use numerals from 10 and up. Never begin a sentence with numerals.
- It's not necessary to "headline" your news release; headline writing is an art. It is helpful to slug the release with a few words that capture the point.
- Number pages of news releases longer than one page. Limit your news release to one or two pages. If it goes to two pages, make sure the slug is on the top of the second page, too, in case the pages get separated. If you need more room, prepare a fact sheet.
- Note the date your news is available to be released.
- Signal the end of your news release with *one* of these symbols:

  --30-- **####** **—END—**
- If a photo accompanies the release, write the identification in the margin on the back or on paper taped to the back of the photo.
- Before sending the release, make sure it's been seen by all who need to, and have it checked out for typos or mistakes.

Take a look at the simulated news release on the next page.

SIMULATED NEWS RELEASE

Our Charter School Letterhead □ Post Office Box 123
Our Town, USA

Contact: Karen Carlson
Days: 813. 932-0865
Eves: 813. 773-4251

For Release: November 5, 1998

Charter School Group to Present Plan to Board Next Thursday

Our Town—The Charter School Group/CSG (**WHO**), which formed last year to launch a high school focusing on technology and engineering, will present its plan (**WHAT**) to the Our Town School Board next Thursday, November 12, at 7:00 p.m. (**WHEN**) in the Administration Building, 327 Oak St., Room 432 (**WHERE**).

(**HOW**) CSG will present to the board its plan to organize a new public school offering small class size and a curriculum with a strong focus on math and science. Other subjects incorporate and/or relate to mathematics and science. For instance, the English course includes writing about mathematics and science.

(**WHY**) "We're concerned about the growing class sizes in our district and the math and science skills of *all* our students who need to prepare for a technological society," said Chair Person, head of the group of 40 parents and community members. He noted that, under state law passed last year, local school boards can grant a charter for operating a public school in innovative ways. In return, the organizers are held accountable for academic achievement of the students.

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Note to Editor: See enclosed backgrounder and fact sheet for full details

News Release Tips for Radio/Television. The same news release can be sent to all media, but there are a couple of differences: Releases to radio and television news departments should be sent to the *assignment editor*, or the *producer* of a public affairs or a talk show. As with newspapers, the release should include the basic points of WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, WHY, and HOW in the first couple of sentences or paragraphs. Then develop the rest of the information.

Radio Public Service Announcements

If you intend to have an announcement read on the air, be sure to keep it short. Read it aloud to time it. Target the timing for 10, 15, or 30 seconds. Always note on the copy a START DATE and KILL DATE.

For radio announcements that are intended to be read on the air, radio style is ALL CAPITAL LETTERS. Numbers are written out, for example: THE EVENT STARTS AT TWO O'CLOCK. The style is also more informal, using, for instance, "it's" instead of "it is." Difficult names should be phonetically spelled out.

Fact Sheets and Backgrounders

A fact sheet is a concise listing of those things that reporters want or need to know. The idea is that the reader is able to scan it quickly and get the bare facts. If it's an event, for example, then it would contain the date, time, and place; any important speakers; the purpose; and so forth. If it intends to convey information about a committee attempting to organize a charter school, it would have bulleted facts about who comprises the committee, why it is forming, and other important elements. A fact sheet is *not* a narrative.

A backgrounder, on the other hand, is a factual narrative account that contains important details that are too complex for a news release or fact sheet. It is very helpful to reporters who want or need to take the time to find out more. Sometimes a backgrounder or a fact sheet (or both) may be enclosed with the news release.

Guest Opinion Articles

Newspapers (and some radio and television stations, too) encourage opinion or guest commentary pieces. Take a look at the format and approach and consider submitting a piece.

Media Kit

A media kit is simply a collection of related information that's put in a folder. It helps reporters to keep all the relevant material in one place. It may contain a news release, backgrounder, fact sheet, photographs, a reproducible logo, slides, or other materials that print and electronic media use in reporting stories.

Distributing Your Information/News Release

There are several ways to get out your news release and information pieces:

- Regular mail is still the number one method for news releases
- E-mail, when available, is preferred by some because they don't have to re-key copy
- Faxing is fine; make sure you have the correct number
- For timeliness, surety of delivery, and if it's critical, hand deliver the release and materials
- Media kits are particularly handy for news conferences

New Media—The Internet

Keeping company with the newness of charter schools is the phenomenon of the Internet and the Web sites on it. Many traditional media outlets—radio, television, newspapers—maintain Web sites and post selected stories. Be aware that if this is the case in your area, you may have wider exposure than expected if your story is used. On the other hand, if your organization has posted a Web site it also becomes an easy vehicle for news media to keep current with information about you.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q: What's the difference between media relations and publicity?

> **A:** In media relations you attempt to build a communicative relationship with reporters. It happens over time; it is a two-way trust level that you're hoping to achieve. Publicity is a sometime thing, usually limited to singular events. It might involve attention-grabbing methods. Media relations goes well beyond publicity. It looks at today *and* the future.

Q: What's the difference between news and editorial? What's a feature?

> **A**: News is something significant that you didn't know until you read it/saw it/heard it here. It is current, it is timely, it is happening. Hard news is not supposed to be opinion; an editorial is an opinion piece. A feature highlights, explores, and delves into a subject that may be a person or topic; it looks for the soft edges as well as the hard. It is not usually a time-bound piece.

Q: Suppose we don't have anybody in our group that feels comfortable working with the media?

> **A:** This is where "media relations" applies. Media people are often helpful and even a bit tender with those who don't know the field. Asking for advice and direction can sometimes be the start of a productive relationship.

Q: What do we do if a reporter got the story wrong?

> **A:** If it's important, then you must bring it to the reporter's attention in an understanding and noncontentious way. We all make mistakes, and we all *hate* to make mistakes. Raging at the offender is not usually productive; gaining an ally is. Ask if the record can be set straight, but don't gripe about a Page-24 play of a two-inch correction to what had been a Page-2 erroneous story. Reporters are not free agents; they have editors. However, if you believe a reporter is biased against charter schools, and errors are flagrant, common, and hurting your position, sometimes a calm word—backed by documented facts—with the editor is warranted.

Q: What's the difference between an editor, a reporter, and a publisher?

> **A:** A publisher is the head of the whole newspaper—news, editorial, advertising, circulation. An editor oversees news, story, photography, and graphics content, and assigns reporters and other staff to stories.

RESOURCE TIPS

Checking at your local library under the categories of public relations or publicity will surely turn up some helpful resources. The following are recommendations that professionals turn to, and that are useful also to the nonprofessional.

The National School Public Relations Association offers media relations and other public relations resources. Visit their Web site at http://www.nspra.org/entry.htm, or write them at 15948 Denwood Rd., Rockville, MD 20855. Telephone 301.519.0496.
Fax: 301.519.0494.

You'll find a trove of journalism-writing tips in *The Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual*. It also contains appendixes on copyright guidelines, and the Freedom of Information Act. It is published by The Associated Press, 50 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, NY 10020.

For clear and correct language usage, get the most recent edition of *The Elements of Style* by Strunk and White, published by Macmillan Publishing Company, New York. It's available at book stores.

And finally, don't forget the fundamental and required resource: Keep a good dictionary nearby, and use it.