The 7 Steps to Raising Your School’s Profile

How to use PR to get your message across
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Every day somewhere in your school there is a great story that should be heard beyond the school gates.

It’s an exchange trip to somewhere exciting, the celebrity chef who has been into school to teach a cookery class and the innovative lesson plan that is broadening your students’ experiences.

There’s the class which has just raised a load of money for charity, the after-school club that is doing something remarkable and the sporty student who has been chosen to represent their country.

But how do you tell the world?

With a little planning and some timely execution it can be your school that is in the limelight and gaining the benefits of a positive image.

This guide will take you through the seven steps which will enable you to raise your school’s profile.

1. Identify a newsworthy story
2. Get your timing right
3. Write a punchy press release
4. Bring it to life with photographs
5. Build relationships
6. Be calm in a crisis
7. Call in the experts
1. Identify a newsworthy story

By definition, something is newsworthy if it is different or special. If it is surprising or quirky, then it could be a story.

A simple test to see whether your story is newsworthy is think whether you’d be interested if it was about another school or a local business.

But there is no hard and fast rule, and what interests a newspaper isn’t necessarily the same thing that excites radio or TV. Timing is important as well – what could have been a story last week mightn’t be this week.

Find a hook that makes the story of interest to people with no connection to the school

It’s about finding a hook – “Pupils go to school” isn’t a story, unless the school has had a massive improvement in attendance. Then it is as much about the how than the what, with the real story being about how attendance levels have been improved and the impact this has had on students and the school.

Being able to identify a newsworthy story is the hardest part – much of the rest is about getting the process right. Everything else you do will improve the chances of a story getting good coverage, but being able to spot something with the potential to be a story when you hear about it is the one thing that will make your school stand out (and make you popular with the journalists you contact).

EDUCATE the reader

Your story should fit at least one of these seven characteristics for it to be of real interest to a journalist:

Exciting – does the story leap off the page? Does it make you want to tell someone else?
Data – are there facts and figures which demonstrate significant change and improvement?
Unusual – is it about something different or quirky? (But don’t call it “unique”, because it won’t be)
Community – does it have a wider impact or involve people from outside the school?
Achievement – has it resulted in success marked by a trophy or an award
Timely – is it new? Does it fit in with what is going on elsewhere?
Emotive – does it raise a smile, make you pause for reflection, has it surprised you?
How to use PR to get your message across

2. Get your timing right

Benefit from your advance planning

Most of what goes on in a school is planned. Visitors, events, competitions and achievements can often be put in the diary weeks or even months ahead of time.

For example, if you have someone coming to the school who is potentially newsworthy, then let journalists know in plenty of time.

If it is put into the forward planning, it is more likely to be used. You also avoid last minute problems of your regular contact being away or too busy, and they have time to arrange things at their end – whether that’s a photographer, a camera crew or even if it is just to mentally allocate some space on the page or in the show to what you are doing.

Also, if you’re having the conversation in plenty of time they can let you know whether it is of any interest and what they might be looking for specifically (perhaps they would want to come along and interview the visitor?).

Yesterday’s news isn’t news

The easiest way to scupper a story is to miss the moment.

“It’s not old ‘til it’s told” is a favourite saying in newsrooms, but that only applies to bad news and scandal.

If the event or activity ties in with something, like a specific date in the calendar or a national event, then it is even more imperative that you get the timing right.

Start your pitch to a journalist with the words “Last week…” or worse, “Last month…” and they will not hear anything else you say. Similarly, saying “I saw your piece on X, we do that as well. Can you come and do a story on us?” will be the start of a very short conversation. They will already be looking for something different.

Understand the media’s timings and deadlines

For each media outlet you are looking to target, get to know their deadlines, how often they publish and what lead times they work to.

Journalists have a (deserved!) reputation for writing everything to a deadline, and not a moment earlier, but that doesn’t mean they haven’t lined up the story and planned it into their own schedules well in advance.

Think of them as your customer – if you don’t have what they want, when they want it, they will go elsewhere.
3. Write a punchy press release

You can find lots of tips online that focus on the trivial details of writing a press release and make them seem like they are the most important things, such as putting press release in the title, or putting <ends> at the bottom.

Make sure you put the best bit at the top

The most important thing – and you’d be amazed how often schools and press offices of councils and companies get this wrong – is to make it clear what the story is about and make it sound exciting.

Jenny Birch’s dance school is part of a show in London.

or

Town High School student Jenny Birch is to dance alongside Will Young on the West End stage in the latest production of Cabaret.

Then add as much detail as is relevant, but be realistic and don’t waste your time (and if you go past 500 words then you’re almost certainly doing that). See how long the stories are in your target publication – if you give a journalist War and Peace and they just cut it from the bottom to make it fit, then all you’ll read about in the paper is War.

As you read through what you’ve written, ask yourself if that sentence or phrase has added anything new that builds on what has gone before. Be ruthless.

Be clear about what you want to say – in terms of the story and the message

Use the “Mum” test. Can you explain the story so that your mum would a) understand and b) be interested?

Don’t be happy with getting coverage for the sake of it – press home your advantage and explain why the story is important. If you have a group on an exchange trip, spell out that you are a language college. If you’ve got a group that has been awarded their Duke of Edinburgh Gold Awards then link it back to Ofsted describing your school’s extra-curricular activities as outstanding. If your swimming champion uses the school pool to train in, mention that it is open to the public.

Be human

The media want stories about people, so put them at the heart of your story. This may go against the grain of a whole school philosophy but abstract discussions about implementing parts of the curriculum are of no interest until you give it a human element of a specific teacher or class.

Always include a quote which pithily explains why your activity or achievement is exciting, unusual, innovative or worthy of recognition. Keep it personal and include named people with specific titles.
and give full names. So it’s not Mr Jones, but deputy headteacher David Jones. There is no reason to use “A school spokesperson said:...”.

Attribute the quote in the press release to the person in the picture, so don’t have the teacher who led the exchange trip to Timbuktu in the photo but the stay-at-home headteacher saying what a great trip it was.

**Get the press release right**

Make sure the details are correct and don’t assume that a journalist will know what you mean. Have you given the school its full title as you want it to appear in print? Have you spelt everyone’s name correctly and given them their correct title?

Get a second pair of eyes on it. They should be looking for typos, sentences that don’t make sense, and references which require prior knowledge – have you missed a key detail, like what year the student is in?

Give it a Ronseal headline – so that the release “does exactly what it says on the tin”. If you think of something clever or funny, you should probably delete it because it is likely that it either won’t be understood or it won’t be found funny. If in doubt, play it straight. In fact, just play it straight. And if you’re struggling to write a headline, then it is a warning that your press release isn’t clear or there isn’t really a point to it.

Don’t provide unnecessary negative information. You’d be surprised at how many people do thinking it somehow gives a balanced picture, such as saying £1,000 has been raised for charity although the target was £2,000. Always be upbeat and focus on the positive.

**Consider who your audience is and cater to their needs**

Think about the ultimate audience. Just as you get a different style and tone in the Times and the Sun, you get similar, albeit slightly more subtle, differences in local papers. Also, appreciate the difference in targeting education press and general media.

Rather than carpet-bombing "the media", think about why the recipient should be interested in your release. Have you thought about it from their point of view? For example don’t send a photo to a radio station, or a really technical piece that’s suitable for the education press to the local freesheet. The same principle is true for individual journalists within a paper, which you will learn through building relationships.

Once you know who you want to contact, get their contact details, which you can usually find online or in the publication itself.
Journalists have an internal spam filter

You will be more successful by targeting. If you bombard journalists you won’t break them down by sheer weight of content, instead you will find they are more likely to ignore or overlook what you send them. In short, send them lots of stuff that is irrelevant to them and you will be added to their mental blacklist.

If the journalist doesn’t understand what you have sent, they can’t assess if it is a good story and so it won’t get used. Don’t bamboozle them with jargon or acronyms and if it is absolutely necessary to include, make sure you explain what it means and why it is important.

Treat the press release as the start, not the end, of the communication

Add your contact details, and make sure that you can be contacted on that number. Make sure that whoever answers your phone, knows to put journalists through (it’s up to you whether this is always the case, or whether you do this for whenever you have sent a press release out).

Always have a second point of contact – if you’re in a meeting for a couple of hours and uncontactable, that will seem like forever to a journalist on a daily newspaper. Ideally that person should also have the authority to speak on behalf of the school, but at the very least they need to be contactable and be able to find you if you’re not available on the phone.

The follow-up

Things get trapped in email or overlooked, or put on a list to come back to later and forgotten about, so always be prepared to follow up. A call from you can help to pull it back to the top of their pile or you can answer the question that was making them hesitate using it.

Sometimes journalists will call to check a detail or get more information. Call them back promptly and make sure you don’t miss the opportunity.
4. Bring it to life with photographs

Photographs are by far the most overlooked part of PR. The difference between a great photo and no photo can be the difference between a prominent piece and it being left languishing in a reporter’s inbox.

Have a quick look through a local newspaper and see the number of bland or depressing images. There are photos of council buildings, of people leaving court or perhaps leaving a funeral. There are photos of middle-aged men in suits wearing ties and middle-aged men in suits not wearing ties.

A story with a photo is always better than a story without a photo

Schools have lots of natural advantages – newspapers want photos of young people being active, being happy, with bright colours and movement.

Most stories from a school should have a photo. Make sure it is of good quality and that the caption explains who everyone is.

These days most smartphones and digital cameras can take a suitably good photo, but it is likely that in your school there is a teacher with a real interest in photography who has a very good camera and an eye for composition, so utilise their skills.

Make the photographs as lively as possible

When you’re looking through a paper, also notice how many photos there are of people holding big cheques – there are almost certainly none. That’s because journalists and editors hate them and so they almost never get used.

Whatever activity was done to raise money will make for a better photograph (or can be arranged so that it is). The photo should either be of people actually doing something – speaking in the debating competition, acting in the play, abseiling down the science block – or at least smiling in the right context – the rugby team with the trophy after the game, the charity cake-bakers posing with their plates of cupcakes.

Have a selection available whenever possible, including at least one portrait and one landscape image, and unless the story is about line dancing, avoid having large groups of people stood in a line.

Don’t send images as attachments, unless you know journalists are happy and able to receive them, but do let them know that photos are available and how they can get them.
5. Build relationships

It may seem at times like dealing with your bank manager – it can be difficult to get a response from them when you want it, but when they want something you’re expected to make it your top priority.

Get through this initial phase and you’ll find it starts to work for you. When a journalist is then calling you unprompted, because they need a favour or have a gap to fill, you know you’ve got a relationship that is worth something.

Journalists are a curious species with a great deal of diversity. What one reporter loves, another will hate, so learn what your contacts like.

Be open and encourage contact

Build a direct relationship. Journalists hate not having direct access and every education journalist in the land has stories of those school secretaries who they can never get past. It is no surprise to know they are the schools which either never appear in the media, or only appear when it’s bad news.

Journalists appreciate having people who are prepared to take the time to explain things and be helpful, and that is usually rewarded by being given a fair, and even favourable, hearing when you need it.

Don’t wait for them to call you. Find out who the right person is and try and arrange to meet.

Let them have a direct contact number, preferably a mobile, and definitely an email address. Also let them know if there is a time when they can usually get hold of you, which will make it more likely they will call.

Understand what each journalist wants

The best way to be active is to understand what it is journalists are looking for. That can involve keeping in touch with them, especially your local paper, to see what they have got coming up that you can help them with.

This is particularly the case with big national or international events, where they will be looking for a local angle, which could be on anything from the World Cup to the US Presidential elections to a solar eclipse. The diversity of activity in schools means that often there will be something going on that can fit what they are looking for.

Try and think like a journalist and find out when is the trickiest time for them to fill their pages or which sections are regularly the hardest slots – and then target these opportunities.
Save yourself wasting time

A good relationship can save you time and effort because it means you can make a quick phone call and find out whether what you think is a story is of any interest.

Don’t play at being a spin doctor

As your relationships with journalists develop, never forget they have a job to do. Don’t gossip about your school (or any other) and don’t get upset when they call about a bad news story.

Be very wary of going “off the record”. Too many people think this means “not to be printed” but a lot of journalists take it to mean “not to be attributed”. If it ever becomes necessary to have an off-the-record chat with a journalist, it is best to have a good relationship already with them and it is critical that you have a clear, unambiguous conversation about what can and can’t be used and in what manner...before you tell the warts-and-all version.

If you’re in any doubt, the simple thing is to say nothing that you wouldn’t be happy seeing in tomorrow’s newspaper.
6. Be calm in a crisis

At some point there will be something that happens that is outside your control and needs dealing with. Social media has changed the speed at which news circulates and the size of the potential audience, and one consequence is that journalists may hear of an incident even if no-one gets in touch with them directly.

Don’t hide – get the facts, make a plan, respond.

One thing is certain – the ostrich approach will almost certainly make it worse, making it appear that you have something to hide.

First, don’t panic. Find out what the journalist knows and what it is they want to know. Make sure you have accurate information and decide how much you want to share publically. Then prepare your response. A written response may be the best way, particularly if it is a sensitive subject.

But if you are looking to downplay the incident – or if the incident really isn’t a big deal – then the best way is to have a conversation and explain that. Just be careful of not leaving any hostages to fortune.

It may be that you judge that no response is best, but this will be in rare circumstances, and will almost certainly result in a “…declined to comment” line in the story. A statement which says virtually nothing is better than no statement, for example say it is being investigated, or that the school can’t comment because of legal issues (if that is the case).

It’s worth remembering that as parents are going to want to receive a proper response, it is best to start with one rather than play catch up later, which only encourages a follow-up story.

Treat a journalist as if they’re a parent, and parents as if they are journalists

All statements are public. If you put it on your website or in a letter home or talk about it at a parents’ event, then there is always the chance that it will find its way to a journalist – after all, one of your parents might be a journalist.

But also see a journalist as a pushy parent. Convince them you are in control and they will become a useful ally and advocate.
Stay professional

You will be best placed to handle a crisis when you have an existing relationship with journalists. They will be much more prepared to share with you the information they have and will want to avoid harming the good relationship they have with you.

Regardless of any existing contact, don’t threaten them with future non-co-operation and don’t patronise them by telling them they don’t understand. Journalists value their independence and their professionalism so don’t question or ask them to compromise on either.

And be warned that if you do go into hiding then you can be sure of a frosty reception next time you get in touch with a story you want the journalist to consider.
7. Call in the experts

The school’s use of professional services, whether that’s accounting, HR or legal advice, is delivered by experienced practitioners. PR and communications is no different and to maximise the benefits of a co-ordinated, targeted PR strategy requires expertise.

The benefits of strong and timely communications are immeasurable, filtering through in a wide range of ways:

Students and staff benefit because it:

- Recognises the efforts of students and staff and celebrates their achievements
- Encourages students and staff to do innovative and interesting things, in and out of the classroom
- Adds to the records of achievement/portfolios of students
- Boosts staff morale

The senior leadership team benefits because they can:

- Be better prepared to manage problems
- Not only be seen to be in control, but actually be in control
- Spend less time fire-fighting. If everyone knows when something is happening, and why, they are less likely to miss out or complain about not being told
- Free up some time. If parents and students have the right information at the right time, or know they can find it on your website, then there will be fewer telephone calls or visits for staff to handle
- Raise revenue – for example through publicising the hire of facilities, or promoting fundraising activities and events
- Be better prepared to manage problems
- Influence the education agenda as appropriate to their needs

The school benefits because:

- It is responding to key Ofsted assessment criteria about its contact with parents, carers and others, and is seeking to positively influence what parents and carers think about the school
- It improves student recruitment
- It becomes a more attractive option when recruiting staff
- Parents are engaged – and stay engaged
- The school’s profile is improved among local organisations
- It creates a closer-knit school community, with everyone better informed about what is going on in the school

As competition for students, staff and resources becomes increasingly tough, it is critical that schools embrace the opportunities that a well-planned and well-executed PR and communications strategy will create.
Ambitious Minds is the right partner for you

We understand what journalists are looking for because we’ve worked on both sides of the journalism/PR fence.

The team at Ambitious Minds has asked the questions and pointed the microphone. We also know what it’s like to be interviewed live on television, from the friendly atmosphere of being sat on the Granada Reports sofa to the very hostile – fronting a press conference to manage a crisis that was sufficiently serious for BBC News 24 to broadcast it live.

Crucially we have the experience and knowledge of the education sector to understand what you want to achieve.

Ambitious Minds is an education specialist. We understand schools so we won’t treat you like just another business using PR to sell more widgets.

We understand the sensitivities of the education sector, that success is not measured merely in column inches or in the volume of emails sent out. It is about portraying an accurate, holistic and positive image of the school throughout all of its communications.

Our experience and expertise, from years spent in journalism and in managing media relations, means we will provide a communications solution that is tailored to your needs and execute it to produce the outcomes you desire.

We take the burden of the planning and execution off your shoulders and become both the conduit and the firewall. We let you get on with running the school, and we work tirelessly to spread the news of the good work that is currently going on unrecognised and without fanfare.

Working in partnership with you, we will shape your message, then we will spread your message.

Take your first step – and call us

Get in touch today to find out how Ambitious Minds can help your school through better PR and communications – call Alex Turner on 0151 224 1464 or email alex.turner@ambitiousminds.co.uk.