

Telling the Technology Story: **PR Strategies** for School Leaders



Backgrounder Brief

Public relations is a critical component of your district's successful technology implementation—and it involves communicating on an ongoing basis with the range of stakeholders inside and outside the district.

In your role as a school technology leader, you work hard to invest wisely in technology-based products and services to support teaching and learning. Your district has likely involved the range of stakeholders both inside and outside your district as it built its vision for technology. These stakeholders were probably also very involved as the technology plan for the district was developed.

Over time, as implementation of the plan is accomplished, assessed, modified and expanded, all of these internal and external stakeholders need to be cognizant of how technology is being used, what successes are being realized, what results are being gained, what needs are on the horizon, any obstacles that have been encountered and resources that will be required to maintain the focus as outlined in the district's vision.

Importance of Leadership

You want to be sure you are telling your district's technology story on an ongoing basis, not only when you require new funds to maintain or expand programs or, worse, when someone begins to question the validity of your technology spending.

The idea that successful public relations is a two-way communication process is particularly important. School technology leaders need to be sharing information regarding programs in place and describing current and future needs. But more importantly, they need to work to forge communication relationships with the range of stakeholders to ensure these stakeholders have information helpful to better understand technology programs, their objectives, their results and any current or future requirements.





Pitching Stories to the Local Media

Developing and then maintaining media lists should be done ahead of time so that opportunities for proactive public relations aren't held up by list building. Consider:

- Local and regional newspapers
- Education newspapers and publications
- Other local magazines
- Radio and television, including cable and educational stations
- Local Web logs and other Internet news sites

And remember to include your district and school print and electronic newsletters, too.

Crisis Management/Preparedness

First of all, *hope* for no problems or bad news! Next, *plan* for any possible negative issues or challenges.

As a school technology leader, you undoubtedly have already anticipated potential problems or troublesome issues, be they with hardware, weather-related issues, student or teacher use, security or vandalism, parent concerns or a host of potential challenges. The important thing is to take them one step further and consider to whom and how you would communicate, should one of these issues arise.

Inviting Parents Into Your Schools

Parents and other members of the community deserve to know what is going on in your district, and this is the perfect audience for hearing, understanding and helping to spread your technology story. Use a variety of strategies to invite them into your schools to see firsthand what is going on.

And be reminded that parents want more than to just be informed about what is decided or done—they want to understand how decisions about technology utilization are made.

Keeping Legislative Partners and Policy Makers Informed

Legislators and policy makers need to hear your voice, in Washington as well as locally and in your region and state. They too frequently do not fully understand the ways in which technology is helping transform teaching and learning in schools and therefore often make ill-informed decisions that have damaging effects on education technology programs.

Legislators and policy makers hold a great deal of power and can make things happen where they have interest in programs and choose to be involved. And politicians are typically pleased to become involved with *good* news about education. Your technology story and evidence of successful use of technology that is positively impacting teaching and learning is good news. School technology leaders must work to ensure that legislators and policy makers increase support for technology utilization in schools as they begin to hear more stories about the positive impact technology has on curriculum, student success and educational opportunity.

Your Role As a PR Leader

Effective communication is part of your role as a school technology leader. As you tell your technology story, remember to focus the message on learning and student achievement. Make it an easy task for others in your district to tell the story as well.

And taking a valuable strategy from CoSN's *What It Takes: Essential Skills of the K-12 CTO*: Be sure to take advantage of the technology. Your website, e-mail newsletters and messages, online surveys and other strategies help you quickly connect with various members of the community to relate important news and information and provide tangible methods of demonstrating the value of technology resources.

Your effective leadership is required to build and maintain strong technology-based programs to positively impact student achievement and support best instructional and administrative practices in your district. Your district must additionally be backed by a supportive community to

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accomplish your plans. Without both of these, disparities in delivery to our nation's students will expand.

Stagnant or declining technology budgets in many school districts threaten the real progress that schools have made over the past decade to improve their technology infrastructure, access and effectiveness for administrators, teachers and students. Yet, with visionary educational leadership and strong community support, some school districts are bolstering their technology plans and budgets.

Be proactive with your technology PR throughout the year. Aggressively seek support from your external partners in

the community—parents, community organizations, the local media, businesses and others—in order to sustain effective technology utilization in your district. Keep them informed of successes as you make progress toward your goals. Share noteworthy stories with the press and other communication channels. Be clear about challenges and setbacks encountered and invite shared problem-solving to help you stay on track.

Planning should involve a team process, and ongoing communications about progress against the plan should be a priority. This helps position your schools for stakeholder buy-in, new funding and other opportunities.

This Backgrounder Brief is an executive summary of *Telling the Technology Story: PR Strategies for School Leaders*, a component of CoSN's Essential Leadership Skills series. CoSN, a national non-profit organization, is the premier voice in education technology leadership. CoSN's mission is to advance the K-12 education community's capacity to effectively use technology to improve teaching and learning through advocacy, policy and leadership development.

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