

Media Tips

For Educators

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Santa Clara County
Office of Education

What is news?

News can be described as information that is timely, interesting, significant and meaningful to the audience. News may also have a human-interest value or an impact on history, as well as an impact on individuals. Other characteristics of a news story may include: conflict, celebrity involvement, action or shock.

Don't confuse news with publicity. Publicity is something an individual or organization wants the public to know. News is what the media thinks the public should know, and wants to know. Some news may have an additional benefit of providing publicity, but that isn't the primary reason the story is being told.

How to sell your story

Look at your story idea objectively to determine whether it has genuine news value. Ask yourself: "If I lived in another part of the city, would I still find this story interesting, informative and entertaining? Is the story at least somewhat out of the ordinary? Is there a possibility for interesting pictorial coverage?"

Look for a "news peg" when you want to interest the media. In almost every story there is something that makes it timely and interesting. Watch for state and national developments and tie them into what is being done locally. For instance, successful programs that recruit and retain teachers locally can coincide with the national concern over the issue.

Note for SCCOE staff: If you have a story idea or news, do not contact the media directly. Contact Communication Services so your information goes to the **appropriate media representative** and is provided in the required format.

“Hard” vs. “soft” news

News gathering agencies do give more time and space to “hard” news topics such as politics, crime, finance, education, health and environmental issues, as opposed to “soft” news topics such as fundraising events, grant announcements and recognitions. Hard news is either timely (by tomorrow it will be old news), controversial or both.

Which story has greater impact on more people: The mayor and the city council debating area transportation issues or the PTA fundraiser at an elementary school? Obviously, the transportation story impacts a greater number of people in a significant way and that’s what a reporter wants. The perception that reporters only look for bad news or are “out to get us” is erroneous. They are out to get significant news stories.

There is room for soft news, and reporters are continually frustrated because they can’t cover more. When you consider the little amount of time and space allotted to soft education news, and then divide that among almost 400 public school sites – not to mention the private and parochial schools – competition is indeed keen.

However, reporters and assignment editors are often looking for feature stories to provide balance to news coverage, especially at times when hard news is scarce, for example, during holiday seasons. This is a good time to promote an exceptional event, program or student.



How to get media coverage

Don't despair or get angry because no one ever covers your event. Read and apply the following tips and keep trying.

1. Avoid scheduling your event in competition with an already well-established media event (i.e. Election Day, a holiday or a local festival). Don't compete when you don't have to.
2. Inviting a city official or politician to an event does not ensure coverage. In fact, during an election campaign, it may discourage coverage if the event is perceived as only a photo opportunity for the candidate. Invite students. Have them take part in the event.

Too often educators focus on the adults – superintendents, politicians, business leaders. The students are what education is all about. Make sure students participate.

3. Think of a new angle or focus. You can't expect much media excitement about an activity that is being done routinely by many. For example, collecting food or toys for the needy is a popular classroom activity during the winter. Focus on what is unique about your food or toy drive. Is there a particular neighborhood that will benefit? Will students be distributing the donations? Is there a student accomplishment connected with the activity to recognize?
4. Don't forget works in progress. A news photographer would be more likely to cover students painting a mural than students unveiling a completed mural.

Media constraints and deadlines

Television

Each television station has only so many reporters and camera operators to cover the Bay Area. Assignment editors assign stories each morning with input from at least two or three other production staff members. Considerations are given to such items as putting together a balanced news show, reassigning reporters for late-breaking news items and allotting travel time between stories. These considerations are all a part of the decision-making process to produce a news show.

The majority of daytime news is gathered from about 9:00 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. (The exception to covering news after 2:30 p.m. would be sending a remote van to a site for a “live” telecast.) Evening coverage is available from about 6:00 to 8:30 p.m.

Print

Print reporters do not have exclusive decision-making rights about stories they write but they often generate ideas. Specific assignments aren’t made until the editors mull over their options. Editors also consider such factors as strict deadlines, story length and photo opportunities.

Newspapers are shrinking and so are their staffs. There are fewer reporters who specialize in education, so it is more likely the reporter assigned to your story will not have depth in understanding issues. Be prepared with background materials. Reporters also are more likely to be interested in trends or localizing state or national news.

Web

Most media outlets also have Web sites that are updated often. Stories may appear online before they are published or broadcast.



Working with reporters

Media access to schools

According to the laws of California, school officials may restrict media access to school campuses in the same manner as access by the general public.

1. Always require reporters to sign in at the principal's office upon arrival at a campus and to wear a badge so that others on the site can immediately identify the "visitors." Be sure a staff member accompanies the reporter while on the school campus. A reporter may be denied admission to a classroom in session if it will interrupt student learning.
2. No state laws bar the media from school grounds outright, but individual school districts may adopt regulations limiting access to school property. In June 1996, the California Attorney General's office issued an advisory opinion giving school administrators the authority to deny media access to school grounds if their presence "would interfere with peaceful conduct of the activities of the school." (*A.G. Op. No. 95-509*)
3. Members of the media can interview students or staff on school campuses as long as the interview does not interfere with the educational process. School officials decide what constitutes interference.
4. School officials may require parental permission before media may interview students at school. Some schools consider permission to be the absence of an opt-out form; others are more pro-active, requiring a signed waiver from a parent or guardian before the student can be interviewed or photographed. Of course, parents always can instruct their children not to talk to the media.
5. Teachers and staff have First Amendment Free Speech rights, but an administrator can require that staff be interviewed outside of the educational day and on that individual's own time.

Media access to student records

All official reports and surveys are public property – this includes yearbooks, contracts and salary information, including that of the superintendent and administrators. You may not withhold such information when it is requested. You do not have to release rough drafts, working papers or preliminary figures and notes.

1. The general public, including the media, has access to public records under the California Public Records Act and Federal Freedom of Information Act. An agency has 10 days to determine if a request seeks public records and to notify the requesting party as to whether the agency will produce the requested documents.
2. Confidential student and staff information, including student and staff records, cumulative files and special ed files, is protected from disclosure by the above acts and the Education Code.
3. Student records and special education files may not be disclosed without written parental consent or by court order. (Education Code Section 49061)
4. Directory information may be disclosed to the media. Directory information is defined in CA Education Code 49061. Also remember that emails, faxes, and yearbooks are public information.

When you get coverage

School district officials are wise to have a written policy and procedures when working with the media.

If you do not have a public information department, then establish one individual or department that will serve as your district's official media liaison. Members of the media must know to contact that liaison and to check in at the principal's office of any school they visit.

At the Santa Clara County Office of Education, all reporters must work through the Communication Services Department. Communication Services staff will assist the reporter with his or her request.

If news people are on your campus without having notified you in advance for permission, question them to determine their purpose. Explain your sign-in process and make sure they follow your procedures. Explain that your responsibility is the safety and learning of each child. Let them know you will assist them, but they must work with you to respect the integrity of the learning environment.

When contacted by the media, remember

1. Respond promptly and honestly. Do not guess or speculate. Be specific, but don't be afraid to say "I don't know. I'll call you back with the answer in ten minutes." Then gather the information and do call back.
2. Don't open doors wide for good news and then slam doors in faces when the news is less than positive. All stories need a response.
3. Reporters are not looking for the negative or for skeletons in closets. They are, however, trained to not merely accept what officials tell them, but to substantiate their information. Reporters are not concerned with placing schools in an unfavorable light. Rather, a good journalist attempts to present many sides of any issue. If you do not respond, the only material they have belongs to the opposing side.
4. Do your homework – anticipate likely questions and review possible responses. Be prepared to answer the questions you don't want asked.
5. Think before you speak.
6. Refer to concrete examples, personal experiences and clear images.
7. Never go "off the record." When conducting an interview, a reporter is not engaging in a private conversation. The information you relay "off the record" may not be used in the immediate story, but may be published if the reporter can confirm the information with another source who speaks "on the record."

A reporter may also ask to use information "not for attribution." This means the reporter agrees not to identify a source by name.

8. Speak slowly and give BRIEF answers. Particularly for TV and radio say only a few words – 20 to 30 seconds worth. If you ramble on and on, it gives the reporter too much editing leeway and you lose control over your message.
9. Eliminate acronyms and jargon from your speech. Most people aren't familiar with articulation, curriculum modification, core classes, component, CDE, CTA, CSBA, ACSA, ADA and C-BEST, so don't use them. Be able to describe these terms in simple language.
10. Use your conversation to flag an important point: "The most critical issue here is..." "The number one priority is..." Also, simple analogies or comparisons can best explain complex concepts.
11. Never say "no comment." If you can't respond, give the reason – such as legal propriety or a pending investigation. You can also speak to policy and procedures, as well.
12. If you don't want to answer a hypothetical question, simply say so.
13. Never assume journalists agree with you although they may act as if they do.
14. Be friendly and helpful, but professional. Maintain your own integrity.
15. Give feedback. If a story appears involving your school, let the reporter know if you like it. Likewise, if the story has a problem or inaccuracy, the reporter needs to know that. Request corrections for significant factual errors.

What you should know about media outlets

It's critical that you choose the appropriate outlet to cover your story. Listed below are different media outlets, what they cover and whom you should contact to get coverage.

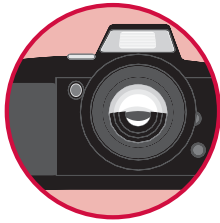
Daily and weekly Newspapers: There are a number of ways to get your story in print via a daily newspaper like the San Jose Mercury News or the community newspapers.

- **News:** If you have hard news, contact the city desk, the education editor, or a reporter who covers your area. If your story has a visual impact, call the photo editor, too. Phone numbers and email addresses are available on Web sites.
- **Features:** Features are in-depth human interest stories. You might read a feature on medical research, playground safety, an individual overcoming hardship, or significant moments in lives. Features may be developed and written over a period of days and weeks; breaking news is usually written in one day and published the next. Contact the features editor or a specific writer with your idea.
- **Letters-to-the-editor:** The letters page is one of the most popular and widely read sections of any newspaper. If you have a response to a news story, write a 100-word letter and fax or email it immediately. Time is of the essence when preparing these letters since what is news today, is "old" news tomorrow.
- **Guest Column:** This column or "op-ed" (opinion editorial) is a great way to explain your cause or concern in a more in-depth manner – about 750 words. Before you prepare your column, contact the op-ed editor for some guidance.
- **Web sites:** Most media outlets have Web sites promoting their programs and assisting visitors with news placement.

- **Local Weeklies:** These newspapers provide stories that spotlight individual communities. Talk to the editors to find out the deadlines and the best way to deliver the information they need.
- **Local TV News:** Many of us get our news from the local television. That's one reason why there's such intense competition to get TV news coverage. Another is that only a few stories make the news. After the weather, sports, anchor chatter and commercials, only about 12 minutes of real news ends up in 30-minute news show. To get your story on air you have to ensure strong visuals. Contact the assignment editor.
- **News Radio:** Although there are only a few of these stations around – disc jockeys now read bits and pieces of the local news at most stations – those remaining usually do a good job of daily news coverage. Find out which stations cover local news and build a relationship with the news director or a reporter.
- **Talk Radio:** Talk radio is for those who are adept and confident spokespersons. Identify those shows you believe have an audience that will be interested in your message. You can call the host or the show's producer.
- **Other outlets:** You might also consider contacting magazines, TV public affairs programs or TV talk shows.

Media list

For a complete listing of the Bay Area media contact the Santa Clara County Office of Education's Communication Services Department at 408-453-6514.



This booklet was prepared by the
Santa Clara County Office of Education
Communication Services Department

The Communication Services Department is located on the second floor, South Building, of the Santa Clara County Office of Education building, 1290 Ridder Park Drive. Communication Services provides expertise in media relations and public relations; publications development and production; recognition events planning and execution; comprehensive design and printing services; and safety and special project management. The department has won national awards for its publications and special events planning.

We are here to help you. If you would like more information, you are invited to write or call:

Santa Clara County Office of Education
Communication Services Department
1290 Ridder Park Drive, Mail Code 215
San Jose, CA 95131-2304
Office: 408-453-6514
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