

WHAT YOUR PR DIRECTOR WOULD LIKE TO TELL YOU

The following pieces of advice were collected before Christmas, 2008 by Keith Moore, CIC senior advisor for public relations. He sent email requests to 54 campus public relations professionals at colleges and universities across the country. His request asked for one piece of advice (or more) for their president that they felt they could not deliver themselves, but wished that someone would deliver for them in the January 7, 2009 session, "Making the Case" at the Presidents Institute in Bonita Springs, Florida. Here is a composite summary of the almost two dozen responses. Of course, confidentiality was guaranteed, and no names or institutions are revealed.

Two respondents had no complaints about their presidents, just compliments. They said: "I think our president is exceptional in dealing with media (certainly, if I still were a reporter I would be impressed). So I'll share a few things I've seen him do:

- He remembers reporter names and uses them frequently (but not too frequently)
- He appears to recognize that they are doing their job. I've never seen him confrontational, and to the best of my knowledge he always has been above board with them.
- He doesn't dodge reporters, even on tough issues."

"Honestly, I tell (our president) the way it is and have done so since I've been working at (the college) (my sixth anniversary was in October). Every year I'm always grateful that I work for (our president) because she gets it. She wants honest feedback, and that's what I give her."

Others had these specific suggestions.

1) Engage yourself in media relations activities.

"While our president is very supportive of our media relations efforts and graciously expresses gratitude to faculty members who dedicate their time and expertise to increasing visibility for the College, our president seems content to observe from the sidelines. She is a gifted communicator who could contribute greatly to conversations within her areas of expertise, but when we approach her to write an opinion piece for our local newspaper or we attempt to schedule visits for her with important editors, she turns us down. A few media relations efforts on her part would greatly increase our college's standing and reputation locally and regionally."

"Be visible to the local, regional, and national news media. Take calls. Return calls. Attend community events. Be seen and heard."

"Act like you really want the reporters there, even if you're just pretending."

Set up media tours every two years or so that we can communicate fresh ideas, new research, new directions, e.g.

2) Listen to -- and rely upon -- your media advisor's suggestions.

“Listen to your colleges' media relations experts. They know the field and the rules of the game.”

“If the PR guy says it's not a story, it's not a story. It doesn't matter what your dean, your colleague down the road or your spouse is telling you. If the PR guy says ‘it's been done,’ ‘we don't want to be in that story’ or (especially) ‘that will make us look stupid,’ believe him or her..”

“It's not always the media relations folks passing the information along to the media, but faculty, staff or students – sometimes well-meaning and sometimes with an axe to grind. Do not say or write anything in a campus-wide e-mail or in on-campus speech (even if not open to the public) that you wouldn't want to read in the next day's newspaper. What the president says, for better or worse, will get to the media and sometimes quicker than you can walk back to your office from the speech.”

“Your PIO needs to be at your right hand, and he or she should be privy to virtually everything going on on campus. Get the best person in the position you can, and then trust him or her to be THE counsel on matters related to PR and media relations.”

3) Support the function on campus.

“The president must encourage faculty (and others) to make (media interaction) a priority by working more closely (and cooperatively) with the public information or college relations office.

“Whether it's a few words of encouragement or a more structured initiative that provides incentive, the president must take an active, vocal, and visible role so that faculty will understand and support the importance of such an effort. Becoming better known as an institution is arguably as important as any other initiative, yet it seems that many presidents are reluctant to even mention it to faculty, much less make it a priority.”

“Thank your PR office when they achieve a major accomplishment, such as a story in *The New York Times*.”

4) Learn what interests the media – and what does not interest the media.

“Campus events do not often make good stories. They make good items to put into a calendar, but they aren't in themselves worthy of an article in the newspaper.”

“Press Conferences are overrated. They are rarely, if ever, needed except to explain major problems or catastrophes and most reporters don't like them-even the TV reporters.”

“Readers don't want to read an eight-page profile of your spouse unless your spouse is Mother Teresa, Warren Buffett or Angelina Jolie.”

5) Capitalize on each opportunity when it arises by...

...treating the media as professionals.

“Be respectful of media, and they are not susceptible to flattery, free food, honorary degrees (well, some are), and tend to be suspicious of staged events.”

“When you have invited reporters to your campus for some event, be it a press conference or campus tour, focus on the reporters and not on anything else. If your mind is elsewhere, your performance as a 'tour guide' will reflect it, and you will appear to care not at all about the reporters who are covering your story.”

“Reporters don't like presidents or anyone else bringing tons of PR crap, clips, view books, DVDs to a meeting. Bring only those materials (three or four things) that support whatever the meeting is about.”

...using your presidential platform to advance a signature issue.

“Stand for something or, to put it another way, pick an issue you are passionate about that is important to higher ed overall -- this will resonate with reporters -- and stick to this message in interviews, at meetings of your counterparts, with reporters, alumni, parents, faculty, staff and students. Make it part of your strategic plan and show the concrete steps you've taken to make it happen. For example, ensure financial aid and accessibility to your college regardless of financial means. This issue is a worthwhile cause. It doesn't mean you're limited to talking only about this issue; it means that this is your signature issue, but of course you're capable of talking about other topics as well.”

“Translate your messages into one-sentence sound bytes. Yes, it is often hard to boil your message into “quick hits,” but that’s how the news media works.”

“Be available to media as much as possible and talk strategically while being forthright about goals and actions that affect students, staff/faculty, the environment, perhaps the community/world.”

...articulating clearly and effectively.

“Take every interview seriously. Today it is possible that a small mention in a lesser-known publication or web site can make its way around the world.”

“Keep it short and you won't be misquoted.”

“Do not drone on and on or try to be so lofty. When speaking to the news media, state your main point first, concisely. The rest of the interview can be information that supports that point, but return at least once to the main point you want to make.”

“Do not speak in generalities rather than specifics. When speaking with reporters, translate your vision into real-world terms and through stories of the interesting people and programs at the college or university.”

...writing in a style the media can easily use.

“When writing for the news media, you are not communicating with your peers or trying to impress peers. You are communicating with an audience that is not as involved in higher education as you are, and doesn't care nearly as much.”

“Do not treat e-mail haphazardly. Many more journalists prefer e-mail interviews these days and quote directly from your answers. So, write coherently and in complete sentences. Be expansive, but conversational. Imagine you are writing a letter to your mother, who is a strict grammarian, and you'll be fine.”

... practicing to get better.

“Take the time -- five hours or so a year at least -- to get media trained by a professional. It will pay off in so many ways.”

6) Use a crisis as an opportunity.

“Acknowledge the tension or conflict that exists on a topic upfront. Reporters rarely write about something that everyone agrees is fantastic. If you acknowledge it, you at least have a chance to frame how the reporter will look at it.”

“In a crisis, don't try to make reporters go away. Understand that they're at your campus to do their jobs, and if you tell them, directly or indirectly, to 'get lost,' they'll think that you may be hiding something and will only want to dig deeper. They'll also remember it the next time you really want them there.”

“In times of crisis or uncertainty keeping the lines of communication open between the top office and the campus community is vitally important.

“If the campus community is going to hear about a situation in (the news reports), communicate the institution's message/response through email, text and website so that the campus community feels like the members have another source for information or better yet, the have heard it from the campus first and not from the local news station. This will create a sense of openness and transparency that will help counter false or misleading statements in the news cycle.”