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I have a question for you. What is your relationship like with the media in your area? If your truthful answer was anything less than “good” or “excellent” then that means there is some work to be done. As much as I like to joke around with the reporters in my school district’s area, the media is not really a part of the Evil Empire, constantly trying to take us down. And just like any other relationship, you have to work at it to make it a positive give and take.

Most good relationships don’t just happen over night and it will take some effort on your part to learn a little bit about how the media in your area works. What are their deadlines? Who are their editors, assignment persons, news directors and reporters covering your district?

Brad Domitrovich, Director of School and Community Relations at Georgetown Independent School District (ISD) feels time can be one of the challenges, especially from a superintendent’s standpoint. However, he says taking the time to reach out to the media and to share information and story ideas has its benefits. “They might not bite on everything that you’re offering,” Domitrovich admits. “There might be something there that is kind of different or unique that will catch their attention.”

Domitrovich encourages district officials to keep plugging away and to develop a relationship that goes beyond a reporter just being someone there to report bad things when they happen. He says it can be invaluable to know who the media players are, especially in a crisis. “It is easier to work with people you know than with people who are strangers who are just walking through your door for the first time.”

Fox News4 Reporter Saul Garza from Dallas, Texas agrees that when they have a relationship with school officials it helps get the right information out. In an emergency situation, that can be key to the school district and news organization alike. Garza feels districts can develop a trust with reporters. “If you build a relationship with a reporter and/or the media, you might have a better chance of getting a feel good or positive story covered as well,” he said. “It works both ways.”

That is a sentiment shared by Neal Morton, an education reporter with The Monitor in McAllen, Texas. “Even though not all news will reflect positively on a school district,” Morton says. “Officials should trust a reporter’s integrity and desire to share the best context and truth. Knowing that can help a school district get the best information to parents and the public in good and bad times.”

Morton went on to say he knows schools are trying to increase knowledge and communication as much as possible and that a reporter can be a direct pathway to accomplish that mission.

But as a school district/official goes about that communication mission through a media source there are some very important rules of the road. Domitrovich says the number one rule is to always tell the truth. He also says you should try to have the key facts available for every story. "Put yourself in the shoes of the reporter," Domitrovich adds. "Think about what questions they will likely ask. Who are they going to want to talk to?" He also says the district public relations person is not always the best person to speak with the best authority in some situations. Another major rule of thumb is to never say "no comment." Garza agrees that many times this makes a district look worse in the eyes of the viewer.

If an inaccuracy does get printed or aired, Domitrovich says it is okay to contact the reporter to let them know something was reported incorrectly. "As long as we treat people as professionals," he explains. He also warns against being confrontational in these situations "Talk to them like they are real people and offer clarification. Say to yourself, "maybe I wasn't that clear."

Domitrovich strongly encourages school districts to have a set of media guidelines and procedures in place for staff to follow should members of the media call or stop by. It is also a good idea to let the media know what rules you expect them to follow if they need something from your district or one of your schools. Often you may find yourself in the role of a facilitator; getting a reporter the information or sources they need in order to put together as accurate a story as possible. Morton says, "School officials too often concrete themselves in their internal machines. Reporters aren't always saying something is wrong when they ask questions or want the details of a situation." He added that districts can look wrong if they refuse to comply with requests.

Another important concept to keep in mind when speaking with reporters is that nothing in the conversation is "off-the-record." You may feel you are doing yourself, the reporter or the district a favor by providing tips or information off-the-record. However, you are more than likely complicating your relationship with the reporter and possibly setting yourself and your district up for other issues down the road. Know your facts and stick to those facts. In dealing with a school district, Garza states, "I look for and expect cooperation, honesty, and straightforwardness."

This article is by no means a complete how-to guide to dealing with or developing good relationships with members of the media. It is meant as a starting point. As we indicated earlier, developing a good working relationship with anyone takes time. The process will also come with its ups and downs. Garza offered a final suggestion that he said was used recently. Several police department information officers in the North Texas area held a "meet and greet" at one central location. They invited the media to get to know them, ask questions and make suggestions as to how to better work together. He said it was informal with reporters coming and going for a couple of hours.

If you would like some more information about media relations, a good source is the Texas School Public Relations Association (TSPRA). They are a cost-effective source for many districts in the state looking for everything from formal training sessions and

communications planning, to simple advice. They can be contacted at 1-800-880-9107. TSPRA is online at www.tspra.org.