Positive Image and Reputation Start With Credibility

How important is credibility? Credibility is king. The average person is more informed and more discerning than ever. When community members come together either in support of a cause or as consumers of a product (i.e., your program is the product; your students, parents, and community the consumers), they are a force to be reckoned with. Gaining credibility with these people is how you can harness this force for the betterment of your program and ultimately, your school.

It's no surprise that credibility is key to a positive image and a good reputation. We get bombarded every day through many media (such as television, radio, print, and the Internet) with so many different perspectives on an issue that we become more skeptical of what is credible information and what is not. Because of this, audiences react by being more selective in the sources of information they use. Any organization or information source that is not *perceived* as credible is often disregarded or attracts significant opposition. Gaining and maintaining credibility will, in the end, win you support.

Are most educators seen as credible?

The public wants to have confidence in leadership, whether in business, politics, or education. However, the public can be less than forgiving when it has lost confidence in its leaders. Therefore, maintaining confidence and being perceived as credible is key. In the wake of recent corporate scandals, business leaders turned to public relations practices to improve their image and gain credibility. Politicians have long done the same. Taking a quick look at your local headlines will give you insight into which of your local leaders are using strategic communications counsel.

Credible leaders craft and follow sound communication strategies that include sound ethical, honest actions embedded with candor, transparency, and leadership. It will serve you well particularly when facing adversity at your school or in your community.

How does one gain credibility with vital audiences?

Ultimately, credibility is gained through

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communication. It's the manner, frequency, and quality of communication among you, your school community, and the public that will gain or gut credibility. Regardless of the situation or environment, you must have answers: What is the situation? Who is involved? Who are important audience members? Who could be our partners? What is current audience perception? What is important to them? What credibility do we currently have with them and how can we gain greater credibility?

Gaining the support of credible third parties is a significant factor. Identifying opinion leaders within your community and organizations or authorities that have the trust and attention of the people you are trying to reach can be significant in gaining or retaining credibility.

Research has shown for some time that the most influential factor in shaping people's opinions or calling them to action is the news media. That's what makes media relations significant, and that's why the ability to crystallize public opinion and inspire individuals to act is vital.

Members of the public are increasingly skeptical of the news media, but that doesn't mean that they have tuned it out. It just means that they diversify whom they get their information from. Instead of just relying on traditional news organizations, people hit the Internet. They question and challenge the predigested synopses that we see in the news, which used to be the vanguard of public opinion.

Application of the Internet, through your school Web site, online discussion groups, Web chats, and other online vehicles represents the new toolbox to shape and lead public opinion, but only if credibility is retained. No new tactic replaces the bottom line—be honest, ethical, and forthcoming with information. The Internet is a channel to identify, reach, and connect with your community. However, online communities have a particularly low tolerance for anything short of complete candor, transparency, and fact. Prepared messages posted online can be ineffective.

Credibility has become a difficult and moving target. The standard keeps getting higher. As mentioned before, there are few constants. Whether we are talking about test scores or school safety, Enron or Martha Stewart, people want transparency—they want candid, open, honest communication.

To gain credibility with one audience, organizations are often reviewed on how they treat other audiences. Administrators judge you on your ability to communicate to and with students. Parents judge you on how you treat their students.

If credibility is lost, can it be earned back?

Admittedly, it's an uphill battle. Regaining credibility after it has been lost demands candor. Offenders have to recognize the reality of the situation and be open and honest about it. That first step cannot be overstated. If it doesn't happen, all the smoke and mirrors are not going to make a considerable difference. You need to identify the contributory incidents that damaged your credibility. That path is marked by candid and honest disclosure, an interest in the community around you as expressed through the individuals that make up that community, and a dedication to doing the right thing.

By doing that, the school and program can start on the path to regain credibility, which is key to a positive image, a good reputation, and support from the community. ∎

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