New Research Points to Shifts in Focus, Strategy

By Nora Carr

Shifting focus isn’t easy to do, but it’s an essential element of public relations leadership and strategy development. If you jump on the bandwagon too quickly your communications success can easily get derailed by a fad that will fade as quickly as it arrives. If you wait too long, you may miss best timing and the best opportunity for moving the dial on public opinion.

There are two shifts currently underway we need to understand better and leverage more strategically as school PR professionals: the shift to mobile communications and the rise, or perhaps re-emergence, of storytelling, particularly visual storytelling.

Pictures win the day

These trends are inter-related. As communications go mobile, and even wearable, visual mediums like Pinterest will continue to soar. In the battle between words and pictures, pictures win every time, and the few words we do use, have to say something memorable. Our brains are hard-wired for this. Some experts estimate that the brain processes visual information 60,000 times faster than text.

Studies dating back decades have long shown that body language and other visual cues communicate more than the words we say. We recognize that people remember what we do and how we made them feel long after they remember what we said.

More recent research indicates that web viewers spend 100 percent more time with sites with videos than those without, and that posts with visuals drive greater engagement with the content. Other studies show that more than 80 percent of learning is visual. If, as authors Ekaterina Waller and Jessica Gioglio say in their new book, The Power of Visual Storytelling, “Attention is the new commodity” (and) “Visual storytelling is the new currency,” we have some work to do.

Use new channels in new ways

As with other communication shifts, the key is using new channels in new ways rather than simply recycling tired text and so-so, point-and-shoot photos. Raised on a world saturated with advertising, today’s parents and consumers are understandably wary of posed and canned photos, including the proverbial “grip and grins.” For on-the-go communications, this may mean creating custom mobile applications (apps) designed just for parents, or packaging information in smartphone-friendly infographics like the one on data security and privacy that NSPRA shared recently with members.

Infographics are easy to appreciate but not always easy to create, especially for one person and small school PR teams without a graphic designer on staff. New tools, like Infogr.am, Visual.ly and piktochart can help.

Candid, photo-journalism style photography delivers authenticity

To get a better handle on the impact of visual storytelling through still photography and well-crafted copy, check out a white paper issued, with admitted self-interest, by NewsCred and Getty Images. According to this report, also called, interestingly, “The Power of Visual Storytelling,” consumers crave authenticity. Candid, documentary-style photos that reflect reality may ring
more true than the smiling, posed kids and teachers presented on so many public school marketing brochures.

We learned this lesson years ago in an urban district that was focused on recruiting top teacher talent across the country to work in schools highly impacted by poverty. Teacher focus groups, as well as national research, told us two things: 1) teachers wanted to see themselves as powerful professionals making a difference; and, 2) they responded more viscerally to culturally relevant photos done in candid, photo journalism style.

This aligns well with the NewsCred and Getty emphasis on finding, photographing and promoting heroes, like highly skilled classroom teachers and caring school custodians, who can serve as the archetypal representation of your school or district brand. As Pam Grossman with Getty images notes in the white paper, “The sweet spot happens when you find an image that taps into something ancient, timeliness and universal, yet it is incredibly contemporary.”

Powerful photos and a few well-chosen words or a carefully curated factoid translate well into mobile environments. School districts like Tacoma Public Schools and other NSPRA award winners have mastered this storytelling skill well.

**Personalization is key**

Personalization also is important in our on-the-go, make up our minds in just seconds world. One-size-fits-all communication has never worked well, whether deployed face-to-face, broadcast to the masses or digitally. Parents, for example, want easy, quick and mobile access to their children’s grades, homework assignments, choral concerts and athletic competitions. They may not want to wade through job openings or new employment policies and procedures to get there. The best mobile apps are personalized to each audience’s needs.

The bottom line for schools communicators is that we need more heart and fewer facts, more showing and less telling. Stories matter. Smart strategists understand this, and know how to execute creative tactics well.

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