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Communications is a team sport and team sports need coaches to get the best from all players. To increase the amount of information you can share, and to improve the quality of the writing, learn how to coach – not just edit your writers and contributors – so they can learn to produce good content.

Communicating through video: Enhancing and personalizing internal communications
Video is a powerful communications tool that has become accessible to non-professional videographers. Read tips for why and how to produce videos and improve the effectiveness of your internal communications.

Hey kids, it’s show don’t tell time!
Your staff are an excellent resource for increasing public support of your district. Help the community get to know the people in its schools by sharing stories about staff who give back to their community. This tip sheet has easy ideas to publicize staff activities.

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Praising children is important, but it must be the right kind of praise, the kind that recognizes effort and motivates kids to keep trying. Praise for fixed qualities such as intelligence levels can stall effort. Read about praise for growth mindsets to help your child do her best.
COACHING YOUR WAY TO GOOD WRITING

You’re dreading its arrival in your inbox.

“It” is a piece of supposed writing that bears little resemblance to the written word. The punctuation is haphazard, as if commas were scattered asunder by a runaway bobsled. The word choice is unique – uniquely awful. The point — surely, there must be one — is obscure.

What to do? That depends on whom the writer is, and how much control you have over the final product. In the end, as well as in the beginning, it comes down to coaching.

Coaching, not directing: Coaching in the professional setting is not like coaching on the sidelines of a game. In the latter, a sports coach continually tells the players what to do. In the workplace, that would be considered micromanaging, a guaranteed way to alienate people.

A workplace coach more closely resembles a vocal coach for a singer or a swing coach for a golfer. The coach is a helpful guide, putting the person in the best position to succeed.

Workplace coaching is not controlling, which differentiates it from editing. Coaching allows the writer to keep control as long as possible. Again, that is the opposite of micromanaging.

Coaching requires the investment of your time, but in the long run it will reduce the need for editing and thus save you time while improving quality.

This is not a fad. As someone who has practiced and taught workplace coaching for nearly 40 years, I firmly believe in its effectiveness. We all need coaches, just as we all need editors, including me.

Start in the beginning: The most important coaching occurs before the writing project begins: What does she envision for the research and writing? How will he approach it? What obstacles does she foresee? Who is the target audience? How will he make it relevant to that audience? Will it be clear to them why they should care? What outcome or response does she seek from that audience?

Coaching can work with a colleague, a subordinate, a parent volunteer … even your boss.

Coaching up – coaching your boss – also requires the art of understanding what he wants from you as far as coaching and editing, and how much tolerance she has for your suggestions.

In the most successful coaching, you’re listening – instead of instructing – and you’re asking questions that help the writer find his way.

The writing process: Writing coaches vary as to whether they define writing as a four-, five- or six-step process. I prefer the Four C’s definition from writer and professor Carole Rich, because it’s easy for me to remember:

1. Conceive – Decide on, and narrow down, the key concept or idea.
2. Collect – Do the research.
3. Construct – Do the writing.

The legendary writing coach Donald Murray boiled the process down even more to prewriting, writing, and rewriting.

In any case, the stages blend instead of being discrete. For example, the research process
often leads the writer to go back and refine the idea.

Conception arguably is the most important step for coaching. Everything in the writing should relate back to that concept. The idea should be summarized in a one-sentence focus statement that guides the writer. Writers often struggle because their concept is too broad or vague. My most-common advice to writers is, “Narrow your focus.”

Writer’s block often occurs because the writer did not do enough work at the previous stage. For example, the writing becomes a struggle because the research was inadequate or the concept was imprecise. That is why it is important to understand the writing process.

Ask magic questions: Writing coaches Roy Peter Clark and Don Fry talk of “magic questions” – ones that cut through writer’s block, help the writer establish her focus, and help him stay on track. Typical questions when I am coaching a writer, depending on where she is in the writing process, include:

- Tell me about your idea.
- Tell me about what you’ve found out.
- Who is your audience? Why will this piece matter to them?
- What are you trying to convey?
- What is/are your key point(s)?
- What is the most interesting about what you’ve learned?
- How will you structure the writing? What is your plan? If you don’t know where you’re going, how will you know when you’ve arrived?
- What should you leave out? What won’t you have room for?
- What is working in the writing and what isn’t?
- Would this piece be stronger if you trimmed it in half … or by a third … or by 10 percent?

And my favorite question: “How can I be most helpful to you today?”

That question works equally well with bosses and parent volunteers. After all, this is not about your ego. The better the product that you receive for editing, the easier your job will be.

Instructions that guide: Make sure your initial request to the writer is clear without being overly complex. What is obvious to you might not be obvious to him. Start with the desired length and format, but you also might need to offer such reminders as these:

Make the reader see: Write with such clarity that the reader gains a mental vision of what the writer is talking about.

Show, don’t tell: Avoid using adjectives or adverbs whenever possible. Use specific verbs and nouns. Instead of writing that “the school is crowded,” give examples, such as “Students carry their lunch trays back to class, because the cafeteria has been converted into six classrooms.”

Get to the point: Unless it’s an academic paper, don’t start with background. Instead, tell people what they need to know. For example, “The bond measure would pay for a new high school and finish retrofitting all the district schools to withstand a Category XYZ tornado/hurricane/earthquake [whatever your potential calamity is]. A Category XYZ tornado/hurricane/earthquake is the equivalent of … .”
That approach is far more engaging than, “Last year, a 20-member citizen task force study of district facilities found that … .”

**Remember the audience:** Focus on what *they* will want to know, not just want you think they should know.

**Cover the basics:** A basic writing formula is that a piece should cover the Five W’s and the H – who, what, when, where, why, and how – and make it clear why the reader should care.

**Keep it simple:** The more complicated the material, the shorter the sentences should be. Write to inform, not to impress.

**Coach for the future:** I once worked as the night editor in a newsroom that was required to produce a weather story almost every day. Because I considered the night reporter a weak writer, I dutifully rewrote her weather story each evening. I was surprised that her work got worse over time, not better.

I thought I was being a good mentor and manager by demonstrating better writing to her. Not so. What motivation did she have to improve if I was always rewriting her work? I have since apologized to her for my editing arrogance.

“Perfect” is the enemy of “good”**: If I did less editing and more coaching, the writer was likely to improve over time. That meant accepting some work as “good enough” instead of insisting on what I deemed as perfection. Clark and Fry’s seminal book, “Coaching Writers,” taught me that.

I’ve heard of administrators who rewrite everything from counseling reports to school board memos. Except in rare circumstances, that seems both a colossal waste of time for the administrator and a demoralizing experience for the staff.

In contrast, I knew an extremely demanding city manager who insisted that department heads write their city council memos in plain, non-bureaucratic language. He rejected memos that failed his standards. But he did not rewrite the memos himself; he coached the department heads on what was needed. Over time, they learned how to meet his standards and why those standards mattered. The public was well-served by the clear, concise, and transparent language.

Such advice is not revolutionary. It was central to Strunk and White’s famous little book, “The Elements of Style,” written by William Strunk Jr. in 1918 and revised by E.B. White in 1959. Recent editions are available as free downloads or as paperbacks.

**What if the writer’s final draft stinks?** Writers, like students, will live up – or down – to your expectations. Your faith in the writer will lead to better work. Your coaching, whether only at the beginning or throughout the process, can make the difference.

If possible, read drafts when you’re in a positive frame of mind, instead of overly subjective and critical. As a professor of writing, I continually must remind myself not to grade student work when I’m tired or in a foul mood.

Coaching does not guarantee miracles. But it yields improvement. And lessens frustration.

**Dick Hughes is a writing consultant. Contact him at TheHughesisms@Gmail.com.**
COMMUNICATING THROUGH VIDEO: ENHANCING AND PERSONALIZING INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

This is the first of a two-part series on using video to communicate with your audiences and stakeholders. The focus in part one is using video to communicate internally. Next month, the focus will be using video to enhance your external communications.

Whatever your audience, video is a powerful – and often overlooked – communications tool that can be used to tell stories, engage stakeholders, provide timely updates, or simply insert a little fun into your work.

Why Video? In the past, video production was strictly for professionals, or at least those with the budgets for expensive equipment and editing tools. Today we all carry around the tools for video production in our back pocket. While professional video equipment will generally give you a more polished and higher quality result, lack of access to these tools is no longer a barrier to video production. And with the popularity of YouTube and other video sharing sites, it has never been easier to make, distribute and view videos.

While there are many ways to communicate internally, video deserves a special place in your communications toolbox. Here are a few benefits of video as an internal communications tool:

- **Absorption** – Many people will absorb information more fully from a clearly produced video than from a written message.
- **Efficiency** – A video can communicate in seconds what might take paragraphs or pages to write. A video can also cover content that would otherwise be delivered via in-person meetings, presentations, or trainings. This can save both time and money.
- **Versatility** – You can use video for a wide variety of purposes, including training, staff messages, organizational updates, recording events, highlighting successes, and much more.
- **Cost Effectiveness** – Modern video production is very cost effective and can save money on in-person trainings, meetings, or printed materials.
- **Accessible** – Videos are easily accessible from a variety of devices.
- **Personal Communication** – Research has suggested that people react to video more positively as it feels more personal.
- **Emotional Connection** – Video provides the opportunity to create greater emotional impact through music, images, and personal stories. This can increase staff engagement and connection to the topic.
- **Immediacy** – Tools like video conferencing and live streaming make large-scale communications instantaneous.
- **Humanized Communications** – Videos, particularly those that include interviews or events, are often less scripted and more spontaneous than other forms of communications. This can often resonate with employees who feel they are getting a more honest, authentic take on the topic.
- **Democratic** – The ability to share employee-generated content opens up communications to staff at all levels.
- **Fun** – With a little creativity and a sense of humor, video can add some levity to the workplace. This can contribute to a happy, healthy, and thriving work environment.
- **Familiarity** – In the age of online video streaming, people spend a great deal of time watching videos online. Providing information in this format mirrors how staff choose to consume information outside of work.
• **Supported by Research** – A 2011 study found that 93 percent of internal communications professionals believed that video had become an essential communications tool (Melcrum, 2011) and 54 percent of employees expect to see video in the workplace (Cisco, 2011).

**Ways to feature videos internally:** Given video’s versatility, there are many ways it can be used to enhance internal communications. Here are just a few:

- **Leadership Videos** – Videos featuring interviews with the superintendent, principal, or a school board member can be a wonderful way to connect staff to leadership while sharing important updates. These interviews can cover anything from policy updates to staff appreciation, current events to organizational changes.

- **Staff Training** – While there is often no substitute for in-person learning, certain types of training lend themselves well to video delivery. Getting a new phone system? Implementing new policies? Consider producing a short staff video rather than pulling staff together for an in-person training. And for those subjects that do warrant in-person training, consider producing a video recording so that you have an archive for future reference or as a resource for staff who missed the event.

- **New Staff Orientation** – Video can be a great way to train new staff and introduce them to your school or district. While the training aspect can be highly effective and save both time and money, it may be the emotional piece that is most valuable here. A well-done video introducing new staff to your district can help create a common sense of place and belonging. Make sure to feature what makes you special – including your students and you vision, mission, and goals.

**Team-Building** – While video can be a highly effective training and informational tool, where it really shines is in creating a greater sense of community and connection. With a little creativity, you can use video as a tool to connect, engage, and inspire staff in ways that an email or memo simply can’t achieve. Some team-building themes include: staff interviews, staff appreciation, staff- or student-generated content, success stories, video of staff events, humorous leadership pieces, bring your child to work day features, etc.

**Video Production Tips:** Below are a few tips to keep in mind as you create your staff videos.

1. **Be creative** – While talking heads have their place in video, try a variety of approaches including interviews, graphics, panoramas, slideshows, and voice overs.
2. **Be responsive** – Ask staff for suggestions on what they would like to see both in terms of content and format.
3. **Don’t over script it** – One of the appeals of video is its authenticity. Find people who are comfortable on camera and knowledgeable about the topic and just let them talk. You can always do multiple takes or edit your video after the fact but if it’s too scripted it will likely feel stilted and forced.
4. **Short and sweet** – Videos should be kept to a few minutes. Keep it within 2-5 minutes for most videos, and err on the side of shorter rather than longer videos. If you need more time, consider doing a series of videos.
5. Have fun – Video is an engaging medium. Don’t be afraid to loosen up a little, do something a bit different, and have fun with it.

RESOURCE LINKS: LEVERAGING VIDEO AS A STRATEGIC INTERNAL COMMUNICATION CHANNEL
WWW.HRZONE.COM/COMMUNITY-VOICE/BLOGS/RICHMONDR/LEVERAGING-VIDEO-AS-A-STRATEGIC-INTERNAL-COMMUNICATION-CHANNEL

UNDERSTANDING THE MYRIAD OF ONLINE VIDEO PLATFORMS
HTTP://AFRAME.COM/APPLICATION/FILES/2014/5373/4220/UNDERSTANDING_THE_MYRIAD_OF_ONLINE_VIDEOPLATFORMS.PDF

4 WAYS VIDEO WILL VASTLY IMPROVE YOUR INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS
WWW.SKELETONPRODUCTIONS.COM/INSIGHTS/4-WAYS-VIDEO-WILL-VASTLY-IMPROVE-YOUR-INTERNAL-COMMUNICATIONS

GIVE VIDEO A STARRING ROLE IN YOUR INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

10 TIPS FOR CREATING THE PERFECT INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS VIDEO
HTTP://BOLDCONTENDEO.COM/2015/07/03/10-TIPS-FOR-CREATING-THE-PERFECT-INTERNAL-COMMUNICATIONS-VIDEO/

HOW TO CREATE A GOOD VIDEO
WWW.WIKIHOW.COM/CREATE-A-GOOD-VIDEO

10 SIMPLE TIPS TO MAKE HOME VIDEOS LOOK PROFESSIONAL
WWW.MAKEUSEOF.COM/TAG/10-SIMPLE-TIPS-TO-RECORD-GREAT-LOOKING-HOME-VIDEOS/

Contributed by Crystal Greene, communications consultant
HEY KIDS, IT’S SHOW DON’T TELL TIME!

If you’re doing a double-take on the headline, you’re right. That’s not the classic phrase some of us grew up with. But it’s a clever idea to increase public support, starting this summer and into fall.

Keep voters aware of the positive impact your staff and volunteers make in your community year-round, not just during school. With all the sizzling political news lately, people might need a positive distraction. They’re hungry to feel pride and confidence in something … so make that something YOU.

This campaign is easy to create because your teachers, counselors, leaders and other staff and volunteers are compassionate, interesting people. It’s time to show that, so get your thinking caps on.

In a nutshell, show how your folks are giving back to the community.

Don’t worry about writing long stories. Pictures tell a thousand words, right? Consider a series of photos with short “blurbs” or captions for your website, Facebook page, blogs, school and district newsletters, even ads in local newspapers. Consider an ad buy, or ask if they’ll run features for free. Consider creating fliers for bulletin boards or posters for lobbies in banks, grocery stores, popular restaurants, malls, wherever people shop and gather, including your own school lobbies.

Get started: Find a diverse, interesting group of volunteers representing a good cross-section of your staff (job type, age, sex, race, physical ability, plus type of activity, etc.). Ask during staff meetings or post a message on your intranet, or in a leader’s email to staff, with this wording:

What do YOU do for our community?
Do you volunteer outside of work? Do you know someone who does? Tell us about it! Email ____________in the ________ (office) with what you do, and you may find yourself featured on our Facebook page, on a poster or in the newsletter. Do you coach? Feed the homeless or rescue animals? Maybe you make quilts for hospice, or pick up litter. Whether you are involved in an organized activity, or you volunteer on your own, we want to hear about it. Let’s show our community what ________ (school or district name) is made of!

Create the list: First, make sure they’re in good standing. Avoid staff on probation or in disciplinary action. You may end up with an abundance of coaches, so just make sure you get a good cross-section to show your community how diverse and interesting your staff and volunteers are. Look for the unusual – a young staffer who works with hospice, or an older but physically active volunteer. You might be surprised! Start small, featuring just a few. If you get overwhelmed (yay!) don’t let the extras go to waste; use them as fodder in a feature story, mention at board meetings and in speeches. You don’t have to turn them ALL into stars. But then, you can probably continue the series year-round if the list goes on and on.

Keep it simple: No fancy design needed – just a photo with a big headline at the top and simple text below, unless you have designer on staff, or a professional designer who volunteers. Make the photo speak for itself, so consider investing in a professional photographer to take “working portraits” or ask your local newspaper photojournalist. Or, maybe a high school student needs a project.
for a media class! The point is to show the person DOING a non-school volunteer activity.

**Brand with one theme:** Here are some clever headings to consider. They might spark even better ideas from you. Make sure each one has the same heading, or at least style, as part of a series. This will create a “brand” readers will quickly identify as your district.

*I’m More Than a Teacher (Counselor, custodian, principal, etc.)*
*More than a Secretary (Counselor, etc.)*
*Is THIS a teacher? (Secretary, etc.)*
*Our Community Matters to Me*
*My Community Matters*
*I Love Giving Back*
*One for All*

All you need below the photo is a simple description of the person and what they’re doing to serve the community.

**Example:** Yes, John Thomas is a teacher. But he also plants trees in his neighborhood as a volunteer for city parks. He not only cares about our kids, he cares about our community. Thank you, John!

**Have fun:** Photo ideas for a “Is this the face of a …” theme: Children painting the principal’s face, your principal as a volunteer Sunday school teacher or summer camp counselor, a coach wearing a chef’s hat or an apron if they volunteer for a food bank, maybe a teacher could wear a hard hat while planting a tree, or have an armful of kittens while volunteering for the local shelter). The principal could be quilting for hospice patients, or doing any hobby that shows service.

**Be strategic:** If you’re facing challenges, for example race relations or religious tolerance, consider featuring diversity. If you’re building support among non-English-speaking patrons, make sure they’re in the languages used by those groups. Include a website for more information, and of course, your district logo.

**Rotate and refresh:** If you create posters, switch them around, so every corner of your community sees new faces. Include one or two with each newsletter; switch out the Facebook features each week. Have a “Hall of Fame” where they’re ALL together for a huge impact and use at special events, retirements, community events, strategic planning sessions, whatever gets traffic.

**Do you have time for this?** Consider adding it to your community relations plan for next year, if you’re overwhelmed. Hmmm…maybe a high school marketing class needs a project?

**Why it’s important:** When trust is low and uncertainty is high, you need to work harder to maintain support, whether you’re planning a finance measure or keeping up with education mandates. It’s important to stay in front of your community with positive messages year-round, not just when “you need them to vote.”

After all, you always need them — so show how you’re always going above and beyond!

*Contributed by Shannon Priem, APR, former public relations director for the Oregon School Boards Association.*
MODELING CIVILITY IN AN ERA OF HOT-BUTTON POLITICS

The current political climate has made it almost impossible to avoid bumping into a hot-button political issue in conversation. Tempers and passions are running high, with issues like immigration, healthcare and government funding in the daily news – topics that affect people’s day-to-day lives.

A recent survey by performance-management technology company Betterworks found:

- The current state of politics distracts 29% of U.S. workers from their work.
- 73% of employees discussed politics with their colleagues since the election.
- 49% of workers witnessed a political conversation turning into an argument at work.
- 20% of the U.S. workforce and 34% of millennials say they’ve participated in a rally or march since the election.

https://blog.betterworks.com/feeling-distracted-politics-29-employees-less-productive-u-s-election/

Political engagement appears to be at an all-time high, which may be great for our democracy, but not so great for our productivity.

While both businesses and schools may be equally affected by potential changes in policies around funding for schools, arts and non-profits, and potential new tax laws, schools are in the business of teaching young minds about their worlds, so a “don’t talk about politics at work” stance is simply not going to work here.

**Don’t make assumptions:** For those of us who live and/or work in homogenous areas where our co-workers all have the same political views, these types of discussions pose less of a problem. Or do they? Are you certain that your co-workers agree with you? Or are they simply staying quiet to not rock the boat?

According to a study by Deloitte University’s Leadership Center for Inclusion, 61 percent of American workers engage in “covering,” (i.e., active attempts to disassociate themselves from associations and relationships that may stigmatize them or marginalize them in the workplace), and that percentage is even higher for women, LGBT and people of color. ([www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/us/Documents/about-deloitte/us-inclusion-uncovering-talent-paper.pdf](https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/us/Documents/about-deloitte/us-inclusion-uncovering-talent-paper.pdf)

In today’s climate, “covering” absolutely includes politics, so don’t be so quick to assume that, in a room full of people nodding in agreement, all of them actually agree.

**Don’t micromanage:** Staff may be on-edge, and it is important to give them some room to breathe. Now is not the time to start enforcing rules that have been left otherwise unenforced, or to create new policies for social media usage during the work day.

Your leadership can be best served by giving your staff tools that they can use in managing their high emotions. This flyer put out by the Anxiety and Depression Association of America on ways to manage stress and anxiety is a good start. [www.adaa.org/tips-manage-anxiety-and-stress](https://www.adaa.org/tips-manage-anxiety-and-stress).

But it’s also important that your staff knows you understand what they are going through, and how they might be concerned about the future of their jobs, their health and their families. Make it a conversation.
Focus on the big picture: Staff may be distracted and possibly fractured. But the goals that we all had at the beginning of the school year are all still the same, and those goals are a good way to bring people together. What were some of the educational and structural benchmarks you wanted to reach this year? Now is a good time to get together and talk about how progress is going on those. It is also a time to reward teams that have reached goals.

If you don't have teams working on goals, put some together. Teamwork is the medicine for a fractured workplace.

Don't think you're above it all! Your feelings are also likely running high. If you find yourself drawn into a political conversation that pushes your buttons, try to frame it as a learning opportunity.

“If you decide to enter into a political conversation with a colleague, think of it as a chance to learn from one another, not change each other’s views. Being interested in someone else’s thought process can be a great reason to engage in a political discussion.

Try saying something along the lines of, “I know what I think about healthcare, but I’m curious why you feel so differently. Would you be open to sharing your position with me?” Just make sure that in the back of your mind you’re not secretly hoping you’ll convert your co-worker.”

www.forbes.com/sites/melodywilding/2016/10/10/watched-the-debates-heres-6-dos-and-donts-for-talking-politics-at-work-this-week/#5f68f3c72996

In the classroom: Much has been written on how to address the current political season with students of all ages, with younger classes learning how to deal with feelings and how to separate fact from opinion, and older students learning how to support their arguments with sources and data and how to differentiate between facts and “fake news.”

The important thing to note is that your students, like your staff, are already thinking about these issues and discussing them with their parents.

Jonathan Zimmerman, professor of education and history at University of Pennsylvania and co-author of *The Case for Contention: Teaching Controversial Issues in American Schools*, which will be published in April by University of Chicago Press, notes, “A good teacher won't flame about politics like our rough-and-tumble national media, where talking heads shout past each other in a 24-hour circus of ridicule and invective. Our teachers need to model a different – and better – kind of civic exchange: informed, tolerant, and mutually respectful.”

Zimmerman acknowledges that teachers are going to have their own political views, of course. “But they also have to make it clear that their students aren't required to agree with them. Otherwise, they're not educators anymore; they're propagandists. And every time a teacher propagandizes her students, she makes it harder for other teachers to educate them.”

Politics can be divisive. It is important to remember that your staff all share the same goals. While politics do affect schools directly, in funding cuts and opportunities, in leadership and in changing scholastic requirements, they can also be a distraction from the fundamental purpose of educating and preparing our young people for the future. Let's not let our differences get in the way of that.

Contributed by Megan J. Wilson, Los Angeles-based freelance writer and communications consultant.
WHEN SHOULD YOU BUY ADVERTISING?

With school district budgets always tight, the idea of purchasing advertising may seem unwise. But schools are like other businesses; they have a product to offer. And if consumers aren’t aware of the product or of the product’s high quality, they may go elsewhere.

That never used to be an issue for schools. Public schools had little competition, other than a handful of private, mostly faith-based schools. It was a given that a community’s children would attend their neighborhood school. But over the years, school budgets in many districts have shrunk, class sizes have grown, and local control has diminished, causing some parents to look for educational alternatives.

Charter schools, online schools and private schools have sprung up in nearly every community. Parents now have options for their child’s school, and public schools have come to a stark realization: it’s not a given that children will enroll with them. This is truer in larger urban areas with other districts nearby. These districts must market their product, just as the charter schools, online schools and private schools are doing.

Marketing strategies vary from district to district. Some districts are aggressive in targeting students from neighboring communities, knowing that each student they lure brings several thousand dollars in state school funding. They may purchase space on billboards along main highways or create ads that run during the previews at local movie theaters. And, of course, Facebook ads are another popular choice.

Some districts are uncomfortable with a targeted approach and may choose to increase their visibility in more conventional ways, such as placing ads in the local newspaper during National Education Week.

Advertising can be an important part of a district’s marketing strategy. Savvy districts budget a specific amount for marketing and make advertising a thoughtful decision.

Why advertise?

Before purchasing any advertising, it’s important for a district to be strategic about what it hopes to gain. Purchasing advertising is an investment that can help you reach your patrons in a targeted manner. There are a variety of ways you can spend your advertising dollars, but not all will offer a good return on investment. It’s important to research different options and to know your target market and where they get their information. You can spend a ton of money in places where your target audience never looks, giving you little bang for your buck. The key is to carefully pick your marketing options, based on your goals and target audience.

While there are multiple avenues for delivering news, no one vehicle reaches everyone you need to hear your message. This has been an increasing problem as the news/advertising market has become more fragmented and specialized. Some parents and community members will visit your district website. Some will subscribe to your Facebook and Twitter feeds. Some will look for information in the local newspaper. Advertising is a way to reach targeted audiences with a specific message. If your district wants to reach Hispanic parents, for example, the most effective place to advertise may be Univision or Telemundo television or Spanish-speaking radio stations. If you want to inform parents about kindergarten registration, you may want to advertise in publications aimed at preschool parents.

Ads give you an avenue for sharing information that is no longer available in your local newspaper. As newspaper readership has declined and budgets have shrunk, the space they allot to local news has also shrunk. Features like “Student of the Month” or honor roll no longer warrant space in most
newspapers, but you could purchase an ad and still feature them.

You can help set the tone of your district as a friendly, welcoming place with a “back to school” ad in August, highlighting some of your successes and inviting parents and students back for a new year.

Are there successful programs in your district that the public may not be aware of? You may want to run a series of weekly ads highlighting different programs, such as your bilingual program or “School-to-Work” program or culinary arts program. Even better is to tie it to some call to action – attend an event, provide feedback, etc, so that you can also gauge effectiveness of the ad.

Where to advertise?

There is no one place where parents and community members get their information these days, so districts should carefully choose where to spend their advertising dollars. People tend to think of newspaper ads when they first consider advertising, but print media is only one of many different options for your marketing dollars. Here are a few to consider:

- **Newspaper** – Newspapers typically offer discounted rates when you purchase multiple ads to run over the course of the year.
- **Online news sources** – Most newspapers have online versions that feature “pop-up” ads that appear as readers open articles pertaining to your city or county. These ads can be highly effective in reaching patrons in your geographic area. One example: get out the vote for bond measures.
- **Radio** – Radio ads can be very effective for advertising events, such as kindergarten roundup. Spanish-speaking stations are a good choice for reaching your Hispanic community.
- **Television** – Television advertising is usually expensive but may be more affordable in some smaller markets. Television may be a good option to reach patrons about big issues, such as a bond measure.
- **Magazines** – Specialty magazines can be a good avenue for reaching specific audiences. For instance, if your high school construction program builds a house each year, it might be worthwhile to advertise the home in a real estate magazine – both to sell the house and to establish the students as quality builders.
- **Facebook** – Facebook is a simple, inexpensive tool for reaching large targeted audiences. Go to your district Facebook page and follow the directions for creating an ad. You can specify the demographics you want to reach, the geographical area and more. You can set the ad to run for a specified dollar amount, time frame or number of viewers you reach.

    It’s worth noting that Facebook is the ad option with the greatest cost flexibility. Set the budget, and Facebook won’t exceed your maximum spending level. And it tracks shares, new page likes and content engagement. An ad buy as low as $10 can reach thousands of people.
- **Billboards** – Billboards are an effective tool for building visibility of your district or perhaps a program, such as a new online school or a bilingual school. Location is key, ideally on a roadway where your targeted patrons pass by multiple times per day.
- **Movie theaters** – Check with your local cinema about purchasing advertising that would air during the previews of upcoming films.

*Contributed by Connie Potter, communications consultant*
Accusations of “fake news” have been thrown around in recent months. If the leader in the highest office in the country labels some of the most visible and, arguably, credible mainstream media outlets “fake,” then how can we expect students to be able to judge the trustworthiness of websites and digital information?

Students need to learn how to tell the fake news and bogus sites from the credible sources. They should build skills that help them ask? Is the information corroborated by other sources or replicated by other research? What is the background of the person providing the information – is he or she an acknowledged or credentialed expert? What is the nature of the organization providing the platform – a respected news outlet or simple blog, etc. And these skills should be reinforced at home and school.

Who can we trust and why does it matter?
This is not a new problem. Ever since the World Wide Web allowed anyone with basic coding skills to post content, the public has had to sort through false or inaccurate information. And even before that – long before – paid advertising sometimes made dubious claims.

There are many reasons students must be able to find believable sources and content for school work. We expect that academic assignments are factual. If the credibility of sources used for academic projects is debatable, then students must choose them carefully enough to be able to defend them.

These skills will benefit students long after graduation when they are adults and search for information about health concerns and finances.

Developing the ability to evaluate online information: According to recent studies, students have a lot to learn. In a study by the University of Connecticut that included 1,429 seventh-grade students from 40 districts in two states, “fewer than four percent of students could correctly identify the author of an online information source, evaluate that author’s expertise and point of view, and make informed judgments about the overall reliability of the site they were reading.” http://bit.ly/2nx1r9F

This study showed that girls performed better than boys, and students from lower income families had the greatest difficulty with the critical evaluation tests.

“The results are alarming,” said study author Elena Forzani. “The ability to critically evaluate the expertise and trustworthiness of source material is critically important when reading online.”

The recommendation from researchers?
Increase instruction to help improve critical thinking.
Does it meet the CRAAP test?
Fortunately, there are helpful, credible online sources of information to help students build skills for evaluating the credibility of sources of information – online and in printed materials. These sites are useful for parents and students, and they can also serve as a good reminder for educators to weave lessons into their curriculum.

Students should learn to watch for signs of legitimacy, such as a standard URL extension (.com, .edu, .gov), an about this site link, a contact us tab, and advertising (if any) that is separate from the content section.

A credibility test that students can remember is CRAAP, a test that will get students’ attention and help them evaluate information. http://bit.ly/2nu27vC

Currency: The timeliness of the information
When was the information published? Has it been revised or updated? Does your topic require current information, or will older sources work? If online, do the links work?

Relevance: The importance of the information for your needs.
Does the information relate to your topic or answer your question? Who is the intended audience? Is the information not too elementary or advanced for your needs? Have you looked at a variety of sources before determining this is one you will use? Would you be comfortable citing this source in your research paper?

Authority: The source of the information.
Who is the author/publisher/source/sponsor? What are the author’s credentials or organizational affiliations? Is the author qualified to write on the topic? Is there contact information, such as a publisher or email address? Does the URL reveal anything about the author or source (examples: .com .edu .gov .org .net)?

Accuracy: The reliability, truthfulness and correctness of the content.
Where does the information come from? Is the information supported by evidence? Has the information been reviewed or refereed? Can you verify any of the information in another source or from personal knowledge? Does the language or tone seem unbiased and free of emotion? Are there spelling, grammar or typographical errors?

Purpose: The reason the information exists.
What is the purpose of the information? Is it to inform, teach, sell, entertain or persuade? Do the authors/sponsors make their intentions clear? Is the information fact, opinion or propaganda? Does the point of view appear objective and impartial? Are there political, ideological, cultural, religious, institutional or personal biases?

Other Resources:
The 5 Ws of Website Evaluation
www.schrockguide.net/uploads/3/9/2/2/392267/5ws.pdf
How to Evaluate Web Resources
www.whoishostingthis.com/resources/evaluating-web-resources/
Annenberg Classroom Credibility Challenge
www.annenbergclassroom.org/page/the-credibility-challenge
Current news on legitimacy and credibility of current viral web content
www.snopes.com