

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH LOCAL MEDIA

HOLDING AN EDITORIAL BOARD MEETING CAN BE ONE VERY IMPORTANT WAY TO POSITIVELY AFFECT THE MEDIA'S COVERAGE OF CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION.

By Sabrina Kidwai

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One of ACTE's goals is to improve the image of career and technical education (CTE) through outreach to the media. As media relations manager, I receive calls from reporters asking questions about the types of students who participate in CTE. Reporters often have a misconception that CTE students are troubled or "at the bottom of the rung." Today's CTE students are smart, technologically savvy and successful. ACTE is working to improve the media's perception of them and the programming in which they participate.

Other questions that often arise from the media are related to the types of careers students can enter with a background in CTE. Reporters often mention construction, cosmetology, culinary arts and the automotive field; but they are surprised to hear that CTE also prepares students for careers in engineering, architecture, interactive media, finance and emergency management, to name a few. In order to help alleviate these stereotypes, CTE advocates should educate and build relationships with their local media. One way to improve coverage is to meet with your local newspaper editorial board to discuss how CTE is being covered. Before scheduling a meeting, you should conduct a media watchdog campaign, which analyzes how a newspaper is covering a particular issue.

This will provide you with the opportunity to monitor how the paper is covering CTE. Presenting this information to the editorial board will give your viewpoint credibility, and it will bring CTE issues to the attention of editors and reporters, which will help improve the coverage of CTE.

Media Watchdog Campaigning

Organize a group of four or five people to conduct the media watchdog campaign. The next step is to focus your analysis on an important issue in CTE. For example, the issue could be on how a newspaper covers CTE courses, promotes school events or includes CTE in workforce or dropout stories. Once the group selects the topic, here are steps on how to monitor the newspaper:

1. Each group member selects one day to monitor coverage of the topic (e.g. Monday). Each member will read through the entire paper and find stories that relate to the topic. This process can be simplified by assigning a person to each section of the paper.
2. Each member develops a chart that is divided into four sections: date of analysis, placement of stories (top or bottom half of the page, page number), type of coverage (i.e. positive or negative), and a description of photos, if included.
3. For each story or editorial relating to the topic, members fill an entry in the chart. If there is no story or editorial, then the member makes a note on the chart to reflect that.
4. At the end of a four-six-week period, the group will compile the results and analyze the coverage. From this analysis, the group will present its research findings during the editorial board meeting.

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Sabrina Kidwai in her office at the Association for Career and Technical Education in Alexandria, Virginia.

How to Request an Editorial Board Meeting

After conducting the analysis, one member of the group should call the newspaper to ask the procedure for requesting a meeting with the editorial board. In many instances, the editor or board prefers to receive the request in writing. This request should introduce your organization, give the reasons for the request, and provide relevant information on the topic you would like to discuss. For example, if the group's topic is coverage of CTE at local schools, it should highlight different successful programs in the area and the impact in the community. The letter should be brief, and should provide three-four pertinent documents relevant to the request (e.g. CTE Research Fact Sheet). Once the editorial board approves the meeting, a letter should be sent to introduce the person(s) presenting the information, and briefly outline their credentials and their affiliation with the organization. In the description be sure to include contact information for each of the presenters. As a rule, no more than four people should attend, with one person acting as spokesperson for the group.

Expectations and Organizing the Meeting

The day before the meeting the group should call and confirm to ensure that schedules have not changed. On the day of the meeting, the group should arrive 15 minutes early to sign in at the visitor's desk and wait to be escorted to the meeting room.

The spokesperson for the group should be positive and well informed on the issues. The editorial board meeting usually lasts about an hour. At the beginning of the meeting, participants will provide introductions, and the

editorial board may ask questions or refer to particular subjects of interest. Meetings I have attended gave the spokesperson from the group about 15-20 minutes to provide background information, present the group's analysis, and address areas of interest to the board.

After the presentation, the board may ask questions and discuss CTE. You should be prepared to answer follow-up questions and have a good understanding of the discussion topics. Although the lack of coverage may be a mistake on the media outlet's part, the best way to approach the meeting is with a mind-set of "How can we work together to increase coverage of CTE?" Editorial boards appreciate it when groups discuss ways they can improve coverage together, and not place blame on one side. They also value people who have done their homework on how the paper covers issues. By having the analysis on hand, the paper becomes aware of how they have covered CTE in the past, and it provides them with a better understanding of how to improve coverage.

Follow up with the Editorial Board

After the meeting, group members should send handwritten thank-you notes to each of the editors and reporters who attended the meeting. If the editors asked for specific information relating to CTE, send the information and include a resource list of career and technical educators, administrators and students who can discuss CTE. For the next few months, the group should continue to monitor the paper for positive coverage of CTE. If a story appears, members should write a letter to the editor, or contact the reporter, thanking him or her for the positive coverage of CTE. Although a media watchdog campaign and editorial meeting does take some time and persistence, if members work together as a group, it will be an effective tool in providing members of the media with a better understanding of CTE, its students, and its importance within the education system. The payoff can be worth it. By conducting the editorial board meeting, it offers the potential for a rich reward in terms of heightened attention to CTE, and you will be looked to as a source of information the next time the newspaper needs information on CTE or other related issues. **I**