

Campus Communicators: How You Can Serve Your President as an Effective PR Educator

By Randell J. Kennedy

Is your president a confident communicator who engages in thoughtful promotion of their institutional priorities and vision?

The ability support and help advance your university leader's effective communications skills is a more important function than ever, as college and university presidents and chancellors are expected to develop and maintain a conspicuous place in the public eye. They need your help and your good counsel, but they may not always readily admit this--given the widely held expectations of those who hired them that they already be a master of everything.

Over the past 26 years, I have been fortunate to work closely with some of the nation's most capable and accomplished on-campus communications professionals and their presidents. I continue to witness many successes first-hand and to contribute to some of them. But, as new challenges emerge in higher education, one of the biggest professional changes underway is the job description of senior campus communicator, second only to that of university president or chancellor, when it comes to additional professional responsibilities and expectations being added, each year.

Additionally, more members of the campus community who are among the least experienced in communication matters seem to maneuver to gain the president's ear in order to offer PR advice. Everyone reads the news, engages via social media or has had some brush with a media outlet. Hence, it seems, PR experts are everywhere—and their armchair ambitions can derail your university's ability to engage your president as an effective organizational communicator.

Your ability to work with or around them when necessary to provide your campus leadership with the best possible counsel can have a significant impact on your university's ability to tell its most vital stories. Indeed, senior-level communicators at public and private higher-education institutions today spend increasingly more time grappling with conflicting and often unsolicited institutional PR and marketing ideas instead of advancing the strategic initiatives that too often seem just out of reach.

It's no secret that a winning communications plan takes focus and coordination on all levels. Though it can be more challenging to gain the type of "marquee" feature coverage for a campus initiative or program in the ever-shrinking traditional press than it was a decade ago, there are also more platforms available to tell your story to audiences that matter, if campus communicators do it the right way. This holds true for university owned media, traditional earned media of all types and social media that matter most.

Each educational institution's media and PR successes are typically based on their ability to identify compelling stories and share them with the right outlets with an emphasis on good writing, clear messaging and excellent timing. Having a president who understands this is key—particularly if they are tapped to weigh in on an important story—and the role of senior communicator to provide context and guidance to their chief executive makes all the difference in the world.

Those presidents who are engaged learners will value smart ideas that empower them to navigate the media landscape. Presidents who are naturally curious (most are) will see the benefits in understanding the steps that go into making smart PR decisions, and they will wisely solicit the counsel of their university's most seasoned communications professionals. They accept change and will seek your help as they gain new perspectives, refine expectations and adopt new tools and approaches, instead of relying on old ones.

As you help your president realize their potential as a confident communicator, you must consider their perspective. Explore ideas they may share from all different angles, and provide them with excellent advice and counsel. They can use your help as an "educator" regarding matters in your field and you should offer it, early, clearly and often. You are in a unique position to advise your president as you cut through the clutter collaboratively to better understand what is important, meaningful and possible amid the noise that seems to be on everyone's radar screens, these days.

In doing this, I recommend that the senior communicators consider their president's personal communication style. Like other accomplished professionals today, most campus leaders are already tuned in and engaged in social media, some more effectively than others. Many are terrific writers.

Ask yourself: Is your president a natural public speaker, but maybe lacking in one-on-one interview skills with reporters? Do they like to Tweet and blog, but struggle to develop an op-ed piece on a higher-education topic? Your work to help them thrive in the communication style and approach with which they are already

most comfortable will help them shine even more brightly. As you do this, don't overlook opportunities to help them build and polish their skills in another medium that may also be important to them and to the university's audiences. Also, as you get to know your president, gain an understanding of a few specific issues and topics that they really care about, personally and professionally. Educate yourself about these topics and help your president stay current and informed about them, especially as they emerge in the headlines, from time to time.

Draft a short summary for your president describing recent changes among traditional news media (local, regional, national), including a few notes on emerging opportunities, the power of blogs and social media. Rather than using or sharing what's already out there or adapting from what others may have written, it's best to develop these from scratch, and make them specific to your own institution, its programs and special place in higher education. I suggest that these be updated at the start of each academic each year and shared with presidents and perhaps with your provost and others on campus who can benefit from gaining a better understanding of today's evolving communications landscape. This will also help put everyone on the same page.

These annual "media updates" provide an opportunity for you to obtain clear sense of evolving communication and PR priorities from your president. This will make it possible to work in concert so that you can keep your high-level communications efforts active instead of reactive, and it can serve as a resource to help you move beyond the tactical to advance the strategic. Additionally:

- * Continue to refine your own editing skills and become even better at condensing information and revealing what's most important for your president to consider and understand.

- * Remember that the best campus communicators are consistently able to provide "just enough" info when suggesting ideas, opportunities or other crucial intelligence for their very busy presidents to review.

- * Consider that a link to a story with a summary of the most relevant points, and a one-sentence explanation highlighting "why we should care" about it, can be very helpful.

- * Provide these summaries on an ongoing basis, but be sure to gain a sense of the appropriate frequency for your president, as some leaders want more updates and ideas, and others want less.

- * Use your access wisely--and appreciate the difference between being "at the table" and being camped out in your president's office, lurking for access.

As you offer good counsel, don't forget that you and your team still need to "get the hits." Work hard to generate positive media coverage based on goals for placement results and on a winning social-media presence. Look for opportunities to briefly and clearly explain to your president and others on campus exactly how the university landed each big feature story. Don't wait: Do this while they're still "hot" and relevant.

When your counsel pays off in other ways, be sure to note it. Don't be shy. And do be sure to give due credit to members of your communications team. Shed some light on the choices that went into putting out the video that went viral or the Tweet that launched an important new conversation in admissions, fund raising or alumni relations. Doing so will also provide your president with an even better and more accurate sense of the specific components and benefits of good university communication.

Be brief, be bright and be gone.

That way your president and other senior campus newsmakers will be more likely to see your value and will seek out your good counsel over that of others who are unqualified to dabble in your line of work. Those non-communicators who frequently seek to advance DOA publicity initiatives through campus-leadership channels are often unable to explain their ideas in the form of a compelling ten-second elevator pitch. This puts you at an advantage as you face competition when helping your president establish and maintain their focus on communicating the most relevant and strategic institutional priorities that often prove so elusive.

This reflects a very different and more interactive relationship than those in the past, when many campus PIOs functioned essentially as senior scribes--expected to churn out press releases, arrange lengthy meetings or repurpose some stand-by quotes from university leadership. More frequently, today, you will be asked to provide fast and accurate counsel, in good times and in bad, and will be expected to take hands-on action or to closely support the president in taking action, as the university responds to challenges and opportunities and they emerge and evolve.

Just as you are being asked for your professional advice on "what to do next," input and tactical advice will also be offered from other sources of counsel that may have little or no understanding of the current landscape at hand. This is not new; however, it does seem to happen now with much more frequency and relentless follow-up. While considering a wide range of opinions on PR matters is never a bad idea, remain

confident in knowing that the insights of an institution's most seasoned senior communicators and those who work directly with them are usually the most accurate. This confidence can be contagious and can provide your colleagues and your president with much-needed perspective to communicate effectively during a crisis or to explain a bold new university initiative to the press in ways they will understand and appreciate.

After all, at the end of the day, it's all about the advancement of learning and understanding. How we work to educate, inform and prepare our presidents and chancellors who oversee our colleges and universities is a crucial part of our jobs as effective communicators in higher education.

Randell J. Kennedy is president and founder of Academy Communications, a Boston-area national communications consulting firm specializing in higher education institutions: www.Academy-Media.com He is a former member of the PRSA Counselors to Higher Education section's executive committee and serves on the executive committee's CHEAG advisory group. Follow him on Twitter: @CampusSources