

Turning Around The Talk: Managing Misinformation and Reining in the Rumor Mill

Admission Community of Practice

Facilitator: *Rebecca Egolf*

Guest: *Audrey Jacobs,*

Soille San Diego Hebrew Day School

Etiquette

- To mute yourself, press *1. Press *1 again to unmute yourself.
- Please do not put your phone on hold during the conference call. If you need to leave the call, hang up and then call back in.
- Please participate – say who you are when speaking so we can identify you.

Goals of the Call

- To explore multiple perspectives on our topic, informed by personal experience and professional guidance.
- To collaborate with colleagues for mutual benefit.
- To understand the power of rumors and misconceptions, and how to proactively deal with negative communications.
- To identify priorities and goals to improve our own practice in this area.

Agenda

- PEJE Announcements
- Introductions
- Setting the Context
- Changing Misinformation into Positive Messages
- Managing Rumors
- Crisis Management
- Preventing Rumors
- Upcoming PEJE Conference Calls

PEJE Announcements

- It's not too late to register for the 2008 PEJE Assembly for Jewish Day School Education, April 6-8 in Boston
- 100+ sessions, including more than 20 on admission, recruitment, marketing and communication
- Pre-Conference Workshops on Sunday morning
- Face to face networking time with your Admission CoP colleagues
- See the PEJE Marketing Award winners
- Over 1200 people registered already!

Introductions

Audrey Jacobs is the Director of School Advancement at Soille San Diego Hebrew Day School where she oversees Admissions, Marketing and Development. Prior to that she was the Admissions Director for Pressman Academy in Los Angeles. Before her career in day schools, Audrey worked for 18 years as a public relations professional for several elite marketing firms.

Setting the Context

Misinformation in the community about your school translates to misperceptions.

Negative perceptions can have a negative effect on your ability to recruit and retain families. Admissions directors, through their interaction with prospective parents and in their involvement in the community, need to identify what the misperceptions are and devise marketing techniques to spread the positive truth.

Questions to ask yourself

- What are the negative perceptions about your school? Are they true?
 - If yes, can you fix the problem? Then do it and promote the fix!
 - If no, then promote the truth.
- If you can't fix it and it's true, focus on a different positive trait about your school.
- Who in the community is perpetuating these negative perceptions?

Dispelling the Myths - Examples

Welcome Alex Greenberg, Director of Admissions at The Hebrew Academy of Huntington Beach, CA

- A parent wrote a Myths & Facts article
 - Ran article in local Jewish paper
 - Presented at the board and marketing meetings
 - Information shared when speaking with prospective parents
- How else could they use this article?

Dispelling the Myths - Examples

Welcome Katie Frantz, Director of Admissions,
The Emery/Weiner School, Houston TX

- Each year, their administrative team focuses on several common misperceptions about their school, and creates a series of postcards about topics like:
 - Athletics
 - Financial Aid
 - Middle School

Rumor: Upper middle class families won't qualify for financial aid.



Gelt without Guilt.

Message: EWS works hard to ensure that money is never a barrier for a student to attend our school. There is financial aid available for many families, and it is always better to go ahead and apply for it rather than suffer frustration and financial/emotional hardship.

Rumor:
Emery/Weiner
is weak in
competitive
sports when
compared to
other schools in
Houston.



Pictured on front: Kevin Goldberg, Class '05, playing soccer for Vassar College; Scott Steiner, Class '06, playing football for Austin College; Jessica Shafer, Class '05, rowing crew for University of Texas at Austin; Daniel Barvin, Class '06, playing football for Case Western Reserve University; Dylan Meyerson, Class '06, playing soccer for Hendrix College.

Message: Actually, EWS has athletes that have gone on to participate in competitive sports at the collegiate level, and we are 3-time tennis champs! The sports program is thriving and growing.

Rumor: The Middle School doesn't matter as much as the High School with regards to preparing a child for college and life.



Message: In fact, middle school does matter, which is why EWS selects its faculty so carefully. Since EWS recruits nationwide, we find the most talented and qualified educators to teach kids in one of the most difficult times in their lives: middle school.

Discussion

What made the tactics that Alex and Katie chose successful in turning negative perceptions into positive information?

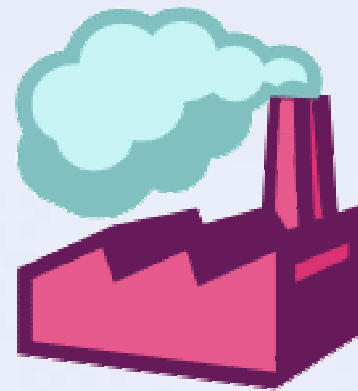
Why do rumors happen?

- Information is power! People like to feel powerful and to be “in the know”
- Rumors are started in part because people have a need to make up information and fill in the gaps when they are left in the dark.
- Rumors may be partially true, things that will come true, malevolent, or “birthday rumors” which circulate at the same time each year.
- Plus, our people love to kibbitz and spread Lashon Harah.

Rumor Mill

- *a misleading metaphor*

This metaphor probably traces back to when factories were called mills. The metaphor is misleading because rumors actually spring up anywhere, rather than at a single point, which makes rumors difficult to control.



Grapevine

- a misleading metaphor

This metaphor suggests that rumors propagate along a linear path. To listen to rumors, you just plug into the grapevine. The actual rumor propagation medium is a tightly connected network of personal relationships. Rumors propagate far more rapidly over this network than they would over any linear structure.



Rumors are Random

- Cutting the grapevine or shutting down the rumor mill doesn't work, because there is no grapevine and there is no rumor mill.
- Rumors can pop up anywhere, and are spread by hopping along personal relationships, fed mostly by anxiety and worry.

Managing Rumors

Never Repeat the Rumor!

- The number one rule of rumor control is not to repeat the rumor, even to deny it.
 - For example, say that rumor has it that your students are paying teachers to change their grades. If your principal tells the press that “our students never paid the teachers to change their grades” then people who had not yet heard the rumor would notice this sensational detail and repeat it to others. Instead, simply address inquiries by saying, “Our teachers stand by their ethics and our grading system.”

Strategies for Managing Rumors

- Credibility is your most powerful tool.
 - Credibility can quell rumors. It can even limit their formation. Be clear, be early, and be right.
- Repair your credibility when it is damaged.
 - Repairing your school's credibility often requires making changes. Promote the positive changes you've made and do not be defensive.

Strategies for Managing Rumors

- Be judicious about openness
 - Many believe that openness – telling everything – prevents rumors. While secrecy does stimulate rumors, openness only limits them if it reduces anxiety.
 - Openness can even make things worse, if it adds to anxiety. Be thoughtful of how much information you share. Know what to say and what NOT to say.

Strategies for Managing Rumors

- Leave no voids of information
 - When people worry, they make up what they don't know. When we say nothing about a topic people are worrying about, we leave a void to be filled by rumors.



Strategies for Managing Rumors

- Anticipate anxiety
 - If you know of a probable source of anxiety or worry, get in front of it. Don't wait for rumors to form. Take mitigating actions early.
 - Example, if your principal is leaving – be proactive and send letters and emails about why the decision was made, and plans for a search committee in terms of timing and criteria.

Strategies for Managing Rumors

Even if you do all this, remember that you're not in charge of what people worry about. People might still worry — it's their choice. They might not believe you, or they might not hear you. Listen for the rumors and use what you learn to adjust your actions.



- Discussion?
- Questions for Audrey?

Managing Rumors in a Crisis

- If a crisis does occur, the first step in crisis containment is to notify anyone affected by the crisis. This could be the parents, staff, board members, the media, or the community. When you formulate a statement, follow this crisp PR advice: *Just say it.*
- Although attorneys may suggest smokescreens or denials based on the possibility of an ugly day in court later on, the court of public opinion is instant.

Crisis Management

- Rumors are especially damaging in that they exemplify three characteristics:
 - Suddenness
 - Uncertainty
 - Urgency

Crisis Management

- Rumors spread quickly!
- In the rumor spreading stage:
 - Repetition fosters belief, and the story grows in credibility as it's repeated.
 - Rumors aren't merely repeated, they're refined according to the teller's beliefs to enhance credibility.

Crisis Management

- Uncertainty fuels rumors.
- During the rumor generation stage, people develop a susceptibility to rumors, based on an optimum combination of uncertainty and anxiety.
- Rumors develop after lingering questions about worrisome events. Rumors explain and give meaning to these events.



Crisis Management

- **URGENCY** - The administration must make a quick decision in a sudden, unpleasant situation.
- Damage control must take place in battle-like conditions, which distorts the leaders' sense of reality and can undermine the decision-making process.

Crisis Rumor Control

Neutralize and Dispel Rumors

- Take everything you hear seriously, but with a grain of salt
- Investigate rumors before you comment
- Confirm the truth: rumors often contain a kernel of truth, and it's beneficial to acknowledge the accurate part
- Correct wrong information quickly and thoroughly
- Don't pass on rumors – don't repeat it!

Crisis Rumor Control - Examples

Welcome Jennifer Shecter, Director of Communications, Vancouver Talmud Torah, Canada

- VTT recently dealt with a security breach on their campus. How did they deal with the situation and prevent rumors from spreading?

Preventing Rumors

- Explain events fully to dispel anxiety and stop the need to fill in the blanks.
- Practice tactics aimed at lowering anxiety levels.
 - For example, a relaxed demeanor costs nothing and signals that the situation doesn't warrant anxiety.
- Cultivate a climate of trust to reduce the credence of rumors within a school.

Assign Spokespeople

- Assign a senior level spokesperson or people to represent your school.
- Limit number of spokespeople- fewer is better
- Select spokespeople with credibility for the audiences with whom they will communicate
- Use most senior leader to increase accountability
- Training your spokespeople is vital

Spokesperson Reminders

- Prepare
- Know your audience
- Personalize your message
 - Be honest, be frank, be open
 - Speak clearly and with compassion
- Know what to say and not to say
- There's no such thing as "off the record"
- Don't speculate
 - When you don't know the answer, tell the truth, say "I don't know"

- Does anyone have any examples of rumor-control situations they have experienced in their school?
- Discussion?
- Questions for Audrey or Alex, Katie or Jennifer?

Lessons Learned

- What ideas are you taking away from this call?
- What will you do differently next time you hear a rumor about your school?
- With whom will you share what you learned today?

Next CoP Call

*Making the Case for Jewish Day
Schools: A Discussion of RAVSAK's
Spring Issue of HaYidion Magazine*

- Thursday, March 27, 1:00 - 2:00 pm EST
- Copies of the magazine will be distributed for everyone to read prior to the call.



Thanks for participating!
Thanks to our special guests,
Audrey Jacobs,
Alex Greenberg, Katie Frantz,
and Jennifer Shecter!

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