



MANAGEMENT CONNECTION

CREATIVE PR STRATEGIES

FOR FOODSERVICE OPERATIONS

BY CHRISSY CARROLL, MPH, RD

PUBLIC RELATIONS (PR) can be a powerful tool for foodservice organizations. It allows you to build relationships with customers, the media, and other key stakeholders, as well as generate a positive reputation for your facility.

WHAT IS PR?

According to the Public Relations Society of America, PR can be defined as *“A strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics.”*

In other words, you utilize planned, intentional communication to help the public better understand and appreciate your organization.

Here are just a few benefits of an effective PR strategy:

- **Improves public perception.** Historically, noncommercial foodservice programs have sometimes been criticized for poor food quality or nutritional composition. These long-held beliefs influence the way people feel about programs today. But foodservice professionals like you have made amazing strides in innovative and delicious meals! Positive press helps convey that to the general public and changes the perception about noncommercial food service.
- **Raises awareness.** Has your hospital started offering catering for community meetings? Is your school foodservice program utilizing local farms for fresh produce? Does your university foodservice program specialize in allergy-friendly meals? PR lets people know these initiatives exist.

- **Shines a positive light on your organization.** We often only hear news about local companies when there's a negative experience. PR helps shift that, giving people a positive viewpoint. It's proactive rather than reactive.
- **Expands your network.** By making connections with local media contacts, you're also able to personally expand your network. These relationships could lead to valuable opportunities down the road.

HOW TO GET STARTED WITH PR

You'll want to start by checking if your organization already has any policies or partnerships in place. For example, your employer—the hospital, long-term care facility, or school district—may already work with a public relations company. If so, you may be able to collaborate with that company to share your department's successes and new projects.

If your employer doesn't currently work with a PR company, you can implement some easy strategies on your own. However, *it's important to check if there are policies in place for employees with regards to media involvement.*

Some companies prohibit employees from talking to the press (though the legality of this practice has come up for debate in recent years). Others have a specific spokesperson or media relations department to handle all public relations, and you'd need to coordinate with them instead.

If your organization doesn't have policies in place to prohibit employee involvement in media, and your employer is open to starting a PR initiative, you can



use these simple ideas to start getting some positive press for your department:

Get Quoted in the Media

This is easier than you'd expect. Try signing up for emails from HARO (Help a Reporter Out) and Qwoted. These companies send out regular emails that feature journalists requesting to interview people about a variety of topics.

Not all requests will be foodservice related, but you can quickly skim the emails each day to see if any are in this space. For example, a past HARO query requested the following:

"Looking for professionals working in the senior living foodservice industry to share current and upcoming trends in the senior dining space. If you have implemented any of these trends into your foodservice operation, what are they and what has the outcome been?"



If you have a story to share or an exciting new program in your department, consider

WRITING YOUR OWN PRESS RELEASE.

If you see a query like this that you can answer, just respond to the associated email address. Be sure to give the answer directly in the email. Try to provide "soundbites"—quick, easily quotable pieces of information. Don't forget to also give your credit line (typically your name, credentials, and organization).

In addition to websites like HARO, you can also network with reporters for local newspapers or television. Make it known that you are available for quotes and interviews within your realm of foodservice expertise (whether that's long-term care nutrition, school meals, or corporate dining).

Write a Press Release

A press release is a short, interesting news story. It outlines key facts about a new initiative, exciting event, or engaging experience at an organization.

If you have a story to share or an exciting new program in your department, consider writing your own press release. This can be submitted to members of the media, who may choose to use it in a story. Be sure to write an attention-grabbing headline and include interesting writing with grammatical accuracy.

There are several online distribution sites where you can submit the press release. Most are paid services, including sites like EIN Presswire, PR Fire, and Cision (PR Newswire).

However, most national news organizations won't pick up press releases about local foodservice programs (unless you've got an absolutely incredible story to tell). Because of this, you are usually better off submitting the press release to local news editors instead.

Try creating an ongoing list of local media contacts. This could be newspaper editors, website owners who focus on local news, or area television station contacts. Sourcing these names and emails will take a little work, but then you'll always have them on hand for your PR needs.

Invite Media to an Event

Is your school hosting special events for National Breakfast Week? Are you planning a summer picnic for your long-term care facility? If so, why not invite a local journalist to attend?

Hands-on events are one of the best ways to convey the difference your organization is making. When media members see your work in person, they're more likely to be able to understand and communicate the unique value of what you do.

Make it as easy as possible for reporters to get a good story. Provide them a detailed schedule of events ahead of time, give them access to interviews with any key personnel (for example, a visiting sports player for a school event), and ensure they get to experience the meal.

Use Social Media

According to recent statistics, Americans spend an average of three hours per day on their phone—much of which is on social media. Use this to your advantage as a foodservice director.

Social media allows you to interact with the masses, build stronger relationships with the community, increase the visibility of your organization, and share successes—all for free! This is a great way to boost your PR efforts.

When using social media for your foodservice organization, be sure to:

- Regularly post interesting and engaging content.
- Share updates about upcoming events, new community partnerships, or heartwarming stories.
- Share helpful non-newsworthy information (for example, this month's menu).
- Use high-quality photos and videos (and be sure you have permission to use these if minors are in the photos).
- Respond to comments, questions, and criticisms promptly and professionally.
- Tag partnering profiles in posts featuring collaborative projects.

You can also use social media to interact with reporters or connect with them directly. For example, if you see a reporter tweeting about school lunches, use that as an

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editors, website owners who
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SUBMIT YOUR PHOTOS FOR ANFP'S INSTAGRAM



Share recipe photos, staff celebration pics, and more! Send them to marketing@ANFPonline.org along with your Instagram username so we can tag you!

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opportunity to share information about your department's creative efforts in the space.

Think About Generation-Specific Messaging

As a foodservice director, you're probably used to thinking about how to appeal to different age groups. Fan favorites at an elementary school may not always elicit the same passion in a corporate kitchen or long-term care facility. Each audience requires careful consideration.

The same principle applies when thinking about your PR strategy. Each generation may consume information in different ways, and may resonate with different messaging angles.

For example, a good proportion of Baby Boomers (born in 1946-1964) may still read print newspapers regularly, while those in the Gen Z group (born in 1995-2012) are far more likely to discover information on social platforms like TikTok and Instagram.

Similarly, older generations may be more responsive to messaging surrounding taste, nutrition, and classic dishes, while younger generations may be more interested in sustainability, menu innovation, and trends (like plant-based alternatives and functional foods).

Consider your audience's preferences when developing a PR strategy. Keep in mind you will likely target multiple audiences—for example, a K-12 foodservice system may be trying to reach both families and community stakeholders, while a long-term care facility may be aiming to target caregivers and future residents with their PR messaging.

THE BOTTOM LINE

As you can see, there are many ways foodservice organizations can use PR. By utilizing media quotes, events, and social media, you can increase the visibility of your organization and build stronger relationships with the community. All of this will help you achieve your ultimate goal—providing the best nutritious and delicious foodservice experiences for your customers. **E**



REFERENCES

Scan QR code to view the list of resources for this article.



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CE QUESTIONS | MANAGEMENT CONNECTION



This **Level II** article assumes that the reader has a thorough knowledge of the topic. The desired outcome is to facilitate application of knowledge into practice by drawing connections among ideas and using information in new situations.

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1. Which of the following is true regarding public relations?
 - A. It involves planned, strategic communication
 - B. It must always include a press release
 - C. It is not appropriate for foodservice managers to handle
2. You want to start implementing PR strategies for your department. What is the best first step?
 - A. Reach out to journalists and offer a quote
 - B. Write a press release about a new program
 - C. Check with your employer about policies and pre-existing partnerships
3. Which of the following is a service that emails you with queries from journalists who are looking for quotes?
 - A. PR Fire
 - B. Twitter
 - C. HARO
4. Which of the following is a service that provides mass distribution of press releases?
 - A. PR Fire
 - B. Qwoted
 - C. Pinterest
5. Which of the following is a social media platform that allows you to connect with journalists?
 - A. Qwoted
 - B. Twitter
 - C. EIN Presswire
6. You want to share a PDF of this month's regular menu for your school foodservice program. Which of the following would be the best strategy?
 - A. Post it on your school's Facebook page
 - B. Share it in a nationwide press release
 - C. Send it directly to your city's television station
7. You are planning a luau event for your long-term care foodservice program, which will showcase festive menu items that highlight your organization's commitment to food quality. Which of the following would be the best strategy to share this event?
 - A. There is no need to share this as it's a small local event
 - B. Contact a local newspaper reporter and invite them to attend
 - C. Create a nationwide press release and pay for mass distribution



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