



PRNews

# Crisis Management Guidebook

 volume 3

## CASE STUDY

# Going Transparent: A Board of Education Takes Off Its Gloves

By Ann Voorhees Baker

Sometimes a crisis calls for a politically incorrect response. It takes guts and it's risky, but if you know your client's stakeholders, you can guide your client to deliver the honesty and passion that his constituents have been longing to hear. You'll be taking a risk, but if you call it right, approval ratings can skyrocket.

### UNBRIDLED TRANSPARENCY

Here's a situation where I did just that, while directing public relations for a public school district in crisis: The board of education had been mired in crises and conflicts for years, in a community of unusually active, passionate individuals.

There was a large Jewish population that sent a significant majority of its children to the local Jewish day school. On Saturdays, the streets in their neighborhood were crowded with Orthodox Jews walking to synagogue in white long-sleeved shirts, black hats, and prayer belts, the women in modest clothing and wigs.

Then there was the large low-income neighborhood, mostly African-American, with many single parent homes, problems with crime, and families either dealing with gang activity or deeply enmeshed in the activities of the local Baptist church.

There was also a large pocket of blue-blood wealth, where third-generation coupon clippers socialized at the swanky area skating and country clubs. Many of them sent their children to any of four local yet nationally prominent private boys' and girls' schools, where mostly white, Christian students sat in the same classrooms their mothers and fathers had attended from kindergarten through high school. It was a not infrequent occurrence at these schools for mom or dad to show up at the end of a school day in a shiny new Escalade or Hummer to surprise their child on his or her 16th birthday.

This mixed community had attracted many disparate thinkers over the years and community organizations abounded dedicated to goals as diverse as

better understanding among the races and reduction of crime to support for public school teachers.

The amalgam of interests and issues had been spiced up of late by a juicy scandal involving the married superintendent of schools and one of the elementary school principals. The superintendent had been replaced, but the scandal and bitterness it had created lived on. A school levy was on the ballot, the third in three years, and battles raged over it. The last two levies had failed and the district was in dire straits financially.

I worked with the new superintendent, the treasurer and board members to guide them through endless hearings, meetings, interviews, public commentary, television appearances and surprise visits by the media on various campuses. I used every public relations best practice you could think of. Always, what came out of the district representatives' mouths was diplomatic, compassionate, sincere, inclusive, and open to discussion and feedback. It was all very politically correct.

The levy passed.

### A FUROR ERUPTS

Then came a backlash from the most extreme of the anti-public-school special interest groups. Its leader made inflammatory statements to the media, urged a special election to repeal the levy, and said he was suing the school district.

The community was now in greater turmoil than before. At first, the superintendent and board reacted to all of the inflammatory statements, making careful, conciliatory responses, inviting further discussions and meetings and couching all of their statements in politically correct wording.

But the clamor grew louder, and now the strongest expressions of anger began emanating from the formerly strongest supporters of the schools.

I met personally with leaders of several groups. Their frustration was at a breaking point: We're sick of

listening to the district leaders go around and around, they said. They need to get on with the business of running the schools, strengthened by the infusion of funds that the levy has brought them. They need to stop being paralyzed by the negative actions of a few. What are they going to do about it? And when?

At this point, I decided that it was time for fighting words. The people needed to see some guts and muscle from their district leaders.

I met with the superintendent, treasurer, and board. It's time to throw down the gauntlet, I said. The president of the board should speak his true mind, and show some righteous anger. Let's call a press conference. Give a rousing speech. Show the district's supporters that you're not going to take this any longer. Tell the anti-school faction that if they want a fight, they'll get it. If they want to sue, you'll defend the suit, and you'll win. Tell them that the votes were counted and the levy has passed. That's the democratic process. We're moving forward, and we're not going to be mired in debate and arguments any longer.

We called the conference. I wrote the speech and made the rounds with it for approval. The board was nervous, their strand of trust in my counsel pulled to a thin, very taut thread.

The day came, sunny and brisk. We decided to place the podium right outside the board of education doors—under the flagpole—positioned so that the board of education seal would be prominent in any camera shot to be taken.

Every local media outlet showed up, as did a large crowd of supporters plus a few representatives of the anti-levy group. The board president stepped to the podium facing a half-circle of microphones festooned with every local media outlet logo. He welcomed the gathering, stated the reason for calling the press conference, and then delivered his speech in rousing, ringing tones. At every statement of righteous indignation, of challenge, of “we're not going to take it anymore,” the crowd cheered.

That evening, sound bites appeared on the news on all three local television stations and the local public radio station. The next day, both local newspapers ran articles with photos showing the full strength of the board, all lined up behind the president as he gave his speech, fronted by a bevy of microphones. The following week, the editor of the local weekly paper ran a glowing editorial in praise of the board's backbone, guts, and push forward.

## When to Say 'The Hell With It'

Even if you're dealing with a crisis and you feel the time has come to say what you really think, you still need to act with caution.

- First, make sure you really have your fingers on the pulse of the stakeholders. If you think that they're sick of hearing what they regard as platitudes and they want to hear the “real truth,” test the waters first. Meet with representatives of your client's constituents. Ask them how they feel about the actions and statements of your client to date. Ask them what their frustrations are, and what they're longing to hear.
- Have a bull session of the best thinkers in your client group or who advise your client at the highest levels. Talk out the idea of a “say what you really think” tactic, sharing the feedback you've gathered from constituents. Get everyone's input and, ultimately, backing for the move.
- Use care when planning your press conference, if that's the vehicle to be used for the message. Get the word out well ahead of time, as you would for a positive announcement, but don't telegraph the speaker's comments beforehand. Let the statements have maximum impact at delivery. Encourage the attendance of your supporters. Stage the event with an eye toward the best backgrounds, choreography, camera shots, and sound bites.
- Print the speaker's remarks and distribute to the press at the time of the conference. This makes it clear that these are well-considered, official statements and the speaker stands behind them.

Source: Ann Voorhees Baker

The supportive groups were heartened, and satisfied. The detractors were silenced, at least for this go-round in the district's long-standing battles. The pull-off-the-gloves-and-fight-dirty gamble paid off in a big way. **PRN**

---

*Ann Voorhees Baker served for two years as PR director for a troubled public school district before relocating to her native Los Angeles, where she now represents a number of eco-conscious and health-related clients, and heads the Southern California chapters of the national women entrepreneur's networking group, Savor the Success.*