

The New Rules of Marketing & PR

Bringing It All Together: Brand Journalism at Cleveland Metropolitan School District

Make It Happen – Chapter 23

Published by: David Meerman Scott, 2017

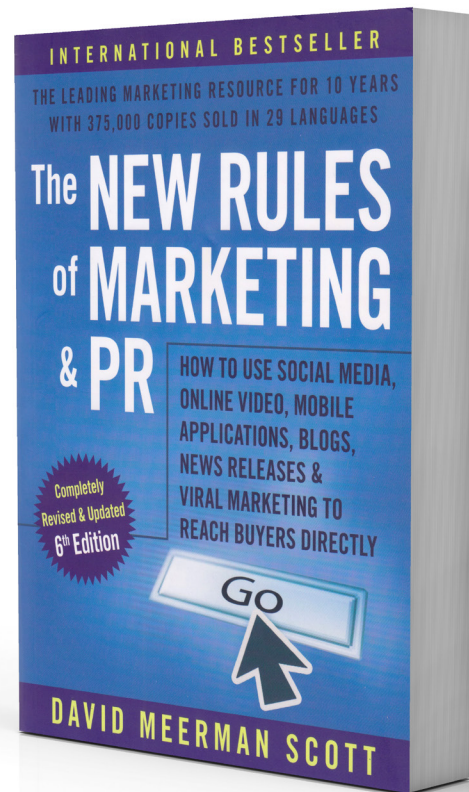
Recently I had an opportunity to meet with Roseann Canfora, chief communications officer for the Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD). I spent a day with her entire team. It was incredibly interesting to hear how CMSD deploys journalism techniques to communicate with students, parents, the media, and the wider Cleveland community. Canfora's team focuses on reaching not only the families of the district's 40,000 students but also those who attend other schools and might consider CMSD.

Canfora operates what's effectively a full-time news operation—including a television studio—in support of CMSD and the wider Cleveland community. She leads a team of 12 people divided into two teams: news and information, and marketing and advertising. The CMSD staff includes a manager who taught television production for many years. The news director was a reporter for nearly 25 years with the Cleveland Plain Dealer including three years as the education beat reporter. Everybody on the entire news team, including Canfora, comes from a journalism background.

"It's our responsibility to let families know about the choices they have in Cleveland," Canfora says. "Unfortunately, we don't have much of an identity but that of a struggling, inner-city school district if the people telling our stories are the local media. The daily stories that big-city journalists are drawn to include gang fights, low test scores, truancy, and weapons finding their way past metal detectors. These stories fall short of what I learned in journalism school was our social responsibility to tell—the deeper stories, the root causes of these things; the incredible stories of triumph over those challenges that take place in schools every single day. Those are the types of stories we now tell ourselves.

When she started at CMSD, Canfora inherited a virtually inert communications operation that was producing print materials to be taken home by students. Each school in the district also did its own communications, further diluting the CMSD brand.

"The buy-in took years, because it meant disturbing the comfort level of thousands of people, people who felt very territorial.



"Well, that's my event. Why are you doing that?" "That's my task. We do the mailers. Why are you doing that?" Even prying from them their love of ClipArt and WordArt and telling them to throw out their hot pink paper [was difficult]. The pushback I was experiencing was coming school-by-school and department-by-department. But I had the buy-in from the top for a clearly defined brand framework. I set the boundaries regarding what stories are told, how they are told, and more importantly by whom."

It was clear to Canfora that CMSD was not effectively reaching families until the district approached marketing and advertising as a much bigger stream of content. "It meant creating a team of writers. It meant finding a multimedia journalist to go out with a camera and convey these stories in depth," she says. "It meant having social media specialists in every part of our team to not only write for our brand but also create content that will be interesting for the media. We're looking for interesting stories, unique angles, and beating the

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local media to the punch by telling it better so that they see us as a thought partner and even a thought leader.”

A major challenge for Canfora was finding journalists who were eager to move over to CMSD and become a brand journalist. Many reporters are reluctant to join what they call the “dark side” of communications—working outside of a media company. On the other hand, there are many people with a marketing and PR background who are not qualified for roles Canfora had available.

“I can clearly see the difference between a story and a story with credibility, one with facts, stats, and all the elements of good journalism,” Canfora says. “That is probably the greatest challenge in going the brand journalism route. We’re telling our own stories, as journalists, and that’s different from a PR writer writing a bio about a new person, introducing a new product or a new way of doing things. Readers see through it quickly if your content marketing reads more like selling and less like telling. Hiring trained journalists is key to establishing credibility in our news bureau, but having good reporters who love to tell good stories is what is making it work.”

To further complicate the hiring process, Canfora tries to bring journalists onto the team who know the Cleveland market and who have covered the news there. “What sold me on my multimedia journalist was her work as a news reporter at WKYC Channel 3 here in Cleveland and also as a news anchor in Michigan where the stories she always wanted to tell and the ones that were her favorites were taking place in schools. Our youngest and newest member of the news bureau was a crime reporter at the *Plain Dealer*. These are people who know our city. They know our families. They know our challenges. They know the poverty in this district, which has the second highest number of children of poverty in the nation. If you don’t know these people, you can’t really write about what’s happening in their lives with any kind of meaning or with any kind of accuracy.”

Now CMSD delivers constantly across multiple channels to multiple audiences every single day. “This is the first year I can actually say we are a mobile, digital, multiplatform operation where brand journalism, which was always my goal, works,” Canfora says.

Poking around on the CMSD news site offers some fun stories produced by the television team. For example, they produced a news story about how students at Design Lab Early College High School have set an example for news makers across the country.

The school had a special visit from Adam Savage, former cohost of the hit Discovery Channel TV series *Mythbusters*.

There’s a written story, “New School to Have Space at MetroHealth,” that tells how CMSD’s new Lincoln-West School of Science and Health is being based partly at the MetroHealth System’s main campus. District and hospital leaders believe the school, which opened July 25, 2016, with ninth and tenth graders, may be the only one in the country located within a hospital.

Canfora is currently working to hire an individual who understands the metrics associated with the sites and social channels. “Incorporating analytics into the brand journalism strategy is the only way to know if we are truly engaged,” she says.

It’s exciting to see what’s possible for any organization willing to do the work.

Great for Any Organization

There’s no doubt that your organization will benefit from your getting out there and creating web content in whatever form you’re most comfortable with. But I’m also convinced that no matter who you are or what you do, your professional and personal life will improve, too. If you are an innovator using the ideas in this book, it may lead to greater recognition in the office. And if you’re like many bloggers and podcasters I know, you will derive a therapeutic benefit as well.

It’s fun to blog and tweet, and it makes you feel good to get your ideas out into the world.

If you’re like me, you will prefer to write rather than create audio or video content. But I know plenty of people who hate to write and have created terrific photo, video, and audio content to reach buyers. And it works for all kinds of organizations: corporations, nonprofits, rock bands, and politicians. People often say to me: “But I’m just a ____ [fill in the blank with pastor, painter, lawyer, consultant, sales representative, auto dealer, or real estate agent, for example]; why should I blog or create a podcast?” My answer is that not only will you reach your buyers directly with targeted content, but you’ll also have fun, too—web content is for everyone, not just big companies.