Imagine this: You’re shopping for groceries on a lovely Saturday morning and you spy a parent of several of your students rushing toward you with her children in tow.

She practically bumps into your cart and blurts, “Did you hear that the school board is going to cut librarians?” OK, your peaceful Saturday is ruined, but more importantly, you have only a brief period of time to make a reasoned and compelling response that this mother is likely to repeat elsewhere in the community. Are you prepared for that moment?

As documented in recent research, school librarians, while well trained in instruction and managing a library, are grossly ill-prepared in communications and advocacy strategies. Stoddart (2011) found in a study of LIS programs that only half addressed topics such as marketing and advocacy, and most did not have a dedicated course on communications skills for school librarians. We also know that principals almost entirely learn about school library programs (SLP) from their experiences with school librarians (Shannon 2012). So it is imperative that school librarians learn and apply marketing and advocacy skills in their jobs.

Messaging for school librarians is the act/art of crafting and using concise and meaningful messages—whether written, oral, or via images—designed to appeal to targeted audiences that convey the role of the school library program (SLP) and what it uniquely contributes to student learning. When consistently used, these messages become the foundation of the advocacy communication plan, translating the SLP’s mission in ways that engender support from stakeholders. There are many types of advocacy messages including taglines, slogans, springboard stories, etc. However, this article will present the position statement, talking points, and the elevator speech.

Regardless of type, all well-crafted messages have these characteristics:

- Student-oriented - Highlight the SLP’s unique contributions to students and academic achievement
- Stakeholder-relevant - Connect to the needs and interests of the audience
- Mission-based - Support the missions of the library and school
- Issue-focused - Focus on a single idea or concept without library jargon
- Credible - Are truthful and believable
- Memorable - Are concise, compelling, and easy to remember

POSITION STATEMENT

The position statement is a public statement that articulates the role of the SLP in the school and its impact on student learning for the general public. It can be up to three sentences but usually is one clearly stated sentence and grounds the advocacy plan. Often, the position statement is adapted from one of the underlying common beliefs or core values of the profession (AASL, Empowering, p. 12-13). It differs from both a mission statement and a vision. A mission statement describes the purpose and function of the SLP as it currently is and is written as an internal, publishable statement in the vernacular of educators. A position statement is directed to laypeople, not necessarily educators. A vision statement, which is usually longer, describes the SLP in the future—what it is striving to become and do.

An example of a position statement is “An effective school library program staffed by a certified school librarian is essential for all students to learn and for teachers to teach.”

TALKING POINTS

Talking points are core messages that support and elaborate on the position statement. Each is written as one succinct, declarative sentence free of library jargon to convince or persuade specific stakeholders. Talking points can be scripted to address an “ask” (something you want the audience to do), and they often include summarized research or data to validate the issue.

Depending on the position statement, talking points can be crafted to address such issues as staffing, technology, budgets, flexible scheduling, extended library hours, etc. When
memorable and internalized, talking points also help the librarian or speaker to stay on message while delivering a credible and professional message.

Here are some examples.

For a legislator: “In Pennsylvania, certified librarians and collections are required for prisons, but not for public schools. Our K-12 students need certified school librarians, too!”

For a school administrator: “Studies show that students in schools with strong school library programs learn more, get better grades, and score higher on standardized test scores.”

For a parent: “Research suggests that school librarians are an important factor in helping at-risk learners to improve reading and writing skills.”

**ELEVATOR SPEECH**

An “elevator speech” is a short, focused, persuasive speech, so named for the approximate time an elevator ride takes—about thirty seconds and 100-150 words. Although the “speech” is preplanned and sometimes memorized, the delivery is usually unplanned and often a one-to-one, serendipitous conversation during an unexpected meeting with someone whose support is needed for the library program. In this age of thirty-second TV commercials and 140-word tweets, you need to have elevator speeches preplanned, short, and ready-to-go for each of the major stakeholders you want to influence.

An elevator speech consists of the following components:

**INTRODUCTION/GREETING**

Introduce yourself, what you do, and where you work, as needed. Be positive, enthusiastic, and don’t forget to smile!

**PERSONALIZED “HOOK”**

Lead into your speech with some personal connection or story, focusing on why your audience should care about this issue. This requires that you know something about the person you are addressing. For example, [to a parent] “Your son Harry goes to my school and I have been teaching the students to be safe while using the Internet. The students told me that they often go into chatrooms but don’t really know anything about chatroom safety.” [To a legislator] “Did you know that school districts in your legislative district are cutting library staffing and budgets, which causes students to have less access to the learning resources they need and that taxpayers pay for?”

**YOUR POSITION**

Next, state your position on the issue as simply and clearly as possible in one sentence. For example, “Support is needed for our district to continue to have school librarians who teach our students the digital literacy skills, which are not taught in the classrooms.” Notice the use of “our” making it clear that the audience and librarians are united in this effort. The position also highlights the value-added teaching that librarians offer beyond basic classroom instruction. Also, when possible, use the third person, talking about school librarians in general rather than infusing the speech with “I,” “me,” and “mine.” This makes it more professional and less personal.

**SUPPORTING POINTS AND PROOF**

Using some of the talking points you have developed, elaborate on your position. Inject “proof” or credibility to back up your position by using research, statistics, a short quote, or something that will resonate. For example, [to a school board member] “Research has shown that students in states that lost librarians tended to have lower reading scores—or had a slower rise on standardized tests—than those in states that gained librarians.” [To a teacher] “When teachers and librarians collaborate, students receive more individualized instruction resulting in higher student achievement.” Keep it short and don’t use more than two points.

**THE “ASK”**

Knowing what your ultimate goal is helps to conclude the speech. End with an “ask” or invitation to get involved. Minimally, ask for their email so you can send them more information about the topic. You have taken the time to make this important connection, so be sure to nurture the relationship.
The goal in messaging is to help the target audience associate a benefit they value with the SLP or the role of the librarian. Over time and with repetition, you can “own” your advocacy messages by consistently using them in all your marketing communications.

FINAL WORDS

In the February 2016 issue of Teacher Librarian, this column focused on identifying influential stakeholders who have some decision-making control over school library resources. Knowing who those stakeholders are and what they care about is only half of the equation. You also need to know what to say in order to motivate them to actively support the SLP and advocate for students. This requires time to get ideas on paper and collaborate with your advocacy or advisory team, building consensus on the advocacy plan. You need to dig deep into your beliefs about school libraries and their role in creating the next generation of educated citizens. And, you need to say it in short, convincing, and memorable sound bites, adapted to specific stakeholders. The goal in messaging is to help the target audience associate a benefit they value with the SLP or the role of the librarian. Over time and with repetition, you can “own” your advocacy messages by consistently using them in all your marketing communications.

REFERENCES


ADDITIONAL RESOURCES


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