

District Visibility - Public Relations

Whose Responsibility is Public Relations?

Public relations is a big job and everyone's responsibility. Each board member is responsible for how they portray the district, handle concerns, and effectively serve the landowners. While employees have different roles, they are still responsible for how they portray the district in and out of the office/job. You will find information on handling complaints, developing newsletters, media relations, personal communication skills, relations with decision makers, press releases and developing white papers later in this section of the Conservation District Reference Manual.

Before a district can communicate an effective message about who the district is, the district needs to know and understand itself. Each board member and staff member must be united regarding the purpose and goals of the district. As with any successful business or organization, there will need to be a good deal of time and effort put into planning and developing an identity before you implement a public relations campaign. Without sound planning and identity development, any entity will flounder with trying to gain recognition and support.

Therefore, we highly recommend that you read and implement [Strategic Planning –Building a District Identity](#) chapter of this reference manual before spending too much time on District Visibility – Public Relations (this chapter).

Identity

Building District Identity:

What is District Identity?

- When a person hears the name of the District, they can identify something specific about it. For instance, they may recognize a board member, employee, product provided, or a service provided by the district. The opposite should also occur. When a person hears a board member's or an employee's name, product of the district, or a service they provide, they would know that there is a connection to the District.
- Identity may be positive or it may be negative.
- A positive identity is developed over time by the District meeting the local landowners' needs and letting others know about it through visibility (see below).
- A strong positive identity is the key to accomplishing the mission of the conservation district.



Identity Steps

- Building an identity is a lot like climbing a mountain - one step at a time.
 - You need to start small!
 - Your district can take many small steps and actions that can help build strong district identity.
- The Mission statement is reviewed and supported by all board members and staff
- Every board member and/or staff member can explain the mission of the District at any given time.
- Every activity and program of the district is meeting the mission of the District.
- The District has multiple activities planned and implemented throughout the year.
- Identity is similar to self esteem in that it is developed through accomplishments.

- Identify a needed project, plan it, implement it, report it
- After several of these, you are on your way to developing a positive identity
- Once you have your identity, you will want to create visibility.

Building District Visibility:

Building District Visibility

- Many of following steps are inexpensive but will go a long way to developing visibility once you have a few accomplishments under your belt.

Visibility Steps

- If someone dials your district phone number, does the district manager answer with the name of your conservation district?
- When a caller hears the directory of agencies when calling the NRCS office, is the name of your district listed?
- Does your district have a sign on the building?
- Do landowners, communities, counties and other organizations know that your district exists as a totally separate organization from NRCS?
- Does your district have road signs at the boundaries of the district?
- Does your district have signs posted on projects, in progress and/or completed, with cooperating ranches and farms throughout the district?
- Does your district have signs posted on other district projects completed throughout the district such as living snow fences and demonstration sites?
- Does your district have a representative who attends the county commission meetings?
- Does your county, as required by state statute, submit a complete preliminary subdivision plan to your conservation district board for explicit review and recommendations regarding soil suitability, floodwater problems, and watershed protection?
- Do your cooperators/landowners know district conservation technicians (formerly Farm Bill Technician) are district employees?
- Do your district employees wear name badges or articles of clothing identifying them as district employees?
- Do your district employees distribute business cards identifying them as district employees?
- Do your district supervisors wear name badges or articles of clothing identifying them as district supervisors?
- Do your supervisors have business cards to distribute identifying them as district supervisors?
- Does your district distribute a newsletter to not only landowners but also organizations agencies, and local/state/federal elected officials?
- Does your district submit articles to the local newspapers on a regular basis?



Small Steps to Climb Big Mountains

- Building an identity begins with small steps and activities that can bring “BIG” benefits to your conservation district.

Start your journey today with just some of the above ideas & enjoy the walk!!

Handling Complaints

Handling complaints well is an important part of any position. Often times the public will confuse the conservation district with other entities and therefore the office will receive calls dealing with issues that do not involve the district. When this happens, the district staff should do their best to provide contact information for the appropriate entity when possible.



If the complaint is a legitimate concern with the district, hear the person out. It is important to handle the complaint professionally and objectively. As the person expresses their concern, search for the basis in their frustration. People will often develop emotion based on the “story” they tell themselves about the verifiable facts. Therefore, it may be simply a misunderstanding you may be able to help clarify. If it seems to be more complicated and you do not know the specifics of the situation, ask them for their contact information so you can call them back once you do research.

If the complaint is about something the district has done or sold, do everything you can to make it right for the customer. If the complaint is regarding a resource issue, the person wants the district to do something about, it may be an issue that needs to be brought to the Board's attention. Thanks them for bringing it up and let the person know that you will bring it up at the next board meeting or that they are welcome to attend the next meeting to bring it up. Be sure to get back to the person with the decision the Board makes.

Remember that when you are handling complaints regarding the district, you are the face of the district at that time. This may be the first impression the person has of the district. You will want to make it as positive an experience as possible for the individual.

News Letters



Many districts provide newsletters to their landowners at varying frequencies. Some are monthly, quarterly, or maybe even annually. No matter what your schedule it, it is good public relations to ensure it is distributed on a consistent basis.

Newsletters are a great way to provide your landowners with accurate and up to date information. A good newsletter will go a long way in developing a positive identity and visibility for the district. The district can provide information for their partners as well as the district itself.

The cost of newsletters can easily be covered by selling ads in the newsletter and even make the district a little extra money. Some sell them by the issue and others sell them based on ads in all issues for the entire year. Ads can also be made a benefit of a sponsorship package.

Media Relations

What do we mean by media relations? Media relations are developing positive relationships before there is a need for promoting an event or even needing “damage control”. Sometimes district activities and issues are not a high priority for the media and we find it is difficult getting our information and activities covered. However, there are districts that have frequent articles and good media coverage of all their events. So, how do they do it?



The districts that get articles in the paper and media coverage have developed a one on one relationship with someone at the paper (or other medium). It may be a board member or employee that knows a reporter or it may be that the district manager or a board member has made a concerted effort to get to know the reporter by meeting them for lunch and talking about the district's mission and activities. The reporter has been invited and participated in district tours and other interesting activities. In any case, there has been a trusting relationship developed so either party can pick up the phone and call the other for "help". Help may be in the form of a reporter looking for a story on short notice or it may be the district needing to get the word out on a specific issue. Either way, there is a trusting relationship in place before there is an urgent need for media coverage.

Developing media relationships is key to district visibility. If you don't have a great relationship in place with your reporters, begin immediately to developing them.

Personal Communication Skills

As with any interaction with people, your personal communication skills are important when working with or for the conservation district. What is meant by personal communication skills? It is the art of presenting your point of view and listening to others' points of view.

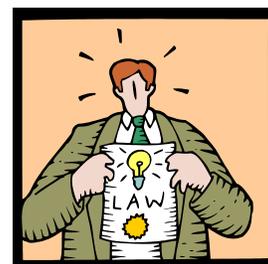


Your personal communication can be challenged when strong emotions, beliefs, principles or convictions are involved. When this happens, take note that this is a difficult situation for you but you are in a position of representing the District and therefore it is important you handle the situation professionally.

There are many books and classes available on this topic. Sometimes we all find it a challenge to communicate well with a customer, board members, and/or staff in the office. If this is a situation for you that is causing lack of productivity and desired results, it is recommended you seek assistance to improve the situation. Your CSCB staff members are trained to assist in some situations. Feel free to contact them for suggestions.

Relations with Decision Makers

Who do we mean when we refer to "decision makers"? We are referring to elected positions such as your county commissioners, state and federal legislators. These people make decisions regarding policy at their respective levels.



Why is this a topic for conservation districts? Conservation districts can play a significant role in influencing policy. You are viewed as a locally led, grass roots organization that is speaking collectively for the landowners. You have knowledge of the local resource issues and real solutions. Therefore, the elected officials are interested in your opinions.

Because districts are respected as a voice of the landowners, it is important that you are speaking on their behalf. You can be very effective if you have held the local workgroup and have evidence that your local constituents are supportive of your message.

As with the other people, it is critical that your district (individuals on the board) develop positive relationships with your elected officials. They need to know who you are, what the district does, why they do what they do, and how they get it done. This relationship should be established long

before you go to them with an issue or concern you want them to address. Because they are pulled so many directions, they are going to listen to those they know and have respect for.

If the District is going to take on an issue, it is important that they have policy regarding their position so that all it is clear it is the District's policy and not just one individual's position. Without such policy, it is recommended that a board member not state a position of the Board/District. If the Board is not in agreement, it will affect your future credibility in a negative way.

Press Releases

There is a fairly standard format for creating press releases. It will help your credibility and chances of being published if you present your material this way. Each press release should include the following:

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:	These words should appear at the top left of the page, in upper case. If for some reason you don't want the story to be public yet, write "HOLD FOR RELEASE UNTIL ..." instead.
Headline	Be sure it describes the content of the story
City, State – Month, Day, Year	State these details before the story to help orient the reader
Body	This is the story. There should be multiple paragraphs, each only a few sentences. If there is more than one page, write "-more-" at the bottom of the page
District Info	Include mission statement and/or background on the District
Contact Information	Contact person's name, District name, phone/fax, email, physical address
END or ###	Indicates the end of the press release

Develop and deliver press releases to your local newspaper, radio, and TV stations when you have an event coming up or you want to get information out about a topic. Search the internet or contact your CSCB staff if you would like more help on developing a press release.

White Papers

What is a white paper? "A white paper typically argues a specific position or solution to a problem. White papers are a powerful marketing tool." (Michael Stelzner, "How to Write a White Paper")

A conservation district could use a white paper to identify the District's position on an issue. It would go into more detail than a typical policy. It would describe the problem/issue and then "sell" the reader on the District's point of view based on the facts contained within the document.

Often times it is important to draft this type of document to "zero" in on what the real issue is rather than a lot of conversations about it which could lead to misunderstandings.



Open Records Requests

We don't always think of the Open Records Act as being a part of Public Relations. However, it is important for conservation districts to always keep in mind that they are subject to the Open Records Act. It is important for districts to provide appropriate information when requested. This will help constituents realize that they can trust your organization.



The Colorado Open Records Act, CRS 24-72-201 to 206 must be followed when records are requested. The Act declares it is "the public policy of this state that all public records shall be open for inspection by any person at reasonable times". Districts, as political subdivisions of the State, are referenced in the CRS 24-72-202 definition (5), "Political subdivision" means and includes every county, city and county, city, town, school district, special district, public highway authority, regional transportation authority, and housing authority within this state.

Refer to the Act to determine the applicable public records and other information necessary to honor the requests. Details for producing public records for inspection are found in CRS 24-72-203. Provisions of the Act of specific importance to note are:

- CRS 24-72-203 (3) (b) The date and hour set for the inspection of records not readily available at the time of the request shall be within a reasonable time after the request. As used in this subsection (3), a "reasonable time" shall be presumed to be **three working days or less**.
- CRS 24-72-205. (5) (a) A custodian may charge a fee not to exceed twenty-five cents per standard page for a copy of a public record or a fee not to exceed the actual cost of providing a copy, printout, or photograph of a public record in a format other than a standard page. Note: There is no need to make copies unless requested or if the information is to be taken off-site.