

ADVOCACY: EMBRACING A CAUSE!

George Schermerhorn, Executive Director of the Community Music School in Allentown, PA, provides a personal account of how purposeful, systematic and creative communication is resulting in increased awareness, partnerships and funding for his school.

I had a very wise teacher during my college days who would say, “This worked for me when I was a public school teacher. It may or may not work for you, but you can begin with a concept that you know has worked.” I say to the reader the same: this has worked for me; it may not work for you.

For me, advocacy begins with an overwhelming belief in my institution and what it can accomplish, and developing goals consistent with its mission. The second step--the hard one--is getting to meet the people who can help accomplish those goals. The task is one of “selling” your institution to others.

When I first accepted this job that step began with a list of people I should meet, prepared by my Board President. Over a period of several weeks, I called each person, made appointments, and sat down with them for 10 or 15 minutes to introduce myself and the School. I explored ways and means of working together, calling on their expertise, and doing more listening than talking. Another Board member, who worked at City Hall, introduced me to the Mayor, while a former County Commissioner, had me meet her colleagues and the County Executive. A breakfast meeting was arranged with our State Senator to let him know our plans for the future. That breakfast meeting resulted in the first state funds to arrive at the school--not immediately, of course, but within a year.

Former Speaker of the House, Tip O’Neill of Massachusetts, is quoted as saying that all politics are local. I believe this also is true for advocacy. All advocacy at least begins locally!

The next step for me was to join our local Rotary Club. Here I met local business leaders in an informal atmosphere. I was questioned about myself and the School, and what plans I had for the future. I volunteered to serve on the Program Committee where I took every opportunity to fill empty programs with performers from CMS. There now is a yearly holiday program of music featuring students and faculty from the School. And let me add that the Club sings our *National Anthem* and *Happy Birthday* at every meeting--guess who volunteers to play the piano for them!

Last year my staff and I hosted a weekly luncheon meeting of the Rotary Club at Community Music School where a friend, R. Clipper Erickson, a world-class concert pianist, performed on the School's recently renovated Steinway grand. Some Rotarians still recall that program with great fondness. Of course, Erickson's CD recorded on that very piano was at every table, and we sold many of them to people who could help the school. Erickson signed autographs and his personal new CD also sold very well. In one hour, we represented quality, accessibility, warmth and welcome. And everyone who attended now knows where the School is located.

I have found that it always pays to thank politicians and business people with a short note. They have given you valuable time and you must show appreciation for it, whether or not anything develops from it. A simple "thank you for your time and/or for listening" will suffice--and implant your meeting in their memory "data base."

The result of this effort is that I serve on a County Advisory Commission, the Board of a local Arts Academy, a City sponsored Arts Walk Planning Committee, advisory boards for a local hospital and a local college. I was asked to serve as a "member at large" in the search for a new Symphony Director, and now sit on an Artistic Overview Committee for our local Symphony Orchestra. The result for the School has been increased funding, partnerships with other arts organizations, and awareness in circles that can help.

Finally, I believe that one should address each and every incidence where the teaching of the Arts in our public schools is challenged. Write letters to the editor, basing your thoughts on knowledge and facts concerning human development of the brain. Do not allow "entertainment" and "musical education" become confused in people's minds. Let people know that music and the arts are good for children of all ages!

In short, to be a good advocate, one must communicate, and one must serve with others. These things have worked for me.

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