

Back to Basics: Five Essential School Marketing Tools

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There was a time – not long ago, in fact – when traditional public schools were the only game in town. In most communities, families were subject to the “If you live here, you go there” model, and that was that. Unless a family could afford to consider private education, school choice simply did not exist.

Those days are over.

Today, traditional public schools that once held a monopoly in their neighborhoods now operate in an increasingly crowded landscape of school choices. The menu of educational options is broadened not only by charter schools, but also by different types of schools available within school districts. (Here in Boston, for example, families may apply to Commonwealth charter schools and a range of [Boston Public Schools](#), including traditional, pilot, exam, in-district charter, and innovation schools, in addition to private, parochial, and home schooling options.)

As parents are presented with numerous options for their children’s education, competition for enrollment is stiffer than ever. As a result, every school is feeling the pressure to become more skilled and creative in proactively marketing itself to parents and students alike. Like any other sector in which consumers have an array of products and services from which to choose, education might now be considered a buyer’s market.

Of course, some will resist or even resent the use of such private sector terminology to describe the education of our children. But those skeptics who sit back and simply wait for parents to come knocking, while making no outward effort to engage and recruit families, will soon find themselves with dwindling enrollments, and therefore dwindling resources. Today’s public schools must not only accept but *embrace* the reality that attracting students requires some salesmanship. (Consider the words of Walt Disney: “I have been up against tough competition all my life. I wouldn’t know how to get along without it.”) As parents from all walks of life become more savvy “shoppers,” they have begun to expect and demand that the schools on their list can make a compelling case for being the best educational option available.

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5 Essential School Marketing Tools

Even the schools that are ready to dive head-first into innovative marketing and communications often are hampered by limited human and financial resources. Knowing that they can’t do it all, schools then ask the crucial question: *What are the essential first steps we must take to get the word out about our school?*

Before jumping into the “how, when, and where” of a communications plan, start instead with the “what”: core messages. Take the time to develop or refine the central talking points about your school, and carry

them throughout all forms of communication. Schools that do not yet have a clear, coherent set of key points may engage in messaging exercises to clarify and strengthen the language used to describe the school community.

Once the messages have been solidified, there is no limit to the depth and breadth of a powerful communications plan. However, there are several “must-have” elements that are critical to successful marketing. Here are five components that can help foster interest and visibility:

1. **A compelling brand identity.** In order to break away from the pack, a school or school district must have a clear, compelling, memorable brand. At the most basic level, this begins with a high-quality identity system that includes a school logo, tagline or motto, color palette, and perhaps mascot, all of which reflect the character and values of the organization. For schools that do not have these elements in place, engaging students and staff in the process of developing and selecting components of the brand (ideally in partnership with a design professional) can build community and school spirit.

The consistent use of these elements across all aspects of school life – print and online resources, letterhead, business cards, school uniforms, interior and exterior signage and displays, and much more – helps build a sense of affiliation, pride and instant recognition. Just think about the brands (particularly consumer products and services) about which you are passionate. The mention of that brand’s name undoubtedly conjures immediate images in your mind of colors, logos, and other branding elements. Even in a crowded supermarket aisle or airport terminal, your favorite brands are always easier to spot.

2. **A strong, integrated online presence.** Today, there is no excuse for an inferior presence in cyberspace. Whether shopping for schools, travel, electronics, or movies, parents and other consumers often turn to the Internet first for guidance and opinions. To that end, schools simply cannot afford to greet first-time visitors with a website that is poorly designed, outdated, or difficult to navigate. Websites are the new “welcome mat,” and we must seize the opportunity to make a great first impression. Think of your website first and foremost as a public-facing marketing tool, designed to attract and engage families, staff, and supporters. The site should capture the character of the school at a glance, with digestible facts and figures, high-quality images, and dynamic content about the latest news and events. Websites, like all marketing tools, must answer the fundamental question, “What makes us different and special?”

The explosion of social media presents tremendous opportunities for quick, easy, free marketing and communication. Schools can now reach broad audiences with a few keystrokes, instantly delivering messages, in many cases, into the palm of readers’ hands. More and more schools are embracing the power of Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and perhaps to a lesser extent, [Instagram](#), [Pinterest](#), and [Vine](#). When choosing among social media platforms, be intentional about which audiences you are trying to reach and which tools those stakeholders are most likely to use. For example, while Instagram has become enormously popular among kids and teens, most adults do not rely on it for information sharing.

The key to social media success is posting content on a regular basis (at least a few times a week) that is of interest to your readers. Remember to use social media to create “hooks” that drive visitors to your website, where they can find information they may not have sought out in the first place. On Twitter, use hashtags selectively and strategically, such as the name of your school’s neighborhood, or [hot topics in education](#) like #STEM and #ELL. Above all, be sure to adopt and distribute [social media guidelines](#) (whether at the school or district level) to ensure the tools are used appropriately.

3. **An e-mail marketing tool and stakeholder database.** Every school should identify the universe of people who are invested in – or *could become invested in* – its success. It is important to reach out to these individuals regularly with short, interesting news and announcements about the school community. To do so, select a reliable, affordable e-mail marketing tool, and develop a sharp template with your

branding elements to send periodic e-news. With each issue, entice your recipients to click “open” with a compelling subject line that makes them want to read more. Keep the entries short and sweet, with high-quality close-up photos of smiling faces and teaching and learning in progress.

It’s important to cast a wide net when developing the recipient list for your e-news. (Anyone you add to the list can opt out of future editions simply by unsubscribing.) Start by building a database of stakeholders that includes all staff, as many parents as possible, partner organizations, funders and prospective funders, district leaders, School Board members, elected officials, and prominent members of the business, higher education, and faith communities. Regular communication with the “movers and shakers” and opinion leaders in your community builds awareness about the great things happening in your school and strengthens your army of supporters and ambassadors.

4. **Print collateral.** Even in this digital age, it is important to have at least one high-quality piece of print literature about your school to distribute in person. This tool is essential for three occasions in particular: (1) spontaneous encounters with a prospective parent or supporter, to put key information in their hands instead of simply encouraging them to visit your website; (2) meetings with prospective donors and partners, as well as grant proposals and other written funding requests; (3) open houses, school choice fairs, conferences, exhibits, and other structured opportunities to hand out information about your school. Given these multiple purposes, it’s important to keep the document fairly general in terms of content, providing an overview of your mission, goals, programs and services (both academic and enrichment), academic successes and other points of pride, and contact information, including social media.

A simple, colorful tri-fold brochure meets this need well. Most readers have neither the time nor the patience to sift through a wordy, 16-page booklet about your school, so keep it brief, and balance text with captivating images. Consider producing these materials on heavier stock paper at a printer or copy shop, rather than from a color printer. The cost increase is minimal, while the difference in terms of the professional look and feel of the document will be significant.

5. **Fun stuff.** While the tri-fold brochure will eventually make its way to the recycling bin, clever giveaways that feature your school’s branding can serve as more lasting reminders. There are thousands of promotional items (or “swag”) on the market, with price ranges to suit any budget, and most can be tailored to feature your school colors, logo, motto, and more. These also make great giveaways for open houses and school choice fairs. Remember that candy and other food giveaways have no shelf life (and may send the wrong message about your school’s approach to nutrition), while more useful trinkets like office supplies, magnets, mugs and totebags will be put to good use for much longer. School-branded apparel (T-shirts, sweatshirts, etc.) can be a popular fundraising item. Promotional items also can reinforce the academic theme or focus of your school, such as branded flash drives for a STEM-focused school. If your school participates often in school fairs and other exhibit opportunities, eye-catching display materials such as branded tablecloths and retractable banners are a worthwhile investment, too.

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These five elements – when used in concert to deliver a compelling message – serve as the basic building blocks of a strong, memorable school brand. There are numerous other effective strategies, including media kits, signature events, and measurement tools, to name just three more.

None of this is meant to suggest that school choice can be reduced to a battle of bells and whistles. After all, even the most attractive packaging can’t improve our impressions of a subpar product or service. An elegant logo, clever tagline, full-color newspaper advertisement and glossy brochure can never make up for

low performance or poor customer service. Parents ultimately want to send their children to schools with a welcoming culture and great teachers who get impressive academic results. They also look for a well-rounded education beyond the basics, including arts and music, after-school programs, sports and recreation, state-of-the-art technology, and much more. Effective marketing doesn't trick parents into believing that a school is something it's not. Instead, educational leaders must identify what their school has to offer – more specifically, *what distinguishes it from the rest of the pack* – and do a great job telling that story in new and inspiring ways.

For more on this topic, read “[The Role of Brand in the Nonprofit Sector](#)” from the Stanford Social Innovation Review and “[Branding Beyond the Logo](#)” from GuideStar.

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