



# Making Your Mark:

## How to Build Your District Brand

Everyone wants their district's name to evoke positivity.

But not every district is associated with feelings of trust, pride or success — despite the laudable work being done in their classrooms. Others benefit from favorable reputations, but leave their public image to chance. Neither is ideal. The stakes are high in today's connected world, as parents and educators have more choices and access to information than ever before.

Instead, take control of your district's brand and put marketing strategies to work. You'll be able to re-define how people see your district, ensure that you're consistently putting your best foot forward and more effectively achieve your goals.

## Why focus on branding and marketing?

In the business world, success is intricately linked with a strong brand identity. When you see the Apple logo, you think of innovative technologies with cutting-edge design. Pixar brings to mind creative stories that tug at your heartstrings. The Golden Arches are instantly recognizable and signal the ready availability of Big Macs and fries.

Your school could benefit from a careful brand strategy as well in a myriad of ways: student enrollment, staff recruitment and engagement, community engagement.

Once you've solidified a powerful district brand, it becomes easier to attract more students and talented teachers, improve community engagement and maintain an excellent reputation.

### *Student enrollment.*

Naturally, parents want their children to go to a school with a stellar reputation — that's why a quarter of all students go to a school other than the one they were assigned.<sup>1</sup> But you want them to choose to go to *your* school. To make that happen, you need to compete with neighboring schools and districts and ensure that your district's name is associated with excellence. This goes beyond any competition created by open enrollment or school choice: 1 in 4 homebuyers cite (perceived) school quality as the deciding factor in their decision-making.<sup>2</sup>

### *Staff recruitment.*

The most talented educators are in great demand, especially as teacher shortages contribute to intense competition between districts. What are you doing ensure that the best teachers choose to work in your school system over all the others? Marketing your district as an employer benefits both passive and active recruiting efforts. A great reputation encourages candidates to seek out your job postings on their own. And utilizing marketing strategies in your recruitment efforts amplifies your outreach efforts, leading to deeper, higher-quality applicant pools.

### *Community and stakeholder engagement.*

You know the importance of communicating with parents and families. But you may be missing 80 percent of the people who support public education: the many people in your community without school-age children.<sup>3</sup> Are you reaching these stakeholders? Do they see that their tax dollars are making a difference in students' lives? If these stakeholders don't understand how their contributions have an impact on future generations, they may have more difficulty accepting much-needed tax increases in the future.

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<sup>1</sup> Wilde, Marian. "Working the System to Get the School of Your Choice." *GreatSchools*. 8 Mar. 2016. Web.

<sup>2</sup> "Field Guide to Schools and the Home Buying Decision." *Realtor.org*. National Association of REALTORS, Nov. 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Carr, Nora, APR. "The Battle for Democracy." *NSPRA Counselor* (2005). National School Public Relations Association. Web.

Once you've solidified a powerful district brand, it becomes easier to attract more students and talented teachers, improve community engagement and maintain an excellent reputation. With so much depending on your district's public image, marketing your district cannot fall to your communications specialist or public relations professional alone. This is an undertaking that requires the participation of everyone in the district. It's also going to require some preparation.

## Building Your Brand

Before you can start to effectively market your schools, you must first define your organization's brand. That's easier said than done. Your district's brand is more than a name, location or logo. These are important, of course, but they're only the building blocks.

*"A brand in business is meant to sell. On the other hand, a brand in education is meant to build support, admiration, and respect for the honorable work you do each day for kids."* - Eric Sheninger<sup>4</sup>

Branding is more like your reputation — it's created and continually influenced by how people interact with and experience your organization. It's your mission, visual style, tone, history and more, all wrapped up in what people think and feel about the organization as a whole.

To put it simply, in the words of branding expert Marty Neumeier:

*"Your brand isn't what you say it is. It's what they say it is."*

But what if "they" don't say what you want them to say?

In that case, it's time for a rebrand. Sit down and research how your schools are perceived right now. What do people think about your district? How do people differ in how they see your schools? Then, define what you want your brand to be. You'll want to document each of the following brand components and ensure that everyone is on the same page.

**Messaging:** What do you want people to think about your district? Think of your brand messaging as what your organization stands for at a high level. This may include your mission statement, district vision, tagline and tone. Think about what makes your schools different — what sets you apart? This is your "why" — why do teachers want to work in the district? Why do parents want to send their children to your schools?

**Visuals:** Humans are visual creatures, so you'll want to be sure that your district's imagery consistently reinforces and conveys your messaging. Visuals include the logo, font, colors and photos you use throughout the district.

**Experience:** Do your website, social media profiles and other communication channels show that you are professional, credible and innovative? Make sure interacting with your district is enjoyable. For example, if you are looking to recruit more teachers, ensure that your hiring process shows that you're easy to work with and tech-savvy — not that your processes are stuck in the Stone Age.

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<sup>4</sup> Sheninger, Eric. "Developing a BrandED Strategy." A Principal's Reflections, 22 Nov. 2015. Web.  
<<http://esheninger.blogspot.com/2015/11/developing-branded-strategy.html>>.

Having a solid brand identity only helps if people know about it. Make sure that people see who you are and what you're doing in your schools. Here are a few general best practices and ideas to ensure that your branding efforts make an impact.

- Get visual! People respond well to imagery, so make sure that you don't just rely on text-heavy materials. Incorporate photographs and visual elements wherever you can — especially social media, where pictures are more likely to gain traction.
- Get students, parents and staff involved as district advocates. Encourage them to become “brand ambassadors” and participate on social media.
- Create positive buzz by sharing stories about your academics, staff, students, alumni and successes. Amazing things happen in your schools every day — these are compelling stories that should be told.
- Drive engagement by recognizing employees' achievements or publicly welcoming new hires to the district.
- Keep your website updated and stay active on social media so people stay engaged and up-to-date with your communications.

## Reaching Your Goals with Marketing

Marketing your district is great to think about in theory, but reaching your goals takes real-life application. You need a plan.

The good news is, you don't need to start the planning process from scratch. Every good marketing plan can be built off a few key pieces. Once you know what you want to accomplish and what you can do to get there, the rest will fall into place.

### Purpose

First, you need to know the purpose served by your marketing campaign. It's okay to keep this high level — do you want to enrich your teacher recruitment efforts? Do you want to find more people for your substitute program?

Pick one goal and keep it simple. While it's easy to get carried away (“*I want to make the district look good so that we can find more teachers and more substitutes AND drive greater parental engagement AND be recognized for classroom innovation!*”), the more you can focus in on one goal, the more likely you are to achieve it.

### Goals

How will you measure the success of your marketing efforts? Know the metrics you want to track and what numbers you'd like to see. These should be clearly aligned to your purpose so you know if you're on the right track. For example, if your purpose is to recruit more teachers, your goal might be to receive 150% more applications for teaching positions.

### Audience

Whom should you direct your marketing strategy toward? Determine who needs to hear your message. To continue the teacher recruitment example, you might want to target recent college graduates from nearby universities or veteran teachers of a specific subject.

### Key Messages

Decide what messages you want to convey to support your goals. Do you want to show that the district has a great work environment and supportive administrators? Or that student performance is off the charts? Try to narrow down to the most effective messages for your purpose and audience, and avoid the temptation of taking the “everything but the kitchen sink” approach.

### Strategy & Deliverables

Here are the nuts and bolts of your marketing plan. Try to nail down how you will deliver your message, what materials you'll need to create and how you can best utilize the resources available to you. For example, if you'd like to use video, who will put it together? Do you have a teacher or student with the skills you need to create an exceptional district video?

Make sure to also determine how you will handle distribution. You'll have a hard time getting results if no one sees your hard work! Luckily, you have tons of potential channels you can use.

- District Website
- Local News Outlets
- Social Media
- District Blog
- Emails
- Signs and Billboards
- Printed Materials

If the purpose of your campaign is staff recruitment, an electronic applicant tracking system makes it easy to take advantage of more channels. And, you can track data on which channels are most effective — allowing you to refine your strategy in the future.

Don't be afraid to get creative in finding new places to tell your district's stories — the only limit is your imagination.

### Evaluate and Refine:

Begin with the end in mind. You already know what goals you want to reach, but when do you expect to reach them? How often will you evaluate your progress, and through what metrics?

In addition, go beyond asking if you met your goal. Commit to tracking the performance of your marketing efforts, and you'll be able to make more informed decisions in the future. You'll want to return to this section after launching your campaign and see how you did. Did your website's traffic increase? Did you gain more social media or blog followers?



### Across the Country

Chandler Unified School District in Arizona advertises in local movie theaters.



Fraser Public School District in Michigan runs zip code-specific ads on Pandora, an online radio station, to reach parents in neighboring districts.



Westonka Public Schools reaches out to potential future students while they're still in diapers, sending out birthday cards to young children and "baby bags" to new parents.

Schools often have reputations that are anywhere from 7 to 10 years old, so if you are part of a system that has recently experienced rapid improvement, it may take longer to see the results you want.<sup>5</sup> But rest assured, consistently marketing your district, sharing the right messages in the right places and reinforcing your brand will allow you to change perceptions and control the narrative.

And by carefully planning your district's marketing strategies, you're even closer to achieving your goals — whether you want to increase student enrollment, attract more applicants or promote community engagement.

<sup>5</sup> Wilde, Marian. "Working the System to Get the School of Your Choice." *GreatSchools*. 8 Mar. 2016. Web.

*Are you ready to get started? Feel free to use this template to plan for your next success.*

## Marketing Plan:

Purpose: \_\_\_\_\_

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Goals: \_\_\_\_\_

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Audience: \_\_\_\_\_

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Key Messages: \_\_\_\_\_

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Strategy & Deliverables: \_\_\_\_\_

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Distribution:

☐ Website ☐ Twitter ☐ Facebook ☐ LinkedIn ☐ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Evaluation: \_\_\_\_\_

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