

Branding: What is it and Why do Schools Need a Strategy?

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Does your school brand itself?

1. The answer is yes, whether you know it or not .
2. Branding can be intentional or unintentional. You want to make it intentional.

What is branding?

1. Branding is a message that differentiates your school
 - a. Just like a brand on a ranch. Sets you apart.
 - b. It demonstrates how your school is different from other schools.
 - c. Steve Lorenz says, "An excellent school brand communicates a clear message about what the school stands for and why."
2. Branding creates a relationship with your shareholders (aka. families, students, alumni)
 - a. Branding is your story.
 - b. Your brand is what conveys that you will provide what parents want for their children.
 - a. It's an emotional connection that helps one school stand out from the rest
 - b. Branding makes an emotional connection with your families, staff, students, alumni, etc.

Why does your school need a branding strategy?

1. There is growing competition
 - a. There are a lot more education options, and not just public school - charters, other private schools, other Christian schools, online learning, homeschooling
 - b. Branding increases the number of people interested in your school
 - c. Branding effects not only student enrollment but teacher, staff recruitment
2. Social media changed the landscape
 - a. Everything is branded now via social media, whether we like it or not, including education
 - b. There is intentional and unintentional branding. BOTH are tremendously powerful
 - a. Intentional branding is crafted, purposeful and controlled.
 - b. Unintentional branding is the opposite.
 - c. You should tell your story. If you don't, someone else will.

What happens when you brand?

1. People want to be at your school
 - c. Branding increases the number of people interested in your school
 - d. Effects not only student enrollment but teacher, staff recruitment
2. People want to stay at your school
 - a. Gives staff, teachers, students, families a sense of pride and camaraderie
3. Moves people from seeing you as a "need" to a "want"
 - a. Needs are the facts and rational benefits of what you offer. Other schools can offer these things.
 - b. Wants are emotional connections with your families, both prospective and current. Your brand is what conveys that you will provide what parents want for their children.

How do you brand? Figure out who you are!

1. "Effective messaging begins with a school coming to a clear, concise, and consistent understanding of itself, and its purposes and values - in other words, its brand." -*Peter Gow*
2. Understand the people in your community
 - a. By knowing what they want, you can use that information to define what is unique about you.
3. Define yourself
 - a. If you haven't already, you need to develop a clear mission statement.
 - b. Determine your values.
 - c. What does the future look like for your school?
 - d. **These are things that come from your principal, your staff, your board of education**
4. Why is your school the best? Start with what your school does best and expand from there
 - a. Raise awareness of academic, artistic and athletic excellence across grades
 - b. What does your school have that other schools don't
 - c. Determine who your notable teachers are and highlight them
 - d. **These are statements that come from your families and students**

How do you brand? What to do

1. Be consistent
 - a. School branding is sending the same positive message again and again and again
 - b. Make sure everyone in your organization uses the same branding and same message.
 - c. If that message is that you have a great fine arts program, encourage everyone to tell that story (families, teachers, staff, church members, etc.)
 - d. Make all of your marketing materials the same. For example, The University of Michigan is very particular about their branding.
 - e. All of your marketing materials should contain the same logo, tagline, etc.

2. Be positive - Remember, you are creating a message and an emotional connection
3. Be transparent, honest, accurate
 - a. You are building a relationship and that means building trust with your families
 - b. Transparency can be letting your students and families tell their stories
4. Create the elements of your brand. 4 Essential Elements of a Brand
 - a. Logo and tagline
 - i. A good logomarkets your school
 - ii. Make it appealing to parents, students, teachers, etc.
 - iii. Needs good colors, fonts, images
 - iv. Consistency is key
 - v. Tagline and moto can come from mission statement
 - b. Website
 - i. A good website is essential
 - ii. Needs to use same logo, tagline, colors as all your other materials
 - iii. Can make or break your branding
 - iv. Look and design important but also navigation and content
 - c. Signage
 - i. Seen by local community, parents, children
 - ii. For example, at St. Paul we have renters in our building
 - d. Prospectus
 - i. It is important to convey all the information parents need, but it's also an important branding opportunity
 - ii. High quality photos, well written text, professional looking layout
5. Maintain your presence across a variety of platforms
 - a. This is the "Social Media" section
 - b. Like everything else, be consistent across media
 - c. Don't get stuck on Facebook
 - i. Other places to use are Twitter, Instagram, YouTube
 - d. Switch up content
 - i. Rather than text-heavy posts, alternate between shorter text posts, pictures, and videos
 - ii. Asking questions is a good way to increase engagement
 - e. Post frequently
 - i. Keep your posts updated
 - ii. Be careful not to send identical messages to each platform. There is software that allows you to do this (eg, Hootsuite, Instagram pies can also post to FB) but be sure to adapt the material to each venue
 - f. Drive traffic back to your website

You've branded. You're done, right?

1. Monitor your brand and make changes if necessary
 - a. Has your core message changed? Have you added programs, teachers, options? Have you removed or changed things that may have been negative? Make sure your branding reflects these changes.
 - b. A good idea to review your brand at least annually. The end of the school year is a good time.
2. Monitor what people are saying about you, online and in person
 - a. There are tools that can help you with this online
 1. Google Alerts
 2. Mention
 3. Columns in Tweetdeck and Hootsuite
 4. Be sure to include common misspellings for your name

Seven mistakes to avoid

1. Using multiple logos
 - a. Needs to be consistent use of one logo.
 - b. Multiple logos dilute a brand. When you use one logo, your brand will be consistent and strong.
2. Using multiple taglines (or no tagline at all)
 - a. A tagline is an opportunity to sell your school in an emotionally compelling set of words.
 - b. The shorter the tagline, the better. Just as you should have one logo, you should also have one tagline
3. Lack of consistent brand elements
 - a. Should use consistent colors and design elements (along with logo and tagline).
 - b. Admissions brochure should have a similar look and feel to your school' s website.
 - c. Lay out all of your marketing materials, ads, and your website on a table. What do you see? Do you see a consistent brand? Do all the pieces look like one school?
4. It's just plain boring and bland
 - a. Your brand is the packaging for your product.
 - b. Give people a compelling and high quality image that attracts them and motivates them to take the next step, to open the package.
 - c. Vibrant colors, compelling photos and engaging messages all contribute to this brand. A boring and bland brand will not attract prospective parents to your school.
5. Using a parent volunteer or designer "wannabe" to create your brand
 - a. Parents are spending money on your school and expect a high level of quality.
 - b. While you might think that you are saving money by using a parent volunteer or designer "wannabe," you are potentially hurting your school's image with poor quality.
 - c. Developing a brand for your school without professional help should not be attempted (there are some exceptions to this).
6. Using poor photography
 - a. Photos can make or break a brochure or website.
 - b. Photos should express the life of your school through images of your students, faculty, and staff in action.
7. Letting everyone brand what is right in their own eyes
 - a. A brand should be controlled, maintained and protected by a person or group at your school.
 - b. If everyone does what is right in their own eyes, then your brand image will be diluted, inconsistent, and unprofessional.

Take Home Exercises

1. List 10 well-known education "brands." What is the essential truth at the core of each of these brands? (e.g., University of Michigan)
2. Gather your school's printed or electronic materials and spread these out on a table.
 - a. Are they consistent with one another?
 - b. Does each reflect the expression of the mission and values of the school?
3. Try filling in the blank in this statement: [Your school] is the ONLY school in the world that ...
4. Ask six to eight parents at your school to compose a 30 second "elevator pitch" that expresses the core of your school. Then ask a handful of staff to do the same. List your key audiences, such as young alumni/ae (under 30), parents, prospective families, prospective teachers, students, and donors. Then ask, "Are my core messages relevant to these people?"
5. Examine your website for visual elements of the home page. How do they compare to other school home pages in your market? What do you need to do to ensure your site articulates your uniqueness?
6. Gather 10 stories from staff, parents, students, graduates, etc. that reflect the principles and the value of your school. Consider ways in which these stories can become parts of the school's intentional efforts to tell its story.

Additional Resources

[Lutheran Communicators](#): A Facebook group that is primarily made up of people holding communications positions at churches, but it's a great resource for admissions counselors too. Moderated by Seth Hinz.

[ACNET List serve](#) - A list serve from the LEA that is devoted to admissions counselors from around the country. Moderated by [Ed Grube](#).