



In our current competitive climate, all public schools should be building their brand

Stacy Tapp

It's no secret. Many public school districts in Wisconsin are facing declining enrollment. Competition is fierce. Charter schools, private schools, voucher schools, virtual schools, STEM/STEAM schools ...you name it. There is a choice that appeals to everyone.

According to the most recent Phi Delta Kappa poll (September 2013), 51 percent of Americans now believe “students receive a better education

at a public charter school than at other public schools” and, in Wisconsin last year, more than one in four students chose to attend a school other than their home school.

What is it that these private, charter, and other non-traditional schools are doing better than public schools? *Marketing.*

These schools were never guaranteed their students, so they have been marketing their schools all along. They know how to sell their product and they have committed resources to doing it well.

Public school districts on the other hand, are latecomers to the marketing game. Most public school districts have not yet committed resources to

hiring a professional to lead communication and marketing efforts, much less created a budget for advertising and marketing initiatives.

According to a recent survey funded by the Wisconsin School Public Relations Association (WSPRA) in collaboration with the Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators (WASDA) and CESA 6, only 10 percent of Wisconsin school districts employ a communication professional. If your district does not, what can you do?

Every school should have a brand that is aligned with your district's mission and vision. And every school principal or leader as well as all school staff members should know how to market that brand.

Though it may seem daunting and expensive, if approached strategically, marketing your school can be very manageable and cost little to nothing.

EVERY SCHOOL
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RESEARCH

COST: Minimal to expensive, depending on approach

Always begin with research. Find out what your stakeholders (*i.e.*, school families, community members, prospective school families) think about your school. Ask these questions:

- What is the community perception of my school?
- What do stakeholders want from my school?
- What do stakeholders like/dislike about my school?
- How do school families want to receive communication from my school?

Gathering this type of information will provide a baseline of understanding about what your school image or brand currently is and it will help you determine how you want to improve that brand.

This information can be collected by conducting formal focus groups or surveys or simply by having conversations with stakeholders in school hallways, at meetings, during events or in the community. Your PTA is made up of school stakeholders. Don't forget to tap them for their input.

Also, consider asking parents or others to "secret shop" your school to identify your customer service strengths and weaknesses.

YOUR BRAND

COST: Minimal

Developing three to five clear, concise key messages is essential for building your school brand and marketing your school. Start with the questions below and work with your entire school staff to build consensus around and ownership of your school key messages.

- What does my school offer that is unique or better than our competition?
- Who are we and what is our purpose?
- What benefits do we provide our students and their families?

Developing 3-5 clear, concise key messages is essential to building your school brand and marketing your school. Start with the questions above and work with your entire school staff to build consensus



around and ownership of your school's key messages.

Make sure your key messages are easy to understand (no education jargon), memorable, and meaningful to school families (“How does this impact my child?”).

Every staff member, from the principal to the teachers to the cafeteria worker to the secretary and building engineers, should know your school's key messages. They should believe in them and be comfortable sharing them with people in the community, friends, neighbors or anyone who wants to know about your school.

Your key messages should help a family know why they should choose your school.

QUALITY SERVICE

COST: Minimal

Approximately 90 percent of reputation is based on quality service. The way your staff interacts with families and community members who visit your school can make or break your school image.

Additionally, positive word-of-mouth is one of the most valuable forms of marketing. And school employees rank first as the most influential source of impression about our schools.

A dissatisfied customer will tell 16 people about his/her bad experience. A dissatisfied parent will tell neighbors, family members, church friends and anyone who will listen about his/her experience with your school.

On the other hand, a positive customer service experience can lead a family to do some extremely valuable word-of-mouth marketing for you that costs absolutely nothing.

So, involve staff in rolling out a customer service/school branding campaign that will lead to these third-party endorsements for your school.

School leaders should ensure that all school staff, especially front line staff in the school office, does a superb job of customer service 100 percent of the time. Here are some basic tips:

- Develop customer service expectations for all school staff and hold them accountable.
- Reward staff who demonstrate great customer service.
- Lead by example; school leaders must be visible and provide great customer service too.

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**Learn More from
WSPRA
at Convention**

The Wisconsin School Public Relations Association (WSPRA) will be holding a session at the upcoming State Education Convention. On **Thursday, Jan. 23**, WSPRA will hold a session on community support, "Building Community support: Why Effective Communication Starts at the Top." For more information, visit wasb.org/convention.

MARKETING

COST: Little to a lot, depending on available resources

When people think about marketing, they typically think of advertising, which is very costly. Some schools and districts do advertise. However, there are also some very low-cost and effective ways to market our schools, including earned ("free") media.

- **Share your story.** Make time to reach out to local media outlets to share your positive stories. If you don't tell your story, who will? And the only expense is a little bit of your time.
- **Evaluate first impressions.** What does your school office convey to visitors? Pretend you are a parent entering the building. Do a walk through and pay attention to what a parent would notice. Make sure the area is welcoming, neat and professional-looking.
- **Utilize outdoor signage.** Make sure your school signs have current, positive messages about your school. Advertise pro-

grams, awards and recognitions in addition to school events.

- **Revitalize your school newsletter.** Your school newsletter is more than a place to inform parents about rules and policies or announce upcoming fundraisers and events. It should market your school and build your brand. Share positive

stories about unique programs, student achievement and high-quality teaching. Post your newsletter on your website. Prospective parents may read it and it's a great way to keep current families engaged.

- **Keep your website up-to-date.** Prospective parents are shopping online. Make sure the information on your website is up-to-date and incorporates your key messages. This is one of your most valuable marketing tools and most often

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the first chance to engage new families.

▪ **Consider using social media.** (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) Don't jump in unless you are ready to take full ownership (which means daily monitoring and posting) of your social media site. If you are ready, using social media is a great way to build relationships with school families and communicate about all the great things your school offers. Encourage your families to share positive testimonials on your Facebook page.



EVALUATE

COST: Minimal to expensive, depending upon approach

Once you've made a concerted effort to market your school, take the time to evaluate your efforts.

Again, this can cost little to nothing if you choose to informally survey school families or community members or request that a parent "secret shop" your school.

You can also survey families who enroll in or inquire about your school. How did they hear about or why did they choose your school? This will help guide your efforts and ensure you are using your limited resources most effectively.

Social media and websites also have built-in measurement tools. How many new "likes" do you have on your Facebook page and what is the quality of interaction on your page? How many followers do you have on Twitter? You can use Google Analytics (free tool) to see how many people visit your website and gauge what visitors are most interested by noting which pages are visited most.

Need Support?

School districts must recognize the need to jump into the marketing



game and begin to build their brands in order to compete with all of the educational options available to families. Every district would benefit from hiring a professional communicator to strategically lead the charge.

WSPRA is also a valuable school communications resource. Don't hesitate to reach out and ask for assistance or advice. WSPRA members can provide a depth of experience and knowledge in school public relations, marketing, crisis management, media relations and more. Visit wspira.org for more information. ■

Tapp is chief of communications and community engagement for the Racine Unified School District and a WSPRA Board Member.

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