



# BOOSTING YOUR SCHOOL'S APPEAL

David Limb says that your design company can be immensely helpful when it comes to cohesive and effective branding of all the promotional material for your school.

**T**hey call it 'curb appeal'. You're driving around an area with a view to buying a house and you see one for sale, but you drive on by. Around the corner, another house for sale catches your eye – this time, you stop and take the details and, perhaps, stroll up as near as you dare without looking like a burglar, trying to get a glimpse at the garden or the front room. Something made you drive past the first house yet feel the pull of the second.

So it is with websites, prospectuses and other promotional materials. To boost your school's appeal you need to give some attention to what draws people in, what makes them stop and peep over the fence. Naturally, your content and its relevance to a prospective parent or pupil is important but the look, feel and unspoken message of your material is what will attract people to look more closely.

According to Reinecke, Yeh et al, (Harvard University, 2010), "*Users make lasting judgments about a website's appeal within a split second of seeing it for the first time.*"

You may toy with making your promotional materials really stand out – circular prospectus, anyone? Or play safe and make them look just like every other one you've ever seen. Research carried out by Google suggested that users like a website to fulfil their expectations and pass over something that looks too complex. (<http://googleresearch.blogspot.co.uk/2012/08/users-love-simple-and-familiar-designs.html>). At the same time, of course, you hope to stand out from the crowd; reaching this balance – simple and familiar or unusual and informative – is definitely something worth considering when you see your graphic designer's plan.

## Shocking pink school increases celebrity intake!

Short of getting a colour therapist in or changing the school colour from red to turquoise to fit with the prospectus, you should be careful about the impact of colour. If you've gone for purple (royalty/luxury, so they say) or black (power/professionalism) but want to convey energy and fun (orange, by the way!) a complete turnaround may be too much (remember, you need to please your current users as well as attract new ones). However, speak to your designer about adding colour to certain parts or incorporating it into an existing design plan. In a website there are graphics, borders, backgrounds, headlines, buttons and pop-ups and your prospectus makes use of several of these. Consider the theme, nature and tone of what you're saying and how choosing the right colour will speak to the parents and children you hope to attract.

Once that first interest-capturing design is determined, you've got the 'A' in that old marketing formula – AIDA:

- **A.** Attract the **attention** of the customer.
- **I.** Drifting into 'I' in the formula we need to gain the **interest** of the customer and a good way to do this is with a headline. This section of the article, for example, could have been entitled 'Use of colour' but it would have stirred little curiosity.
- **D.** Naturally, the dedicated member of a school staff reading this will not have needed to be enticed to reach this point *and* will know the 'D' in AIDA stands for **desire**. This is the point at which a user starts to think, "I'd love to get the children into this school". There's only so much to be done with design and attention grabbers – the children's parents want





“Keep most photographs to happy, hard-working pupils because that’s what parents want for their own children”



Websites with fewer options for action work best

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Market **what is at the core** of the education you offer

information and want to get a feel for the school approach, its vision, ethos and values. Most schools manage to make these sound appealing yet parents won't even bother going any further if the website isn't easy to navigate. Likewise, a hard copy prospectus should be well presented and ordered so that everything is easy to find – use of colour, headers and physical dividers in various forms can help here.

### Buttons and Cinderella

So, if the children *shall* go to the school then you need the final 'A' in AIDA to be effective:

- **A. Action.** Whoever's doing the research must click on the button or telephone the school (in the case of a prospectus a well-designed call to action might encourage the parent to get online). Websites with fewer options for action work best – a parent doesn't want to be hassled to choose between several, however beautiful the layout. No one wants to 'register' so consider the words on or around any button. Anything too twee ('I love to be clicked on' – it's happened!) is in danger of being rejected and anything lost in a sea of text will be ignored. The best buttons have few words or graphics around or on them, but do have 'click triggers'. A click trigger is a reassurance or further encouragement, such as a testimonial (just one line – use brief compliments) or a supportive, 'one click only' or 'it'll take you 30 seconds'. If your designer suggests a graphic of actual buttons on a (very last century) duffle coat or, even worse, Buttons from Cinderella, politely decline, but the simple, encouraging use of background, colour and picture can clinch the deal.

### Fully functioning

The best use of a professional design company is in making sure your website is functional. This means it's easy to use on a laptop, PC or mobile and that it's resistant to things going wrong. If you haven't got an all-singing-dancing-teaching phone, then you're in a minority – seven out of 10 people in the UK now have a Smartphone and sales via mobile web traffic are increasing with each year that passes. Your website will need to work on *all* mobile devices (not only the popular iPhone) which means larger text, visible buttons and links and easy access through scrolling. If your

children were born in this digital age, you will be familiar with mobile users that can't be expected to put down their phones during breakfast. They are on the go and require fast loading – and this includes anyone browsing the internet for schools, or specifically looking up your school – sometimes it really is a race to get there first. For mobile devices to work effectively, a plan to optimise images and develop light, fast pages needs to be built into the design from the outset.

These days, websites usually have integrated and easily found social media icons. If the only time you go on Facebook you need your 11 year-old child by your side, or your knowledge of tweeting belongs in the RSPB-sponsored junior school nature project, then either find someone else to administer this side of things or ask your design company for advice on getting up to speed.

It's likely you'll want the facility to allow you to report that the film studies teacher has left and been replaced by Ms Smith – at least you're free of having to correct the spelling of Mr. Schwarzenegger's name, though that's important, too. Typographical errors, punctuation and grammar mistakes are enough to put some parents off. Consider using a copywriter if you're not confident or don't have the time yourself. Any content management system (where you can do the updating of content yourself) should itself be easy to use or the design company you use will give you full support.

A prospectus needs to be a little more future-proofed as obviously, you can't be regularly updating it. While pictures of little William Potter – now an MP – hugging Sarah Khan – also an MP but on the other side – are endearing and nostalgic, they can start to appear dated. Likewise, references to the 'new' playground or school logo competition winners quickly become echoes of times gone by if not worded well.

### Hot chocolate, drinking chocolate

Way back in the 1970s, before we knew that computers or designers had been invented, a television advert showed a family rushing home in the cold and rain to the whispered and repeated refrain, 'hot chocolate, drinking chocolate'. Of course, they get home to the comfort of the said

warming and soothing drink. They tell you very little about the product because, like many advertisements, they're selling an idea, a lifestyle even, rather than a product. We saw the family warm and cosy out of the rain and we rushed to buy that homely, protective comfort (and remembered it for the next 45 years!).

Schools need to make a lot of information readily available, formal and detailed. But not all of that needs to go in a website or prospectus. Instead, market what is at the core of the education you offer whether that's top marks and high achievement or an open and reformist, alternative education. Use pictures, headlines, key words and design features to tell your story. Generally speaking, plenty of 'white space' is helpful (though it needn't be white) because it suggests clarity and encourages users to stick with it. Use bullet points and quotations and bring these out with colour, pop-outs or accompanying info-graphics. Sneak in an occasional non-child photograph (showing children's work or a stand-out school feature) but keep most photographs to happy, hard-working children because that's what parents are opting into for their own children – happiness, conscientiousness and confidence.

Headlines or lists of contents should take the prospectus browser on without requiring every word to be read. As they move through the features discussed above, colour, layout, graphics, etc. will be working and having an impact.

### Hurry, bargain sale!

No, of course not. While we might steal techniques and perspectives from advertising, we want prospective parents and pupils to take their time and make sure the decision to attend your school is the right one for everyone. Schools should be open and welcoming to visiting families, proud to show off whatever makes them special. There's no point in pretending to be anything other than what you are – but make sure what you are is easily discernable from your promotional materials. Even though Mr. Schwarzenegger has moved on, new children will quickly settle and love the school their parents selected after peeping over the figurative garden wall that drew them in from the outside. 