

Is your school on brand?

When it comes to choosing schools, today's parents are more switched on than ever. How can you ensure your school stands out above the rest? **David Limb** shares some practical steps leaders can take to isolate exactly what makes their school special and communicate this to prospective parents and pupils.

Parents have always cared about the style and standard of education their children receive, but the rise of social media, the publication of league tables and Ofsted reports, and growing confidence in exercising their right to choice have all fuelled a desire among parents to really understand what is going on in our schools.

Today's parents are informed. Empowered by freer exchanges of data, in particular online data, they have developed a keen appetite for information about schools, and are increasingly comfortable with the notion of research and selection.

At the same time, state schools are following the lead of the independent sector—where school leaders are used to competing for pupils—and spending more time managing the image they present to the outside world. Increasing transparency and



accountability across the schooling system means even full or over-subscribed schools recognise the need to sustain their popularity in the long term by finding better ways to engage with their communities. While pupil numbers determine school budgets, popular schools are just as motivated to protect essential income as those struggling to fill their classes, making investments in a good website, prospectus, video and social media valid costs that can pay great dividends over the years.

A new era in school marketing

Evidence of an evolving school landscape continues to emerge, most recently in the form of national news reports that growing numbers of parents are selecting good state schools over independent schools. Once again, this signals a new era in school marketing where freedom of choice and competition are driving more schools to take charge of their reputations by building strong identities and developing robust communication strategies.

And at the same time, ongoing struggles across the education system to attract, train and retain more excellent teachers and support staff are further motivation for school leaders to position their schools as great places to teach and build a rewarding career.



School leaders are being challenged to engage more regularly and purposefully with their communities; to inform conversations by sharing information about their schools, so that parents can make choices based on knowledge rather than hearsay; to reflect their school values, beliefs, priorities, successes and aspirations in a way that will influence what people think, and, even more importantly, say about their school; to inspire pupils, parents and teachers to want to become part of their school.

Faced with the challenge of how to influence public perceptions, there are steps that school leaders can take to ensure they formulate a successful campaign.

What makes your school special?

To begin with, leaders need to outline a clear vision and set of values for their school. What makes yours a good school? Which aspects of school life do you want to be known for? What do you believe makes for the best education, and how are you delivering it to your pupils? Most schools don't communicate what makes them special. Many haven't considered what they believe in recently. But defining what makes your school different and identifying where your strengths lie is an extremely effective way to help focus efforts and channel resources into distinguishing your school from others.

Is your school focused on achieving great academic results, for example, or do you offer excellent pastoral care? Do you take an innovative or traditional approach to

teaching? Do you provide excellent sporting facilities and coaching, or do you have a successful record of nurturing children's musical talents?

Your conclusions will help to determine what information will feature foremost on your website or in a prospectus, as well as in any news stories that you offer to your local press, and in messages you publish via email or Facebook.

Defining your strengths is an exercise that should be carried out in collaboration with pupils and staff in order to gather the most realistic picture of what makes your school special. This will also provide the opportunity to gather valuable quotes that can be used in marketing literature and video footage. This sort of exercise can be extremely enlightening and motivating.

Together, a school's vision, values and ethos make up its identity. In turn, having a strong identity will make it easier to create clear messages and effective branding and marketing materials.

Redefining your prospectus

The traditional prospectus is evolving, not only in the independent sector where its popularity is proven, but increasingly among state schools, where more school leaders are recognising its potential as a way of showcasing the education they offer. In the past, the prospectus was largely used as a handbook of policy information, but now



schools are adopting the format to illustrate their environment, facilities and the opportunities they offer pupils to learn and grow. In doing so, they are allowing parents and pupils to see beyond the school gates in a way they have typically struggled to do before.

The modern prospectus is a celebration of school life and the experiences a school can offer its pupils, captured in photography and words. It might outline the school's vision, values and ethos; draw attention to its strengths; highlight the benefits of its teaching style, the quality of its sports facilities and the richness of its musical traditions; or emphasise the importance it gives to pupils' health and wellbeing. It might also include quotes from current pupils, parents, teachers and Ofsted to reinforce the school's reputation.

Managing your online reputation

The first move for someone who doesn't know your school will be to search online and visit your school's website. Whether you like it or not, the internet will play an influential role in shaping people's perceptions of your school, so it's important that you manage your internet presence where you can.



Top tips for branding your school

1. Define your school's brand and stick to it. When you use multiple logos or taglines, your brand is diluted. Use one logo for everything (website, prospectus, uniforms, stationery, newsletters, vehicles and so on) for a strong and consistent brand. Your tagline meanwhile is an opportunity to sell your school. It should sum up the main message of your school, so you will need to identify your unique selling point—the shorter this is, the better.

2. Use your brand across all communication materials. Consistency is key. Choose a colour scheme and stick to it. This applies, too, to the overall design of your materials. Your prospectus, for example, should have a similar look and feel to your website. Spread out all your marketing materials. Do you see a consistent brand? Is it all very clearly from one school?¹

3. Control, maintain and protect your brand. If everyone does what they want, your brand image will be diluted and unprofessional. Prepare a style guide—your 'brand bible'²—for internal reference, and develop a bank of branded electronic templates so correspondence and communication materials are consistent across the school and to save your busy teachers time creating their own. Ensure everyone, including parent volunteers, follows the guidelines and uses the templates.

4. Avoid poor quality materials. Photos make or break a brochure or a website. They should be compelling, attractive and of the highest quality. They should show your staff and students in action, and convey the amazing atmosphere of your school. Videos too should be of high quality and carefully edited.

5. Hire a professional. It's well worth recruiting someone who knows what they're doing to help brand your school. Parent volunteers or wannabe designers may seem an attractive, low-cost option, but you are potentially hurting your school's image if their work is of poor quality. A professional will be able to help you pinpoint exactly what makes your school special and will bring to the table innovative and effective ideas on how to communicate this to a variety of audiences.



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Statutory requirements, including those laid out by Ofsted, dictate that a school's website must hold important information, including policies on behaviour, curriculum, and SEN support, for parents and pupils to access easily. A clear, user-friendly navigation bar will make this information easy for visitors to find.

But an effective school website can be so much more than an Ofsted-compliant policy portal; a great website will also reflect the school's identity, its values and the sort of education it offers, candidly in words, but also visually, through photography and video. The website also offers a powerful way to maintain engagement with parents and pupils when they have left the school grounds, by offering learning resources and practical support.

Letting pupils have their say

Enlisting the views and energies of pupils can be an extremely effective source of marketing,

because they encapsulate everything parents and pupils want to know about a school. Prospective parents want to know how their child will turn out if they attend your school, while children will engage with pupils to whom they can relate. Putting pupils centre stage can therefore be a great way to shape perceptions.

This might include using pupil quotes about why they enjoy their life at the school in a printed prospectus or on your website, or making short films of the children talking about their experiences. These can be streamed on the school website or shown at open days and pupil visits, and can be a powerful and persuasive way to show what your school feels like and what makes it great.

The key to capturing images of happy, thoughtful, clever, funny, sensitive, talented

pupils is to film them talking to each other or to an interviewer about something you know they are enthusiastic about. This might mean asking them for their views on what they like most about their school, or for their thoughts on their favourite activity or a recent project, performance or sports event.

Shifting negative perceptions

Creating a clear identity and propagating messages that show yours is a school with vision, direction and opportunity is particularly important for schools that are trying to shift negative perceptions, inspire confidence and transform a school's standing in its community.

Schools that have been identified as underperforming or failing often go on to become very competent at communicating what is good about the education they offer. Motivated to improve the way they are seen by current pupils, parents and staff, and by their communities outside the school gates, these schools are likely to invest significant time and resources in restoring their identity and nurturing positive perceptions.

Engaging your internal audience

As well as targeting the external audience of prospective families, schools need to keep existing ones happy and informed. In some ways, this group of people is the most important one to communicate with, because it represents the school in the community and influences others with its opinions.

Pupils, parents, staff, governors and the LEA already have a stake in the school, and their views on the care and education it offers are a powerful indicator of its health and performance. Regular communication in the form of emailed newsletters, social media and website updates, combined with information evenings and open afternoons provide good opportunities to keep this group close and up to date. Encouraging a sense of school community and shared identity in this way can also be effective in boosting loyalty and improving morale among pupils and staff.

The school's prospectus, too, shouldn't only be used to inform prospective parents who are considering the school from the outside. Perhaps even more importantly, a copy should be given to every current family as part of

the school's work to engage with its internal audience in a way that strengthens the school culture, boosts morale, inspires a shared vision and stimulates a sense of pride at being part of a successful organisation.

And once again, even those full or over-subscribed schools need to consider how they are perceived internally as well as externally, because these views will influence the school's ongoing popularity.

The key to creating a successful brand is to make sure the way you promote your school to outsiders matches up to the experiences of pupils, parents and staff inside the school. If you're trying to create the perception that yours is a caring school where children's wellbeing and happiness are your number one priority, but families within the school have a different experience of your pastoral care, you're unlikely to succeed in convincing the public, and instead are more likely to encourage gossip and resentment.

Schools have a golden opportunity right now to engage with and shape the views of a receptive audience that is keen to make the best possible choices for their families. Taking steps to identify, build and nurture a clear identity gives a school the power to differentiate itself from others in its locality or specialism, strengthen the school culture, promote loyalty, dispel unwelcome myths and even transform reputations.

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References

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Knowledge trails

1. **So what is marketing, exactly?** – School marketing expert Stephen Martin-Scott looks at the seven 'P's of marketing and the value of well-thought-out advertising. library.teachingtimes.com/articles/so-what-is-marketing-exactly
2. **Producing the perfect prospectus** – Your prospectus represents the school to parents, so a little investment to make it look and read well can be repaid several times over. Paula Barclay explains. library.teachingtimes.com/articles/producing-the-perfect-prospectus
3. **A virtual school tour** – A virtual tour can share tantalising glimpses of your school's facilities to prospective parents and pupils. Jay Scott-Nicholls investigates. library.teachingtimes.com/articles/virtual-school-tour