

# Rules of engagement

## how branding will help your nursery



David Limb considers what it takes to foster good relationships with families, as he explores the benefits of branding in the nursery sector

Early years settings make up a diverse landscape of environments and teaching styles, offering families considerable choice, while nursery leaders have more freedom than most primary and secondary school heads to create unique environments and design their own ways of providing education. This gives them a tremendous opportunity to create a clear identity for parents and staff to identify and engage with.

When it comes to selecting a nursery setting for their child, parents have many more options than they do when their child reaches school age and is restricted by catchment areas. Parents might easily consider four or five nurseries on the basis of distance from home or work.

With choice comes competition, though, and nurseries have their work cut out to attract a new cohort of families each year. So how can you as a nursery leader differentiate your nursery from fellow providers, and in doing so give families clear

reasons to opt for your style of care and teaching over another?

The answer lies first in defining and then communicating what makes your nursery or pre-school the best place to entrust their child.

### What makes your nursery great

A good marketing plan gives nurseries the opportunity to manage what people say about them. Faced with the challenge of how to influence public perceptions, there are steps that you as nursery leader can take to ensure a successful campaign.

To begin with, you need to outline a clear vision and set of values for your nursery. What makes yours a

good nursery? Which aspects of nursery life do you want to be known for? What do you believe makes for the best education and how are you delivering it to the children in your care?

Most nurseries don't communicate what it is that makes them special. But defining why and how your nursery is different and identifying where your strengths lie is an extremely effective way of focusing your efforts and channelling resources into distinguishing your setting from others.

Is your nursery focused on preparing children for school, for example, and do you believe the key to achievement rests in free play? Do you pride yourselves on your ability to nurture caring, confident, independent-thinking members of society? Do you take an innovative or traditional approach to teaching? Is your nursery an advocate of thoughtful play, or learning focused around nature or the arts? Do you provide a learning experience in a unique setting, such as a forest environment?

### Focused photography

Your conclusions will help to determine what information will feature foremost on your website as well as in any news stories that you



This photo from Seabridge Primary focuses on the strong caring relationships fostered

*'From a psychological perspective, both [photos and videos] are seen as honest and therefore hugely emotive and reassuring forms of visual communication'*

offer to your local press, and email, Twitter and Facebook communications. They should also be your focus when planning photography or video imagery to illustrate what goes on in your setting. And finally, they should provide a framework for any stay-and-play afternoons and information evenings where you want to give families a potted version of everyday life in your nursery.

Defining your strengths is something you should do in collaboration with children, parents and staff, in order to gather the most accurate picture of what makes your nursery special. This will also enable you to gather valuable endorsements, which you can use in your marketing literature – they can also often be extremely enlightening and motivating.

## Managing your reputation

The first move for someone who doesn't know your nursery will be to search online and visit your website. The internet will play an influential role in shaping people's perceptions of your setting, so it's important that you manage your internet presence where you can. Many nurseries and pre-schools still don't have a dedicated website and are missing out on what can be a powerful way of celebrating all the best things about your setting, exactly as you want them to be illustrated.

An effective website will reflect a nursery's identity, its values, and the sort of care it offers, in words and also visually, through photography and video.

At the same time, and linked to the website, a well-maintained Facebook and Twitter profile providing regular updates, celebrating weekly achievements, and illustrating - by way of captioned photography - a rich programme of activities, is also an effective way of strengthening relationships with current and prospective families.

Both communication channels can function as regular touchpoints with parents, stimulating conversations that otherwise might never take place. They encourage valuable feedback in the form of comments,

likes and shares. A nursery that engages in this way will energise a motivated and communicative cohort of parents, who can be relied upon to propagate their views into the wider community through their own social networks and friendship groups.

There is no denying that this sort of branding exercise takes manpower, and that translates into cost. To be effective, Facebook and Twitter profiles must be monitored and regularly updated, and any comments or enquiries swiftly and positively addressed. But the return on this sort of investment can be considerable in terms of removing barriers to communication and bringing families closer to the nursery.

## The power of a picture

Thoughtful photography can be the most powerful tool in a nursery's marketing armoury. Beautiful images that focus on your strengths will instantly help parents to visualise the sort of care and attention their child would receive in your setting. Video takes this a step further, by providing many different perspectives and a rich and energetic source of information. From a psychological perspective, both are seen as honest and therefore hugely emotive and reassuring forms of visual communication.

Photography or video images showing close, animated teacher-child interactions, children's faces spellbound by the magic of storytime or delighted by a sensory play session, can set a nursery apart from its competition.

Once uncommon in the early years sector, the increasing use of the printed prospectus or brochure has been fuelled in part by the rise of



Greatstone Primary School projects an image of a loving playful environment

larger, multi-setting nurseries, as an effective way of sharing imagery with prospective families.

Combining great photography with well-worded, message-focused text shows careful thought and attention to detail. A small brochure sent to parents following an email or telephone enquiry, and handed to parents at open days and visits, provides a nursery with a solid, tactile form of follow-up communication that illustrates exactly what it wants to be known for. Using good quality paper to create it will also ensure it stands up to being passed from family to family – the ideal scenario.

## An opportunity to influence opinion

Together, a nursery's vision, values and ethos make up its brand or identity and provide nursery leaders with a framework to create clear messages and effective marketing materials that truly illustrate the unique spirit of their setting.

A clear brand identity gives a nursery a platform to communicate effectively with its communities, and in doing so seize opportunities to shape public perception, generate goodwill, and ultimately drive demand for places. ■

David Limb is managing director of Blue Apple Education, a design and marketing agency dedicated to working with nurseries, schools and colleges.

W: [blueappleeducation.com](http://blueappleeducation.com) Connect with David on LinkedIn