



THE BEST WAY TO MARKET YOUR SCHOOL AND ATTRACT PUPILS



The job of a school is to educate - and do it well. So how do people know about it? How are parents and potential students able to make a choice between one school and another?

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Most independent schools have begun to adapt to a rapidly evolving landscape that is set to become progressively more important as competition increases, yet still it can seem wasteful or distasteful to put money, thought and time into marketing; this isn't, after all, what school staff do best – and why should they?

This mixture of discomfort and, quite rightly, a different focus, can leave schools without an adequate marketing strategy. Many make a start with a website or a glossy brochure or (we all have to have it now) a presence on Facebook and Twitter, but often it detracts from what might be considered 'the real work', is not hugely effective and creates a challenge; how much time and money is it right to spend on marketing and what's the best way to do it?

Marketing is simply communication; it is a method of telling people what the school staff and students already know – that this is a school worth attending, has standing and respect and achieves results. The job of a school is to educate; the job of a marketing expert is to take the school's message to where it matters.

Return on marketing investment

Up until 2007 independent schools saw a decade of uninterrupted growth in student numbers. Average school fees rose by 40 percent, outstripping the rise of 15 percent

in average earnings of the main customer base of managerial and professional classes. More than 2,000 independent schools in the UK now compete to attract the trust of parents choosing private education for their children. Some schools are helped by the low exchange rate that has made it easier to attract students from Eastern Europe, China and the Middle East, but there is also the added competition of Free Schools and corporate providers, all fighting for the parental pound. Against this background of intense competition and tightening affordability, only 15 percent of independent schools have full-time marketing managers.

The role of a marketing or communications strategy within a school has to make financial sense. Take a fictional school that charges an annual fee of £12,000. They invest £15,000 in a new marketing/communications strategy attracting an extra five pupils at age 11 to generate an additional £60,000 per year; this will turn into an extra £420,000 if all five stay on until they take home their impressive A-levels results. The school is hoping for an increasing return on investment through a yearly rise in the number of new pupils attracted through marketing.

Create a brand

The starting point for all marketing is the brand – and that means more than just a logo. The brand covers every aspect of the school's marketing strategy; it is the package in which

the school's communication is contained and carries a message of its own about style and quality. The brand will help encourage a parent to buy into your school and it directly supports other marketing activities.

Putting a marketing/communications campaign together can give a school space to think about what it is they represent – and therefore what they want to say. Exploring core values – such as independence, opportunity and strength – provides a foundation on which to identify what the school does well, what it can offer parents and students that makes it stand out and makes it the right choice for parents and students.

A marketing/communications strategy for a school need not be treated with suspicion. It is not about selling something that does not exist – it is about presenting a school in such a way that allows parents and children to make an informed choice. Of course a school will want to present itself positively but, embedding the ideas and activities of communications in the whole school is an opportunity to get to the heart of what the school is about and to let all involved have a share in the buzz this creates.

Branding encompasses all the activities of the strategy – logo, uniform, website, communications with parents, signage, – everywhere the school communicates, externally and internally. This type of branding is part of a package of communication that sees a school considering its community profile, its place in the sector, its reputation and its appeal, not only to parents and children but to local people and businesses, governors, inspectors and other schools.

The best schools live up to their brands because they believe in what they are doing and have been part of the process of developing what it is they want to say and what makes them great. The whole

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practice is enhanced by the participation of current pupils and parents, teachers and non-teaching staff. This provides insight into the strengths and challenges of the school and can provide a platform for encouraging loyalty. Once the school's brand is established then word-of-mouth recommendation from parents, pupils and their friends reinforces any marketing initiative.

Promote the brand

Once the brand is established, the task is to promote it. Internally students, parents, staff and governors - those inside, who already have a stake in the school - will, at best, have been part of the process - but

they will need to increase their familiarity with the brand. Communications such as newsletters and an up-to-date website keep people informed and allow them to share in the campaign. Properly implemented, these measures help keep morale high, foster a strong sense of school identity and thus make it easier to retain staff and students.

Marketing to those outside the school not only means potential pupils and their parents, but also local businesses and the community as a whole. Activities such as open days and press coverage prove that marketing is not just about advertising materials; here are opportunities to talk about the school, show what it has done and

communicate its aspirations. The involvement of current students and parents allows people to match up the school's portrayal of itself and the reality - which is why the best strategies start with where schools are at, what they do and believe rather than what they want to look like. Open days are a chance to exhibit a school in its best light, making good use of student-led tours.

The independent education marketplace is changing. It is an excellent time for a re-consideration of the value of the sector and steps to ensure the schools within it are part of its future. Marketing is now an essential component in the pursuit of educational excellence. ←