

by Dorreen Dembski



Marketing Your Schools? Begin with a Solid Public Relations Program

As school districts around the state consider ways to enhance revenue and inspire continued public support for schools, the term marketing is making its way to the school board table. We have all watched medical providers, colleges and universities market their products. More and more frequently, school boards and administrators are asking if marketing will benefit their schools.

Is marketing a business function that doesn't apply to public schools or does marketing have a place?

Getting Started

First, what are the differences between marketing and public relations? Often, the terms marketing and public relations are loosely interchanged. Public relations and marketing can coexist, but each plays a distinct role in the organization. Secondly, marketing begins with a product. What products are school districts marketing? Finally, how do schools market their product and who is the customer?

Knowing when and what to market are critical decisions, especially in times of limited resources. Understanding the components of effective public relations plans and the steps of marketing is the

starting point to understanding the role of each in a school district.

Public Relations

The decision to embark upon a marketing campaign assumes that a public relations program is solidly in place. There are several pieces to an effective public relations plan, including various communication activities, media relations, publicity and evaluation.

School public relations activities should be planned two-way communication efforts that use multiple strategies to foster relationships with the public. These may include one-on-one interpersonal communication such as meetings, coffees with the principal, and presentations. Other communication tools are newsletters, speakers bureaus, school events, Web sites, etc. Communication initiatives deliver key messages to identified audiences for the purpose of creating a better understanding of the district's purpose, vision, needs and successes. Effective communication plans build in two-way communication opportunities.

Public relations programs should strive to understand the perceptions held by teachers, support staff, parents, students and

the community of taxpayers as a whole. The use of formal and informal feedback surveys, community participation on committees, and gathering input are all part of ongoing public relations efforts.

Publicity is another critical component of strategic public relations planning. Publicity includes the media's reporting about the school district activities as well as the word-of-mouth sharing of district news and views. Generating positive media coverage requires that everyone in your school district be on the look-out for good publicity opportunities. Establishing good relationships with reporters, informing them on a regular basis regarding school district issues, and providing press releases are tools for generating positive publicity. Publicity is best done in a "story-telling" format. Consider for a moment the number of times you have "heard" of things happening in your schools. Many good things happen in schools—publicize them! Unfortunately, we often hear or read about the negative news.

Perhaps at no other time does the value of a complete public relations program become more

apparent than in times of negative publicity. An established public relations program will be invaluable in times of negative publicity because your district will be in a stable posture to manage the setback. In times of negative publicity, remember the fundamentals of all effective communication efforts. Undoing inaccurate or poorly released information is very difficult. Instead, managing negative publicity is as critical to your public relations efforts as promoting positive publicity. Keeping your staff “in the know” is also critical—in times of trouble as well as in good times.

The decision to embark upon a marketing campaign assumes that a public relations program is in place.

Internal communications—the efforts designed to help school personnel gain information and insights about the district’s initiatives, successes and plans—is a significant component of good public relations planning and can dramatically impact word-of-mouth publicity. Examples of how to place greater emphasis on improving internal communications are staff newsletters, regular e-mails, the use of an intranet for internal communications, weekly meetings of all staff, face-to-face meetings with staff groups and other groups, news bulletins or

specific information regarding significant issues facing the district, and broadcast e-mails to update all staff on topical or critical information. Employees want to be “in the know.” The improvement of internal communications can positively affect the accuracy of word-of-mouth publicity generated by staff.

In many communities, the word-of-mouth publicity, or the things people say to one another in informal or formal conversations, has a staggering impact on the public relations of the district. Polls tell us that parents believe what their child’s teachers tell them; they also believe information that they gain from talking to other people who work for the schools. Help staff have accurate information because it is essential to public relations efforts.

Marketing

Frequent, ongoing, and planned communication efforts that you evaluate regularly are the foundation of good public relations. A good public relations program is also the starting point for a marketing program. Further, according to a publication written by National Schools Public Relations Association, *Marketing Your Schools*, there is no PR without product. (Retailers do not promote 24-hour drive-through service and then close at 10 p.m.)

Product is also the first of step of marketing process, which is:

- Product research
- Product development
- Brand building of the product through publicity
- Advertising to defend the brand or to remind people of the brand’s availability and qualities
- Evaluation of the product and marketing efforts

These five steps introduce marketing terms: product, branding and advertising.

Typically, people may think of a product as something material that is manufactured, developed or sold by an organization or the services rendered by an organization. I define the product of public schools as the educational programs and services that are provided to the students, their families and the community.

Branding or brand building are marketing terms that refer to establishing recognized product leadership in a product category (i.e. Coca Cola is recognized as a product leader in the cola soda category.)

How is leadership in a product category achieved? An answer is performance, durability and ease of customer use. Using this definition, I believe that leadership in the category of public school education will be achieved by high student learning and achievement (performance); consistently excellent educational service and programs (durability); and an orientation to serve the needs of students, their families and the community (ease of customer use).

Before considering the other marketing activities, this model of marketing (and public relations) requires schools to first evaluate their product and to recognize its strengths and weaknesses.

Ask these questions:

- How well do our district’s programs and services reach the needs of our students?
- What product qualities can you consistently demonstrate that serve students?
- Why are those characteristics important to our students? ▶

Your district will attract and retain students for a variety of reasons. Marketing tells the story of your product. If you have a large high school with small class sizes, that may be your community value, so market it. If you have 13 Advanced Placement (AP) classes because the community values AP offerings, market it. Your product strengths are your marketing messages. If your district offers a well-rounded comprehensive program for all students, market it! Reflect on your district. How do you meet the needs of your students and what are your indicators of success?

In the steps of the marketing model above, publicity precedes advertising. Remember that publicity is also an important part of public relations. Not everything is finished—quality improvement is ongoing in my school district. Publicize advances in programs and new initiatives. Strive to use all opportunities to tell about the new initiatives and why they are important to students. Use publicity to tell the story.

Advertising is secondary to publicity in this model. Advertising includes all the promotional materials that an organization purchases to promote the product it provides. Frequently, advertising appeals to emotions or uses attention grabbers to be noticed by consumers. In a world where people receive on average 237 television advertisements a day, advertising that is “too creative” or uses too many attention-grabbing techniques is perceived as a sales pitch and dismissed. The wrong advertising could cause negative

publicity. This view of advertising has particular relevance to advertising in the current economic climate of the public-school sector.

Advertising is an effective tool when it is used to provide information to potential customers or to remind them of the quality opportunities available in the schools. Promotional materials might include district brochures and handouts, mailings and other printed materials that describe your programs as well as your district’s strengths and future vision. Some advertising campaigns could include “welcome kits” for new residents, a “tips for parents of preschoolers” campaign to potential customers, or a “Take a Closer Look at Our Schools” information package for school choice inquiries.

Use your Web site for advertising and publicity. In the information, you will want to include general information about your district and highlight your students’ achievements. List district awards and recognitions, the choices your district offers in its programming, and your district’s achievement in key academic areas.

There is an old marketing motto that says, “Shoot the ducks when they’re flying.” It means that advertising dollars should be spent when your audience is ready to receive your message. There are prime times for reminder advertising campaigns, such as back-to-school months and registration periods for kindergarten or high school. Whenever you advertise, it is important to advertise the information that demonstrates

Public relations and marketing can coexist, but each plays a distinct role in the organization.

your leadership in the area of student learning and the consistent quality of your programs.

Conclusion

If the term marketing has made it to your school board table, there is a need. Your product is the important first step in marketing and public relations. Then, what is the next step? The answer is dependent upon the state of your complete public relations program. Marketing is not a stand-alone activity. Consider how all components of public relations and marketing can help your school district promote its value within your community. ▀

Dembski is the public information coordinator for the West Bend School District. She is also a member of the Wisconsin School Public Relations Association (WSPRA) Board of Directors. WSPRA, specializing in school community relations, provides visionary leadership and service to Wisconsin schools by equipping its members with effective communication management skills. (www.wspra.org)