

# 'Marketing' is Not a Four-Letter Word

*Gain support for your district with a cohesive image-building plan*

**W**hen you say “marketing” and “schools” in the same sentence, people tend to run for cover. It’s just one of those combinations that freezes some district administrators and school board members to the bone. But it is time to warm up.

Whether we realize it or not, we’re marketing our schools every day. Some marketing signals are obvious — some are not. Some marketing signals are positive — some are not. There are marketing implications in everything we do.

How many businesses would survive, let alone prosper, without marketing their product or services? No business could sustain itself without marketing, especially a business whose product is a service. And we must realize that education is a service-sector business.

Add to this equation the ever-expanding educational options available to families. What formerly was a decision to attend either public or private school is now a decision among public, private, parochial, charter, virtual, magnet, home, open enrollment, and everything in

between. Your “competitors” know the return of the marketing investment.

But, you may say, “We don’t have a marketing budget.” Marketing does not have to be a big-ticket item. It takes some time, strategic thinking, some work, and yes, some monetary investment; but it is well worth the effort and is not out of reach. Here are a few ideas to start you thinking about marketing your schools.

## **Branding Your District**

In much the same way ranchers distinguish their cattle from their neighbor’s stock on the open range, your brand can identify your organization in your community and beyond. When someone sees a publication from your school district — a letter, a newsletter, a calendar, a lunch menu — does he or she instantly know that it is from your district? Take a look at the publications in your district. Lay them out in front of you. If they don’t have a similar look, it’s time to work on your “brand.” If you don’t know how to start designing a brand or look, ask a marketing professional from your community for some

pointers as a business partner. You will improve the design of your publications, develop your brand, and, as a bonus, build a new community partnership. Create an image for your school district and put it everywhere!

## **Developing Key Messages**

There are many great things happening in your district right now — initiatives that create opportunities for students. As you set your goals, whether for one school year or for a decade, let people know what you’re reaching for and how you hope to get there. Put the communication keys in the hands of your staff. Make sure that everyone in your school community — administrators, teachers, custodians, secretaries, classroom aides, food service workers, bus drivers, volunteers, vendors — knows what you are working toward and how you are getting there.

## **Celebrating Success**

Find great facts and celebrations about your schools and put them on everything — lunch menus; Web sites; school newsletters; the district newsletter; your chamber of com-

No, marketing isn’t a four-letter word. Instead, it will take you on a path toward a much better place — SUCCESS!

merce newsletter; school and community marquee; athletic, school concert, and theater programs; and on small pocket cards that staff members can keep with them and share. Call them “points of pride,” and soon other positive facts will emerge and be shared throughout your district and your community. Give people something to brag about, and they will do it with passion!

### Creating Ambassadors

A great strategy for marketing your schools is to turn your community members into ambassadors. An especially effective method is to establish a “key communicator network.” People love to be “in the know,” so do some homework and identify the different publics in your community. That may include business leaders, members of the faith community, senior citizens, parents, governmental leaders, members of service organizations, etc. Plan a special session where representatives of these publics are invited to a meeting with the district level administrative team. In the Wausau School District, the Community Resource Committee (CRC) meets three times a year with the administrative team. Each meeting includes time for feedback, informational presentations, an issues discussion, and a homework assignment for feedback at the next meeting. CRC members like being involved in the process and because the meetings are held only a few times a year, the schedule is manageable for even the busiest members. E-mail reports from the meetings and E-flash updates keep CRC members in the loop on emerging issues, creating another group of ambassadors in the community who are armed with the “right stuff.”

### Infusing Quality Service

More people quit frequenting a business because of a negative personal experience with staff than for any other reason. In today’s competitive environment, that can happen in schools, too. That’s why it’s extremely important to make sure that everyone understands the importance of quality service — particularly those on the front lines in your schools.

Take a few minutes now and look at the “curb appeal” of one of your schools. Is your grass cut? Is there litter blowing across the sidewalks and parking lot? Is there appropriate signage? Do parents and visitors know how they are to enter your campus and what direction their cars are to travel? Are there adequate, well-marked parking spots for visitors? Is your entrance inviting? Is the office clearly marked and easy to locate? These are just a few of the site review questions you should ask yourself about your school’s appeal

— and you haven’t even made it past the office door!

The Wisconsin School Public Relations Association (WSPRA) offers exceptional training in quality service through its *Image Builders or Breakers* workshop for frontline staff. The workshop can be tailored to meet your district’s needs and can help your staff develop quality service standards that can help you market your schools every day. For more information about *Image Builders or Breakers*, contact the WSPRA office at (608) 257-3220.

Schools and marketing really do go together. It’s important to recognize that marketing helps build support for our schools, and that schools with community support are better places for children to learn. That, after all, is what we are all about in the first place! ■

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