

What Your Patrons Really Want to Know

TWENTY YEARS AND COUNTING of research conducted on behalf of school districts large, small and in-between has made one fact painfully clear: Most patrons in the community aren't as interested in all the details of school district life as you think they are (or you wish they were). Swimming upstream trying to change that fact only worsens the district/patron relationship.

Certain school district topics — employees, programs, facilities — always seem to stimulate an opinion, whether or not community members have a current student in school. Others, such as classroom technology, the activities of the board of education, and

whether the district keeps its promises generate interest levels that run from modest to downright tepid.

Focusing your communications strategy on the core topics that are of most interest to your citizens, while using resources such as your website to satisfy the detail-hungry zealots, helps build a relationship that will leave you and your patrons pulling in the same direction.

Just what are those issues that patrons can never hear enough about?

► ***The performance and personalities of your classroom teachers.***

How do your teachers bring cur-

ricula to life for students? What evidence can you share of teachers' efforts to continually grow in their profession, beyond just getting an academic degree that will benefit them financially? How can you demonstrate your teachers' personalities — their unique research trips to further their own studies, personal stories of triumph, ongoing support of student sports contests and dance recitals?

Personalizing your teachers strikes a chord with community members because everybody fondly remembers teachers who made a positive impact on their own lives and career choices.



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► **Your efforts to maintain suitable school buildings.** Each district has patrons who believe in the principle of “nothing but the best” and others who question every budget line item. Thankfully, our research has discovered that these groups are the minority, while the majority expects suitable, well-maintained facilities that enable the delivery of quality education.

Sharing details about efficiency measures taken, ways the district is extending the life of its buildings and common-sense examples of renovation and repurposing will link this topic to the expectations of typical patrons.

“... our research shows that **THE QUALITY ‘RECIPE’ PREFERRED BY TYPICAL PATRONS** consists of a mixture of real-life stories of student success, teacher creativity, school-building pride and effective district practices.”

► **Examples of the quality education you provide.** School districts have a data-driven comfort zone when it comes to talking about quality.

However, our research shows that the quality “recipe” preferred by typical patrons consists of a mixture of real-life stories of student success, teacher creativity, school-building pride and effective district practices. When a school district disseminates a steady stream of such stories, patrons see their school district working well, turning out successful students and employing committed, visionary educators.

► **How well you prepare students for the next phase in their lives.** Expectations for students’ futures vary district by district. Some patrons insist their districts bar community

colleges and vocational programs from College Nights, while others welcome any schools that represent possible next steps for students, recognizing that not everyone goes on to a traditional four-year university.

Understanding those expectations in your community leads to more effective, patron-focused storytelling about how the district provides students with skills and experiences they need to excel after high school and demonstrations (scholarships, academic and service awards, etc.) of postsecondary success.

► **Evidence of your efforts to communicate with patrons.** A laundry list of newsletters, blogs, blast e-mails and other communications tools employed by school districts means nothing to patrons who don’t recall seeing, hearing or reading any of them.

Memorable stories focus on the necessary details, answer the obvious “Why should I care?” question and recognize the need to repeat information to have it resonate. Keep in mind that school district news represents a small portion of the information consumed daily by your patrons to help to discipline your approach.

► **Demonstrations of the value received for the tax dollars invested.** While common sense would suggest that patrons in districts full of high-dollar homes might be feistier about school taxes than those in more middle-class communities, our research suggests that’s not typically the case. The issue is not so much the amount of the tax bill, but whether that investment delivers what patrons perceive to be a good value.

Evidence of good value includes reinvesting in buildings, paying a fair wage to keep good teachers and simple demonstrations of effective management of district funds.

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