



WHITE PAPER

You have a brand problem (and no, it's not your logo)

Perception is reality.

The education you provide my children is only as good as I think it is. It doesn't matter how great the curriculum is or how caring the teachers are or how fancy the technology is. If I think the school is not getting the job done for my child, then it's not.

That's my perception. Therefore, that's my reality.

That's how I see your brand.

Everything I encounter in my life is subject to my perception of that thing. Everything you encounter is subject to your perception. We may both encounter the exact same thing and have different perceptions about that thing. Think about Wal-Mart. You might think it's a convenient, friendly store that offers good value on lots of merchandise. I might think it's trash. And a million-other people will each have their own unique perceptions.

Brand is the perception people have of your product or service.

So, what does it matter?

It matters when I must choose. For example, my wife sends me to the grocery store with a shopping list that includes mustard. There are at least 25 choices. They all look the same. They're all the same color. The ingredients are the same. How do I choose? It usually comes down to one of two things—either I pick the cheapest (generic), or I pick a more expensive brand name based on the belief that a known brand connotes some superior level of quality/value.

In this case, I come home with French's.

So, how much more am I willing to pay for a brand name?

You might be surprised. A study by the *Wall Street Journal* found 50 percent of people would pay 30 percent more to have their brand of choice, while 25 percent said price doesn't matter if a brand owns their loyalty. And that's not just for mustard. That's for shoes, cars, business

services, pool tables and everything else where people have a choice and are guided by their perceptions.

And that affects you how?

Your school district has a brand. Your patrons have a perception of your district. Patrons in neighboring districts have a perception of your district. Patrons have already established the value of your district—and the premium they are willing to pay to be in your district. Patrons don't sit around thinking about your district's value proposition, but they could make a judgment call quickly if they had to.

Consider Harvard. Would you pay 30 percent more for your child to attend Harvard than to matriculate to East Central Northern State University? Of course. Harvard has the premier brand in higher education. Harvard knows this—it's how they can charge \$40,000+ per year. It's how they can recruit the top 1 percent of students and still turn most of them away. It's how they get zillions of dollars in endowments.

Harvard knows the value of their brand.

What about your brand?

How much (or how little) do patrons value your brand? Are you generic? Are you a premium brand? Are you undervalued? Are your patrons simply paying their taxes or are they paying you what you are worth? Public education funding is under attack from every direction—and the fighting is only going to get worse. To have any chance of surviving, let alone prospering, in the coming economic fight, you must get your arms around your brand.

Where to start?

Your brand lives in the mind of your patrons, so that's where you start. You do brand research. You must get inside the head of your patrons. You find out what they like, what they dislike, what's important to them and what they would change. You find out what their concept of an ideal school district is, how close you are to that, and what you need to do to close the (brand) gap.

How people see and value your brand impacts every decision you are ever going to make. Whether you want it or not, you have a brand. And if you don't know what it is, you have a real brand problem.