



WHITE PAPER

Building the trust you need for your school district to succeed

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Perhaps one of the most famous quotes ascribed to a discussion involving a hard-to-define word came from Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart, who famously observed during a landmark 1964 case on the subject of obscenity, “I know it when I see it.”

This expression found its way into the lexicon, and quickly became a staple of speech for those trying to describe the seemingly indescribable. Any word, phrase or idea for which the dictionary explanation didn’t suffice could be supplemented by this notion: “I know it when I see it.”

“Trust” – in terms of a feeling, rather than a financial instrument – offers the same challenge for most individuals.

Everyone knows people, products, services and companies they trust, because those individuals and organizations have lived up to expectations, and kept promises. In doing so, those entities have built up a store of trust with us.

For example, we can trust that a Coke will always taste the same (the “new Coke” debacle notwithstanding); that a Motel 6 room will be inexpensive, clean and rather Spartan; that an Apple computer should perform differently from a PC; and so on. We trust that no matter where or when we encounter these brands, our experience will be a familiar one.

In a way, a brand – the thoughts, feelings and emotions that come to mind when a product, service, company or person comes to mind – is like a promise. Actions by the brand that affirm that promise strengthen trust with stakeholders, while those that fall short degrade the relationship.

School districts present a more complex brand challenge than consumer goods or even business-to-business commercial relationships, according to research we have conducted on behalf of public school districts since 1992.

The complexity comes from the various ways each stakeholder group interacts with the school district, and how those interactions impact the level of trust – for better or for worse.

Our research breaks down the perception of district performance into a series of people, program, facility and district/patron relationship factors. That's because we know that a general "How would you rate the school district's performance?" question falls short of understanding the nuances that are key elements in that rating, and are as individual as the person being asked.

Our research suggests – not surprisingly – that current district parents base their level of trust on numerous types of encounters. From the demeanor of their son's teacher, to whether their daughter was selected for the volleyball squad, to the courtesy of the front desk staff at their children's schools, districts have regular chances to fill or drain the trust "bucket" with current parents.

At the other end of the spectrum are less-involved stakeholders, such as those we call "never" parents (meaning those who never had children who attended a district school). Their points of contact? Their tax bills and their perceptions of the school buildings and the students whenever they happen to drive by and observe one or the other.

In between these two extremes are groups, such as former parents (meaning every district student in their household has graduated), district staff, alumni, and affinity groups, such as booster clubs, local media, social media, and community thought leaders. Each group – and each individual in that group – has different needs and expectations to be met, if it is to trust the school district.

In other words, "I know it when I see it."

Faced with the reality that trust is a moving target, what should school district leaders do?

First, abandon the notion you can earn the trust of every stakeholder.

Shelves at your local library are filled with self-help books that teach those who are searching for solace to stop trying to please everyone – because you can't. There will always be someone (or likely, several people) who have decided you aren't their cup of tea.

Why should school districts be any different?

Our research affirms that even in districts with nearly 100 percent graduation rates, students going to upper-crust universities, winning sports programs, high test scores, and low taxes that a segment of stakeholders will always believe that "the district could do better."

Stop aiming for perfection. You will not only live longer, but you'll be more effective.

Second, define your brand, and use that definition as the touchstone for decisions.

Consumer brands are rife with examples of companies that have effectively defined who they are (and who they aren't), and then advanced those messages to the marketplaces they seek to conquer.

For example, BMW doesn't reach out to Hyundai drivers, knowing that its chances of getting these individuals to spend at least twice as much for transportation are limited. Instead, its goal is to convince high-dollar car buyers that BMW is more in keeping with their own personal style than Audi, Infiniti, Lexus and so on.

It is important to note the marketplace will decide whether, in fact, BMW is the right choice. But the company does what it can to encourage such beliefs.

By the same token, school district stakeholders will add up the evidence as they see it and determine whether their local district's professed brand rings true. But the school district should not sit on the sidelines and hope that good performance will be enough to make the case.

Rather, it is an important exercise to define your district brand by stating what you believe in and what you aspire to be.

This isn't permission to create a Blue Ribbon Committee that will spend a year fussing over a Mission Statement rewrite. (Research participants tell us they pay little attention to such flowery statements.) Instead, it's a recommendation to define what you want your stakeholders to clearly understand about what matters to you.

Third, define your “Trust Targets.”

With your brand definition in hand, it's time to determine a realistic “Trust Target” for each key stakeholder group. In other words, how much can you grow trust from where it is today with each key audience?

Think in terms of “awareness,” “engagement,” “advocacy,” and “participation” when identifying your goals for trust growth. Determine how you will measure improvements in these areas, and make it a priority for someone on your team to track progress.

If you don't have a good grasp on where you stand today (which is very possible, if you either have a lot of squeaky wheels, or it seems dangerously quiet), you should consider conducting research to identify your baseline, before you determine your destination.

Fourth, engage in active, strategic communications.

Brand beliefs among stakeholders are determined by experiences, but influenced by messages sent by the brand holder.

In fact, our research on behalf of school districts affirms that patrons pay attention to information – such as the need for new facilities, or the possibility of a pending ballot proposal – when they trust the district. When the trust is lacking? These messages tend to fall on deaf ears, leading to claims that the district is being secretive when the stakeholder first begins to hear what has been said for months or, perhaps, years.

What does “active, strategic communications” look like?

1. It is outward-focused, rather than inwardly directed.

Everything you communicate should focus on the benefits to students first. If there is merit, family benefits would be second, community benefits are third, and school district benefits are last.

You don't build trust by touting that every student will be getting an iPad (the feature). You build trust by talking about how the initiative will benefit each student's educational opportunities (the benefit).

2. You repeat yourself. A lot.

Advertising professionals will tell you that it takes, on average, six exposures to a message for the recipient to even know who sent the message – let alone what it said.

In other words, if you think you've said something often enough...you haven't. Avoid the temptation to quit too early, and you'll limit the number of times a citizen says, "That school district never tells me anything."

3. You talk about long-term needs early and often.

Perhaps the hardest conversation any school district has to have with its stakeholders is on the subject of long-term facility and/or financial needs.

Those who are in the midst of it – meaning school district leaders and staff members – know the facts all too well. The buildings are in need of attention, or student population growth is causing them to be insufficient for the needs. Technology is behind the curve. Your pay scales are driving good teachers to nearby districts.

These are not messages that should be sprung on patrons, shortly before fielding a bond or levy proposal. Our research suggests that long-term needs should always be part of the conversation districts have with stakeholders, bringing them into the thinking about the challenges (at an appropriate level).

4. You recognize that most patrons are only interested in the basics.

While you are, rightfully so, excited about the work you do and the impact it has on students, families and your community, the typical patron's interest level is not nearly that deep.

In fact, for about 80% of your patrons (according to our research), their most burning question about any news you have to share is, "What does this mean to me?"

This doesn't mean you don't have zealots who want the details. But if you try to turn average patrons into zealots by foisting exhaustive information on the masses, you will eat into their trust.

Details belong on websites, where those with an interest can find them. Keep it basic for the masses, and they'll relate to you more effectively.

5. You admit errors (or problems) quickly, and you address solutions almost as quickly.

When something goes wrong – as it can and will – you enhance your patrons’ level of trust by coming forward promptly with the facts.

This is not the time to fall on your sword. Instead, it’s your opportunity to state what you know, what you are doing about it, and when you will be back with additional information.

Obviously, you will want to be in direct contact (with more specific information) with those who are personally affected. But the typical patron only expects to hear the key information and your plans for next steps.

Fifth, measure your progress and update your Targets, if necessary.

If you’ve set good, measurable Trust Targets, you should be able to monitor your results during the school year and determine where you were successful, and where you still have work to do.

Chances are good if you find yourself needing to increase the difficulty of multiple Trust Targets after one year, you probably set the bar a bit too low. Recognize that, and take the necessary time to make the updates fit where you really are, and what you aspire to be, as you seek to build greater levels of trust with those who are important to your district’s success.