WHITE PAPER

Successful school districts nurture their brands

One can hardly set foot in the business aisle at the local bookstore without spotting at least a half-dozen books proclaiming the wisdom of branding and – more often than not – the author's own approach to "helping you create a brand that will connect you more effectively than ever before with your key stakeholders."

Advertising agencies have replaced their creative directors with "Directors of Brand Voice" or something similar. Newspapers and websites dedicate regular inches to the subject. Multinational companies routinely tout how they are "building brand recall" in current and emerging marketplaces.

With all the noise and jargon being tossed around, is it any wonder that school districts often believe they can sit out this discussion? Or, they believe that a confident slogan, an inviting logo, and solid academic test results are all the "brand" they need?

Unfortunately, history (and research) suggests that's not the case – and a slogan, a logo, or even commend-able performance in the classroom does not a brand make.

Brand: A definition

All the noise about branding has led to the belief brands are something that are created by a company, a not-for-profit, or a school district in an effort to sway those important to the brand sponsor's success. This notion has turned many people off to the concept, with the familiar refrain, "I spent all this money on branding, and we got nothing out of it."

In fact, brands are the confusing mixture of thoughts, feelings and emotions that live in the minds of those very important people when they think of your school district. These emotions come from a combination of personal experiences and from the impressions of others, including friends, neighbors, kids, the media – you name it.

As the district moves on and off the radar screen of individual stakeholders as their level of direct and indirect contact changes, the intensity of emotion associated with the brand will fluctuate. But, the general brand essence –that mental image, emotion, or even a word or phrase

that immediately springs to mind when the school district's name is mentioned – will always remain, impacting the district's ability to succeed.

The unique challenges of school district branding

School district brands exist in an environment that would likely scare off even the most confident communicator for products such as cars, soft drinks or fast-food restaurants. Theirs is an environment in which products can be adjusted to meet changing customer expectations or to open newly discovered markets where money is waiting to be made.

Public education, on the other hand, is one of the key foundational elements of solid communities. And "foundations" don't move (or if they do, they do it deliberately…and generally following exhaustive study). The result is a set of branding realities that are specific to school districts:

1) Personal experience

Pick up any research study conducted for a school district since computers for students became the norm, and you'll find a few comments from patrons here and there along the lines of "We did just fine with what we had…why do they need all this fancy stuff?"

It's a troubling fact of life for school districts today:

"School" has changed in so many ways (the dominant presence of computers being one), but a meaningful segment of the patrons has not kept up. The challenge is even greater in districts where the number of households with students dwindles as the median age rises.

For patrons with this mindset, the district's brand comes from their own history with the school experience – either where they live today, or elsewhere – while the school district would prefer its brand be one of an organization that is skilled in preparing students to compete in the global economy.

2) Level of connection

Brands are built through experiences and, logic would suggest, the more experiences an individual has with a product or service, the more defined that brand becomes in that person's mind. Therein lies a major challenge for school districts: The varying levels of connection between the district and those who are important to its success.

It's easy to see how students and their parents who are recipients of the school district's "product" have a brand image of the district that is front and center. On the other hand, those whose children have all graduated and who, therefore, aren't as likely to set foot in a school regularly, hold a brand image for the district built more on media stories and from the reports of neighbors, grandchildren and other such sources who continue to have regular contact.

And, of course, those with no personal or family experience have an even less-defined brand image of the district which is – unfortunately – often driven by their perception of the value they are receiving for the taxes they are paying in support.

3) Passionate patrons

Passion, when appropriately channeled, can truly benefit a school district and its facilities. One need only to step into a school with an active (and generous) parent organization to see what a difference a strong commitment from patrons can make in the lives of schools and their students.

However, passion can also bedevil a district's efforts to build and nurture a consistent brand, when overly enthusiastic patrons seek to advance their personal visions of the district's mission.

Active engagement from patrons is beneficial, but those who are overzealous can truly muddle the district's brand and make meaningful connections difficult to maintain.

4) Monopoly mindset

Not all school district branding challenges are external.

In fact, districts are often their own worst enemies when they believe that understanding and nurturing their brand is unnecessary because, "When it comes to schools, we're the only game in town."

Technically, that may be a true statement: There may be no private or parochial school presence, and home-schooling may be a rarity within the district's boundaries. But even districts with little local "competition" for students would benefit from attention to their brands in two ways.

First, strong school district brands attract new patrons (and their tax dollars) to the community. Even the smallest districts benefit when patrons sing their praises to individuals who are considering relocation. No advertising, slogan, or mascot can top word-of-mouth for a newcomer trying to determine which schools will best educate his or her children.

Second, strong brands help school districts retain the support of those with no direct connection who, there-fore, aren't exposed to regular reports of student success. Maintaining a solid brand among this audience is not only good practice, but it can be the difference between success and failure on funding requests decided at the ballot box.

Brand building: A primer

Because brands consist of the myriad of thoughts, ideas and emotions that surface at the mere mention of a product, a service or a school district, brand building begins by understanding today's landscape – both internally and externally – through research (typically focus groups).

Research with internal audiences such as administration and BOE members, teachers, active parents (such as parent group leaders), and staff members will help develop a picture of how these key stakeholders believe the district is viewed, what its strengths and shortcomings are, and what they wish everyone knew about the district.

Following this with research of patrons (current parent, past parent, and non-parent), community leaders, and any other key groups – and asking similar questions – will provide a clear indication of the gap between the brand the district would prefer, and the one it currently holds in the minds of those who are important to its success.

Developing a deeper understanding of these two positions, and the gap in between, allows school districts to communicate more effectively than ever before with patrons and other key constituents, because the communication is based on what these essential audience members have said means the most to them.

Effective research practices for brand development

While many research assignments can be effectively handled through skilled, in-house resources, developing a true understanding of your brand benefits from the involvement of outsiders.

Why? Even the most talented on-staff professional would come into this assignment with biases that will impact his or her ability to be objective. Then there are the dynamics of expecting an in-house person to secure honest responses among groups of staff members who may fear reprisals, and the challenge of securing similarly blunt feedback from outside audiences who don't wish to offend the moderator.

As much as school districts value frugality, brand building benefits when skilled outsiders – who will pull no punches – are engaged to gather the data.

The risks of ignoring brand development

Pick any election night, and you'll likely find school district staff members and campaign volunteers huddled around computers and television screens watching results from bond and levy proposals they submitted to voters.

Some start celebrating early, while others must wait nervously for the last votes to be counted. Still others, unfortunately, receive an early indication this will not be their night.

The post-mortem on unsuccessful bond and levy elections usually places the blame in one or more of the following areas: the proposal itself, its out-of-pocket cost to patrons, and the effectiveness of the campaign. Certainly, all factors merit evaluation, so the critical next steps after a defeat can be sound and taken with confidence.

But, history also suggests those districts that win bond election after bond election, and levy increase after levy increase, aren't necessarily the ones with the best proposals. Rather, these are the districts that have built and nurtured an effective brand over time, creating a strong relationship that makes success at the ballot box much more likely.

Final Insight

Building and nurturing an effective school district brand bears somewhat of a resemblance to the process of improving and maintaining one's personal health.

Each begins with a recognition that a problem exists, followed by research into the depth of the challenge and which approach will produce the greatest success.

Then comes setting a goal and developing plans, and then the hard work required to achieve success. This, of course, is followed by regular maintenance – so all that hard work is not lost.

The problem associated with all the excitement and media attention dedicated to branding is the incorrect notion that branding is an activity that has an end-point, rather than a commitment.

Successful brands are built and nurtured by steady attention to the delivery of messages that consistently connect with what is important to those in their intended audience.

School districts that wish to succeed at branding must take care to execute the research effectively, and then to focus equal attention on the building and nurturing phases. Such an approach will inculcate the brand as a way of life within the district, and will positively impact every interaction with key stakeholders.