

EDUCATION EXECUTIVE

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ACHIEVING A* MARKETING

Our host of experts share tips on how to best
capture the attention of perspective parents

ACHIEVING A MARKETING



Whilst private schools might see themselves as the trailblazers when it comes to school marketing a number of state schools are also showing they have what it takes to capture the hearts and minds of prospective parents. MARIE CAHALANE speaks to four school marketing gurus about how to boost your school's appeal and win favour with the people that matter

OUR EXPERTS

Carolyn Reed

Strategy and creative director, Reed Brand Communication

Rachel Womack

Joint managing director, Mango Marketing

Ken Stevens

Managing director, Communitas

Justin Smith

Director of marketing and development, Wymondham College

When it comes to attracting parents and students your school's identity speaks volumes and effective marketing can dictate what it says and how it says it. When used correctly strong marketing can promote your school's ethos, highlight successes, build relationships within the community and position your school's head as a thought leader in the sector. There are many elements to successful school marketing so how do you develop an A* marketing strategy to boost appeal and attract the people that matter? Let's ask the experts.

WHAT DEFINES GREAT SCHOOL MARKETING?

Rachel: In my opinion you can't talk about great marketing without talking about great PR. In any business the two need to go hand-in-hand in order to achieve the greatest success and schools are no different. Well-planned school marketing and PR consistently deliver snapshots that are reflective of a school's ethos, values and messages to its target audience. Each school is unique and no 'one size' fits all. Marketing capitalises on all the school's success stories, considers the school's specific objectives and has a concrete crisis management plan in place to effectively address any negative stories should they ever arise.

Carolyn: Much the same principles apply as with any mainstream brand. Schools are actually businesses like any other and need to think of themselves in this way. It's all about satisfied customers and having the right product and right message delivered through the right channels at the right time. To do this you need to know your target audience, identify your school brand, define your key message, determine the most appropriate channels and ensure messaging and branding are consistent.

Justin: It's about really understanding your key messages and communicating them effectively – easy to say, but difficult to deliver. Ask yourself what your stakeholders expect from you, be clear about what makes your school unique, acknowledge the factors which your audience values most highly and develop your message accordingly.

Ken: Identify cost-effective tactics that match your school's marketing objectives. If you need to increase pupil intake, hold an open morning for parents at the weekend. If you have a limited budget promote this on your website or social media, or secure display advertising in a publication widely read by your target audience.



A school's greatest assets are its teachers – particularly enthusiastic teachers

IN TERMS OF BRANDING, WHAT SHOULD A SCHOOL'S NUMBER ONE CONSIDERATION BE?

Rachel: When deciding on branding, the first thing schools should ask themselves is does it meet what I like to call 'the three Cs'? Is it clear, concise and consistent? Your brand needs to be instantly recognisable, synonymous with your school's ethos and values and consistently used across all the school's marketing collateral. Consider your business objectives and ensure the brand highlights the key features that support these goals. The brand needs to be understood by all the school's stakeholders; a brand that's clear, concise and consistent is much easier to grow than one that's muddled and, ultimately, 'growth' is most schools' main objective.

Justin: Marketing your school should always begin with defining your brand and core values, bringing together those things that make your school what it is – after all, every institution is different and these unique aspects need to be acknowledged, appreciated and harnessed. A simple brand-mapping exercise, involving students and staff, can help articulate those key messages. Remember that staff and students are your key ambassadors so engage with them first!



HOW CAN YOU BEST BOOST A SCHOOL'S APPEAL?

Rachel: Traditional attractions, such as good exam results and student behaviour, still apply. However, in this digital era, schools which are proactive in using social media and have intuitive and up-to-date websites are going to have an edge over other schools. These schools are going to appeal to today's technology-rich, time-poor parents.

Ken: Use traditional marketing tactics to engage with prospective parents in your community. Display posters and leaflets in local feeder nurseries or schools and, perhaps, invite parents to a coffee morning at your school or find opportunities for your headteacher to meet prospective parents at a youth conference. ►

HOW CAN SCHOOLS REACH THE RIGHT PEOPLE IN THE COMMUNITY – THE PARENTS?

Carolyn: Talk to parents to really understand what they're looking for, how they perceive your school versus the competition, what they like and what could be improved. Nothing beats face-to-face communication.

Justin: Schools have to use a mix of communication tools to reach parents effectively. From our research it's clear that many parents still learn about events and open days - and form opinions - from 'word of mouth' contact with others in the community. Digital technology – and social media in particular – has provided us with a very responsive and dynamic platform to engage with parents. It still astonishes me just how many parents actively respond to our Facebook posts...

Ken: Regularly refresh your website so that prospective parents get a real flavour of life at your school. Is your school building a capital development or have your students succeeded in a recent competition? Introduce a headteacher's blog and think about uploading a video or photos to your website. It's also worth looking into how you could contribute an article to a local magazine or newspaper.

ARE THERE PARTICULAR MARKETING ASSETS THAT SCHOOLS TEND TO HAVE AND HOW CAN THESE BE CAPITALISED ON?

Justin: Staff and students are your best ambassadors! Sell the key messages to them first; they'll carry this with them and it'll be far more effective than any promotional campaign. Try to introduce a 'pass-along message' – a simple two-liner which sums up your school and its key attributes.

Ken: Boost your school's appeal by showcasing its unique staff, grounds and facilities and create fun ways to engage through your marketing channels. Regularly upload images and videos onto your website demonstrating why your school stands out as a safe place for children to learn and meet friends in a caring environment.

Rachel: A school's greatest assets are its teachers – particularly enthusiastic teachers who are keen to push the learning boundaries of students and who are open to experimenting with new techniques. These successes should be highlighted and celebrated through local media channels for potential parents to see; that kind of exposure for a school is priceless.

WHAT'S AN EXAMPLE OF EXEMPLARY (A*) SCHOOL MARKETING?

Ken: We see a move away from hard copy prospectuses as more media savvy parents look for information online and as more schools see them as an unnecessary expense due to high printing costs. As a result we've seen a sharp rise in innovative interactive prospectuses with engaging video content on school websites.

Rachel: A secondary school in Dagenham that we've worked for over the past five years wanted to raise its profile in the regional and education sector media. The school had a lot to share with the community but, as is the case with many schools, finding the time to publicise its successes had proved a challenge; other schools in the area had been quite effective in self-promotion which put this school at risk of being seen as inferior. Using a mix of press releases, features, case studies, thought leadership by-lined articles, national press opportunities and editor and journalist interviews the school's messages have reached their target audience; it's now positioned as the top school in the area and is over-subscribed. That's a pretty good result in our book! ■

Top tips

Rachel says:

- Recognise the unique qualities of your school and focus on promoting them
- Work with the local community to understand their likes and dislikes
- Promote the openness of your school: a good school celebrates the successes of its students and is recognised as being open and transparent.

Carolyn says:

- Keep researching for insights
- Have a comprehensive brand manual to ensure consistency
- Think laterally for ways to increase awareness of your school; creative ideas that are unusual can garner lots of interest
- Keep smiling and stay confident; marketing is at the bottom of the priority list for most schools but try to ensure the function is given the respect it deserves by the SLT.

Justin says:

- Define your brand and key messages
- Understand what parents want from you
- Make use of collaborative opportunities with others
- Don't assume you have to spend vast amount of your limited budgets on traditional advertising – social media is highly effective and cost efficient.