

## MIND YOUR REPUTATION

### Marketing Your School's (or District's) Greatness

We all make decisions . . . as much with our hearts as with our heads.

—Peter Montoya

It's a game we communication people often play. Morning coffee in hand, we scour the newspaper headlines, looking for people or organizations whose reputations have suffered a major bruising. How, we ask ourselves, would we have responded?

We gathered the following examples one random morning from the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times* and the *Alexandria Gazette*.

From the business section:

“Ford Had Its Worst Loss Ever [This Year]”

“Delays Limit Robust Sales at Microsoft”

“Wal-Mart Settles U.S. Suit about Overtime”

“[Television] Anchor's Ties to Citigroup Attract Scrutiny”

From the education world:

“Abortion, Sexual Orientation Sample Lesson Plans Draw Discord”

“School System Resists ‘No Child’ Provision”

“Colleges Regroup after Voters Ban Race Preference”

That list doesn't even get us to front-page politics.

Every day, hundreds of people wake up worried about what other people are saying about them or their organizations. Corporations worry because it affects their bottom line. Not-for-profits worry because public opinion affects donations. (Think of the struggles of United Way and American Red Cross in recent years.) Politicians want to get elected. Celebrities want unbridled approbation. Community leaders want approval. We all want to be liked. Headlines like those above keep communications people employed.

### WHY WORRY?

Why should a school or a school system care what people think? Why does reputation matter? Unlike our corporate brothers and sisters, we are not selling products. We do, however, depend on our communities for funding and support. When public opinion about our schools is negative, when editorials and op-ed pieces in the local press decry school policy and practice,

it is harder to persuade the city council, the county board of supervisors, and the taxpayers to vote monies for new and expanding programs. The first reason schools should care is our own fiscal bottom line.

We also protect our reputation because it is the foundation on which we build relationships in the community. Everyone wants to stand next to a winner. Business partners, advocates, volunteers, political allies, mentors—the entire support network around a school or school district grows strong as the reputation of that school or system grows strong. An excellent reputation opens doors.

For years, the Economic Development Authority of Fairfax County has used the excellence of Fairfax County schools to market the economic viability of the community—both at home and abroad. If you have worked in Fairfax County Public Schools and traveled outside the state, you have often heard:

“Oh, you work for Fairfax Schools? I have heard so much about what a great system that is.”

On the other hand, if you have ever worked in a system (as we have) with a poor reputation—deserved or not—you also understand the impact of a negative reputation.

A healthy reputation allows you to lead through change. If your school or system is known as a high-quality institution, when you announce a new program or the retiring of a favorite old program, your reputation will cause your stakeholders to examine your plan in a positive, not a negative, light. When you suffer a critical incident, your reputation gives you the wiggle room you need to get through. It buys you time.

If you are doubtful about the need for a stellar reputation, remember how creative marketing changed our views about seatbelts, even before the laws were passed, about helmets for young bicycle riders, about alcohol and driving. Skilled marketing can help our customers make good decisions about their good schools.

## **TWO CAVEATS**

*You can't market a poor product.* No matter how high your ratings, if you introduce a poorly conceived plan or a bad idea, it won't fly, and your reputation will suffer. No amount of marketing will help. Everyone recognizes lipstick on a pig.

*You can't market a poorly aligned product.* If you have a great plan for using the new school marquee, but what your parents need is more timely information on your website, you lose. Before you go public with any initiative, you must be sure that it is the right one in the right place at the right time. Building your reputation successfully requires that you are also careful about how you use it. Your reputation rests on excellence, integrity, and trust.

## **IF YOU DON'T MANAGE YOUR REPUTATION, SOMEONE ELSE WILL**

School leaders shy away from the word *marketing*. It sounds commercial. In fact, marketing is simply a matter of minding your own reputation. Nature abhors a vacuum. If you don't spread the good word about what you are doing well, someone will fill the air with bad words about your shortcomings. If you are proud of what is happening in your schools—and, in general, we

school people are—then it should not be a hard job to say so. Marketing, like other forms of communication, requires attention and thought. It is an intentional process.

As a local council election was heating up, it became apparent to the superintendent that the school system might well become the center of negative attention from candidates on all sides—not because it was a failing system, but because there was a dearth of other “sexy” topics for debate in the community that year. The superintendent launched his own marketing campaign. He endorsed no candidates, but went on the stump through the community, spreading the good news about the system—rising test scores, successful new programs, and student academic prowess. He visited every council candidate and provided information about the school system, inviting each candidate to visit his or her local school. At the end of the campaign, every council candidate was on record praising the accomplishments of the school system. Every candidate claimed, at least in part, to be responsible for the schools’ good record.

That superintendent was able to move in a proactive and preventive way, but sometimes you don’t see the arrow coming until it hits. Don’t let unwarranted public attacks on your school or school system stand unanswered. The temptation is to ignore the strikes and not to make a second-day story. That almost always turns out to be a mistake. Silence may encourage more attacks, and it almost always demoralizes employees and supporters who feel the sting as much as you do.

## **MARKETING IS EVERYBODY’S RESPONSIBILITY**

Most days, most schools and school systems neither receive a national award nor suffer a major bomb threat. Reputations thus are made or broken on smaller things, like how quickly and cooperatively solutions are found, how accessible the boss and her staff are, how accurately snow days are called.

Reputations are also made on the backs of what industry calls “tangibles,” that is, the appearance of things such as the cleanliness and brightness of the school, the appropriateness of staff members’ dress, the timeliness and accuracy of communications, the hospitality with which visitors are greeted, even the placement of visitor parking spaces. These are all visible clues to employees and guests alike that this school or system is a place of respect, a place where people take care of each other and their work (Zeithaml and Bitner, 1996, pp. 118, 120, 122, 306). Stakeholders’ trust is built in tiny increments. The fact that the sidewalks are well shoveled no matter how much snow falls, and that the halls are shiny clean every day builds reputation.

Tending to all these small details is the job of everyone in the organization. The boss doesn’t do this alone. The boss’s job is to set the tone and lead the way. As management guru Tom Peters used to say, you must pay attention to the people who can move the ball down the field. In the case of marketing, that includes bus drivers, food services workers, front-office staff, and groundskeepers, among others.

## **BUILDING YOUR MARKETING PLAN**

Marketing builds strong relationships with employees, parents, and neighbors and protects your reputation in the community. It provides information to your stakeholders and moves them to action.

We are all about plans that work, not beautiful notebooks on the office shelf. Stick to the basics. You can start small. The community is primarily interested in three things about schools: Are they safe? Are the kids learning? Are we getting good return on our tax dollar? Parents today add another question: How am I included in the process? A marketing plan built around these questions is a winner.

You may need to focus your efforts on a particular issue. Do you need to tout the schools system's academic strength? Do you need to broadcast the changes in your special education services? Do you want to be known as a friendly and welcoming place? A good place to work?

Americans are much more conscious about what they eat and what their children eat than they used to be. It's a hot topic these days—one that the news media loves to talk about, particularly if it appears that student interests are not being well served. School nutritionists and food service workers are constantly fielding requests from families that eat a vegan or vegetarian diet; parents of students with food allergies; and citizens with other concerns about obesity, school menus, onsite vending machines, or food preparation.

As parent demands began to grow, one school district undertook a well-orchestrated but quiet campaign about its food. When the district opened its doors to a health department inspection, it also agreed to welcome the television news cameras that wanted to tag along. The public relations office began sending food story briefs in its regular Friday e-mail to media. These included nutritional information about school lunches, a description of the taste-testing events held for student food tasters who help to choose cafeteria items, and media releases on all the awards the department won. The food service director gave interviews. Over time, the campaign created the backdrop against which other food stories were written. The department became known as “the award-winning food services department,” even when under public attack from outside watchdog groups.

Such marketing initiatives don't have to be focused just on members of the press. They can be focused on parents (“The school system is now offering college and financial aid counseling for students and their families, and here is how you can avail yourselves of these services.”), on employees (“You will now be able to access your benefit information on line and, annually, make changes to your benefit structure. Here's how.”) or on the community (“October is open house month at Ruffner High School! Come see a play, hear a concert, or sit in on an English class.”).

Branding can:

- Capture the imagination and help consumers make an emotional connection.
- Reflect in an image or a phrase the organization's culture and values

- Build credibility.
- Communicate simply and effectively through design consistency.
- Claim a key position in the consumer's mind.

(Carr, 2007)

Your goal is to build relationships. Effective marketing provides specific information about a particular topic, but good marketing also tells a story. It appeals to the emotion as well as to the intellect. Over time, focused marketing can move a specific group of people to very specific action, though the benefits of marketing may not necessarily show up immediately. Marketing has a timed-release effect. That is what distinguishes it from crisis management. Marketing is about the long haul.

## **IS BRANDING RIGHT FOR YOU?**

A few years back “branding” became a marketing buzzword. A brand is a kind of shortcut that, in one image or phrase, conveys to the consumer a positive value about your school or school district. A brand is a promise made to stakeholders.

Effective brands are hard to come by. (The GEICO gecko did not just show up on the boss's desk with coffee one bright morning.) Unfortunately, in schools, branding often means slapping an ill-conceived slogan and logo on all publications. In some school systems every department and program has its own logo, leaving the public confronted with a confusing array of visual images that end up signifying little. The promise of the brand is not always kept.

Good branding is built on the same principles as all good marketing. Only when a brand is the product of thoughtful consideration, planning, and skillful design can it make a difference. There is a lot of bad branding out there. Good branding is very hard to do.

### **Branding Should Reflect Answers to These Questions**

- What makes your school or district different or unique?
- What can your school or district truly own in the marketplace?
- What does your school or district do better or more than everyone else?
- What one benefit or message is the most compelling?
- What will connect emotionally the most with your target audiences?
- What reasons can we develop to support our claim?

(Carr, 2007)

## **GOOD MARKETING MANAGEMENT**

Marketing is not rocket science. The important components of a marketing plan are little different than the components of any good project plan.

You will need to define clearly the issue you are addressing and your audiences. It may be the whole community, but it could be a much smaller segment of your audience. Be sure to assess the risks of your effort and identify the people in the community who can serve as your sponsors and key communicators. Figure out what tactics you will use, how you will know that you have succeeded, and how much it will cost.

Once you have organized your plan, one good way to test it out is with an elevator speech. You and I meet in an elevator in the central office building. In the time it takes for us to travel from the parking garage below to the superintendent's office on the fifth floor, can you clearly define your marketing initiative, its mission and overall strategy, and why I should help?

## **MARKETING TACTICS THAT WORK**

There are many tactics to choose from. The caution is that the ones that you love most may not fit in every situation. Often, the best tactics are extensions of the ones you have in place already—the tools that you already use to spread the word, like faculty meetings or parent coffees. That energy just needs to be repurposed, and the messages reshaped. Tactics don't have to be big and hairy. Small steps often work better. The most important parts of marketing are the intention, the focus, and the planning.

Whatever your plans, be sure that your employees are first on the information and marketing lists. Employees are your most important stakeholders. They are always the key to success.

Parents, particularly parents of elementary children, like hands-on tactics. They like to hear about their own children. They like to see and touch the products. Younger parents like lots of information, preferably on their smart phones where they can access it from work and at odd hours of the day and night. Backpack letters work in the younger grades, but (do we need to say this?) hardly ever work in high school. E-mail—carefully used in connected communities—is great. Twitter and Facebook can likewise be effective. The media can be an important part of your plan, but it shouldn't be the first thing you think of. You control the information that goes on your website and in your virtual communication. You don't control what is reported on the evening news. That said, including reporters is always better than keeping them out. Invite them to tea. Take them on a tour of the school. Tell them about your new programs and initiatives and why they are important. If you can help them figure out a timely lead, maybe they will write that good news story you've been hoping for.

Don't forget about elected officials and other key leaders in your community. Having them involved on the front end of your initiatives is better than having them attack on the back end. If you can't get them to visit you, go visit them. Take them information and leave an open-ended invitation to visit.

## **MARKETING AND LEADERSHIP**

When all is said and done, the only thing in this life you can truly claim is your reputation. That is true of your personal reputation and of the reputation of the organization you lead. You should never take it for granted. Its value is beyond measure. It is well worth your time and effort to protect.

A worn and yellowing sign hangs over the desk of a businessman in our neighborhood. He is a graduate of a local high school and once a world-class amateur athlete. The sign says:

“Do what you’ve always done, and you will get what you have always gotten.”

In the old days, when we launched an initiative, asked for more funding, or changed our staffing formulas, the community nodded its agreement. Life is more complicated now, and we must make our case clearly and often to whoever will listen. What we “always got” is no longer enough. That is what marketing is all about.

• • •

## **THE BOTTOM LINE**

Protecting and enhancing the reputation of your school or school district should be a priority for all school leaders. If you don’t take charge, someone else will. Marketing—getting clear, timely, and compelling information to your stakeholders—needs to be carefully planned and executed. Its chief aim is to build fruitful relationships between your school or district and the community.