

CHARTER SCHOOLS GET SMART ABOUT MARKETING

By Patty Kennedy

Charter schools around the country are facing an ever-increasing need to attract great teachers, leaders, students and support. Not an easy task when budgets are tight, resources strained and priorities many. The thought of marketing can be confusing at best, and daunting at worst.

The good news? It doesn't have to be.

As CEO of Kennedy Spencer, a NYC-based marketing and communications firm that has trained and worked with more than 30 charter schools across the country, the question I am most often asked is: what really matters most?

To that, my answer is three things: message, message, message!

MESSAGE MATTERS – AND VALUES-BASED MESSAGES MATTER MOST

Jim Cummins, a respected professor at the University of Toronto, wrote, “Human relationships are at the heart of schooling.” Any passionate, effective educator would attest to this, as would I when it comes to marketing. The whole purpose of marketing is to connect with, engage and inspire audiences to take action. But more than simply developing a lunch, a launch or a logo, it is critical to understand that action results from authentic, compelling messages that connect with what your audiences care about most.

The most successful organizations – and schools – have achieved their goals by connecting through values. The majority of the charter schools in NY have been through my values-based messaging trainings, but I really can't emphasize enough the importance of identifying and leveraging an audience values. Values trigger engagement, decisions and action. Values will make your campaigns a success. Miss the values – and talk simply about the greatness that is your school – and you'll miss the mark. Madison Avenue believed so strongly in this theory, a collective group of the world's strongest brands spent millions of dollars on a study with leading neurologists that found more than 95% of our every day decisions can be directly connected to our values.

So whether a charter school is looking to improve reputation, increase awareness, move from a start-up to a more sustainable operation, or recruit students, quality teachers, donors or dollars, an action from one or more audiences is desired. Create messages that connect with your audiences' values and you will trigger that desired action.

TO MARKET, TO MARKET

Now that you have identified and leveraged your audience values, and created clear messages, you may wish to consider developing a campaign theme. That is one theme that brings together all of the messages in a consistent and emotive way. A theme also helps bring clarity and consistency to your marketing materials and other marketing initiatives. It is far more effective (and cost-effective!) to implement three strong, consistent initiatives that work together to

underscore your school's message and call to action vs. create a cadre of inconsistent materials and ideas that don't work together.

It is also important to remember different audiences have different motivators. Schools need to think about not only what values matter most, but how to best communicate those values in ways that resonate with their audiences. Specifically, think about how parents, students, prospective teachers, media, potential donors and elected officials get their information.

This could include a website, video, brochure, direct marketing piece, press kit, e-card, newsletter, annual report, or a number of other materials. Kennedy Spencer typically suggests developing 3-5 core materials (or a core marketing kit) that will help your school establish an identity, credibility and can be used for different purposes.

At the very minimum, you need to consider your school's physical space. School space is often one of the most important, and overlooked, elements of marketing! The school – outside of the students - is your “product”. You need to represent it well. Nothing will be a more effective (or detrimental) to your marketing efforts than the school's physical space. We can't tell you the number of teachers, parents, donors, foundations and the media who have told us they were won over by the “feel” of a school.

CREDIBILITY COUNTS; ENLIST YOUR AMBASSADORS!

In Kennedy Spencer's experience, audiences do have some things in common when making educational decisions: they are motivated by word-of-mouth, peer recommendations that convince them the school is the “right” place for their child, talents, money or time. In short, credibility counts. This is why we, generally, steer clients away from commercials and billboards that are typically meant more for raising awareness than inspiring a direct action.

Instead, I often urge schools to identify and leverage their strengths, connect with audience values and enlist their most credible “ambassadors” (those people who already love the school) to help spread the message, either directly or through other means.

Is there a new group of donors who want to get involved? Wonderful. Start a 5-5-5 campaign (give 5k, get 5k, tell 5 people). Have great connections in the community you serve? Great. Partner with other like-minded community organizations and hold a unique event night or auction. Changed parents and communities for the better? Terrific! Start a letter-writing campaign to your elected officials or local media. There are so many unique and credible ways to reach your audiences.

Kennedy Spencer has also helped schools leverage social marketing with great success, creating initiatives that have generated national awareness, attracted new board members and raised thousands of dollars. In fact, some of the campaigns we implemented were so successful, we created a social marketing tool specifically for schools (Call us if you want to learn more about that!) At any rate, social marketing is a tactic that your school should certainly explore as part of your efforts – just be clear on your goals and desired outcomes.

Most importantly, remember you don't need flash and whiz to effectively engage your audiences. You know what a terrific school you have. You know how tremendous your kids are. You understand how you are changing the world. Now you need to simply, clearly and consistently communicate that – and share exactly what inspires you about your school and students -- with the rest of the world.

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Five Smart Marketing Tips

1. Identify your goals, audiences and desired actions.
2. Develop a unique, authentic message that connects with your audiences' values and presents a call to action. Consider a campaign theme.
3. Produce a core tool kit that establishes your school's credibility, communicates its unique message, and provides a call to action.
4. Invest in and market your school's physical space!
5. Enlist your ambassadors! Arm them with the right tools, messages and ideas.