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Smart Marketing Your School District During Tough Times — Market Communication Planning for School Districts

1. Overview

A successful communication strategy is based on presenting the facts and vision of the schools to the **community in order to understand the direct and indirect benefits** of their public schools. A comprehensive marketing and public relations strategy brings together parents, community groups, town officials, etc. They need to understand how the school district's strategic plan, goals, and objectives **affect** school budgeting, test scores, program improvements, etc. More than ever, public schools are competing for students, funding and other resources. By implementing a marketing and communication strategy, school districts can be more proactive in positioning their schools in a prime position to garner support from the community.

It is essential that the school leadership be accepted as the **only credible source of information and facts** about the schools—as opposed to other interest groups (taxpayer, senior citizen, religious, etc.). These groups use the schools and budget planning process as a platform for promoting their usually confrontational messages and agenda(s). Providing **bonafide information** that results in **positive support from the community/targeted audience** is key to meet a school districts' goals and objectives.

2. Smart Marketing Components

- a. Tying key issues to a school district's mission
 - Curriculum/Student Performance
 - Technology
 - Capital Improvement
 - Budgets
- b. School Culture & Leadership
 - Being proactive vs. reactive
 - Balancing board members' roles
 - Working with staff effectively
 - Team building for effective leadership
- c. How and when to use marketing/public relations to support vision, mission and goals
 - Components of a communication plan — Marketing and Public Relations
 - Using demographic profiling
 - Dealing with change
 - Using resources effectively
 - Making a plan that works
 - Measuring results
 - Being consistent
 - Creating a sustainable campaign
- d. Tools and tactics
 - Surveying the community/Communication Audit
 - Branding and positioning a district's identity
 - Media Relations
 - Newsletters, internet, e-mail, and other delivery systems
 - Establishing a community foundation (private money support)

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- Organizing a successful board retreat

3. Creating a School-Based Marketing/Communication Plan

Phase I (Internal Focus)

1. Review District Mission Statement
2. Review or Create Vision Statement for Your School
3. Determine Goals (District and School) for the Year
4. Determine Objectives to meet those goals
5. Determine Tactics to support Objectives

Phase II (External Focus)

1. Create District-based survey (from Board of Education)
2. Create School/Program-based survey (from principals)
3. Create Internal Survey (from Administration)
4. Evaluate survey and benchmark findings to stated goals
5. Modify or let stand goals and objectives

Phase III

1. Do a Communication Audit of existing district and school materials and tactics
2. Determine if a new identity/image (Logo) has to be created
3. Create a communication plan
4. Put together an action plan with assignments, dates, budgets, etc.

Phase VI

Evaluate and modify the plan as needed



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4. Creation of Communication Training Model

Process involves solid research, effective message development and constituency building and by using “demonstrate methods” instead of “deliver methods”. By gaining the endorsement of third party endorsement the crust of cynicism will break. Using “The Summit for America’s Future” goals as a springboard for community volunteer for your schools.

Step One — Activating Creativity

A bottom-up method that will illustrate your theme(s) in deeds rather in words alone. Call it the use of metaphors or images, but the approach becomes a powerful weapon in developing an active constituency. This is where collaborative projects (school-based communications) become extremely useful. A visible project that shows actual results provides a perfect opportunity to communicate the value they bring to their stockholders and the community.

Step Two — Energizing The Grassroots

This difficult step is the hardest to achieve but provides the best value and results for your grassroots constituency. It requires meetings, training and support from the most senior organizational leadership. Create a campaign, e.g. “A Community Conversation/Dialogue” study/school advocate groups. This directs their activity to helping the schools instead of telling the schools what to do. It gives them a positive role without having them interfere with day-to-day education operations and management. It also, eliminates the self-serving or defensive posturing that the educational community uses to the detriment of their goals.

Step Three— Developing Credibility

Community volunteer leaders get activated from this type of involvement, but they need the tools to carry-out the positive messages you are encouraging. Volunteers need to be trained who will empower other citizens. Other tools include: campaign kits which explain all aspects of effective advocacy and communications materials need to be designed for local use and media placement. The essential ingredient in enlisting volunteers as effective advocated for the schools was *the development of non-self-serving messages and approaches*. These illustrated the value of the schools to the community and to society as a whole. Third party validation is the most effective way of garnering support for your schools

5. Building an Image, Identity and Brand

- a. Consistency of Graphic Look and Message/Theme
- b. Process:
 1. Investigation (research) and recommendation;
 2. Creation of communications strategy;
 3. Development for multiple uses;
 4. Implementation

6. Communication Tools and Tactics — The Publicity Kit

- a. Surveying the community and/or your school
- b. School-Business Partnerships
- c. Newsletters (District/School-Based)
- d. Image/Recruitment Brochure
- e. Media Relations
- f. Internet/Web-site
- g. E-mail