



# Leadership NOTES

## Brand Building- Telling Your School's Story

Marketing, branding, public relations, advertising, and messaging are all important aspects of a company's quest to attract new customers, turn them into repeat customers, and perhaps even turn a few of them into raving fans that will spread the good word to others. We know these concepts are important for a company to compete in a free market environment, but do they have currency in the public education world, where students are often assigned to schools that are all pretty similar by design? The answer is surely yes. While the tactics of marketing and brand building differ in the business and education worlds, the concepts transfer perfectly. School leaders do well to build and position their school's brand in the education marketplace so as to increase engagement, support, and good will.

**Some definitions from the business world** (from [www.businessdictionary.com](http://www.businessdictionary.com))...

**Brand.** Unique design, sign, symbol, words, or a combination of these, employed in creating an image that identifies a product and differentiates it from its competitors. Over time, this image becomes associated with a level of credibility, quality, and satisfaction in the consumer's mind (see positioning). Thus brands help harried consumers in a crowded and complex marketplace, by standing for certain benefits and value. The legal name for a brand is a trademark and, when it identifies or represents a firm, it is called a brand name. See also corporate identity. ([businessdictionary.com](http://businessdictionary.com))

From Seth Godin's book *Linchpin*- "A **brand** is the set of expectations, memories, stories and relationships that, taken together, account for a consumer's decision to choose one product or service over another. If the consumer (whether it's a business, a buyer, a voter or a donor) doesn't pay a premium, make a selection, or spread the word, then no brand value exists for that consumer." (Godin, 2011)

"Your brand is what people say about you when you're not in the room." (Jeff Bezos, Founder and CEO of Amazon)

## Success Principles for Educational Brand Building

### Begin with the End in Mind.

In *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey reminds us that we should "begin with the end in mind" (Covey, 1989). The end-product of brand building is to create a specific set of thoughts and feelings in the mind of customers, or constituents. Target... affordable chic; Airbnb... adventure and community; Burt's Bees... natural, high quality body care products with a touch of social/environmental activism; Nike... equipment for greatness- just do it... Ford F-150 pickup truck... tough, capable, best of class.

Get the idea? Start with identifying these thoughts and feelings and then build the brand to dependably cause them. What exactly do we want our constituents (parents, students, faculty, community, etc.) to think and feel about our school?

Midwood Elementary School, Home of the Comets... *family, optimism, inclusive, become the best version of you, holistic, community*

Riverton High School, Home of the Wolves... *team-oriented, the pack is the wolf and the wolf is the pack, future driven, opportunity, purpose, relevance.*

## Align your brand with your mission, vision, and core values.

In fact, your brand should be your mission, vision, and core values... projected into the world. Remember, a brand is not something a school can dictate. A brand is a set of thoughts and feelings in the mind/heart of constituents that are consistently activated upon engagement with the school.

So, if a school has been through a powerful mission-vision-values identification process, it's brand building should focus on consistently creating thoughts and feelings in the minds of all constituents that are aligned with the school's mission (core purpose for existence), vision (image of an improved future school), and core values (constitution, rules of engagement, how we roll).

## Understand your market.

Who, in the total educational marketplace, do you want to engage with your band? Keep in mind that an effective brand has just as much impact internally as externally. So, include faculty, staff, and other professionals or paraprofessionals that work inside the school.

Make a list:

Internal constituents: Teachers, administrators, staff, itinerant staff...

External constituents: Students, parents, community, local businesses, media...

Internal/external constituents: Board members, central office leaders, maintenance workers...

Conduct market research: What do these constituents think/feel now about your school? What is most important to them? What issues have their attention? What educational experiences have they had? Who/what is your competition in the marketplace? What is their brand? How are they different?

## Clarify your brand message.

The best and most memorable brands have a simple, easy to remember message. Crest is the toothpaste your dentist probably uses. Remember the line "4 out of 5 dentists prefer Crest"? Volvo makes cars that are safe and durable. "Volvo for life." Olive Garden provides tasty Italian food in a family atmosphere. Olive Garden might suggest that the word "family" also conjures thoughts of large portions and fair prices, but they don't say that overtly- they keep it simple.

What thought/feelings do you want to evoke in your constituents? Make a list. Now pare the list down to its simplest, most memorable form. This is your clarified brand message.

## Create a Unique Selling Proposition (USP).

A Unique Selling proposition (USP) is a branding/marketing concept that means a product's (or person's or school's) key points of differentiation in a crowded marketplace.

Supermarket shelves are organized by product category, not by brand. So, many products from the same category are right next to each other on the shelves. If Proctor & Gamble's Tide wants to stand out on a shelf full of laundry detergent options, it must lead with its USP- why Tide instead of any of the other options? Tide's USP? Tide is solid, proven, dependable- the gold standard (or orange). Smuckers' jelly is displayed right next to many other brands. Why buy Smuckers? Because "with a name like Smuckers, it has to be good." The name Smuckers is unique, it's different, it makes you smile... surely the jelly inside does likewise.

Schools are not positioned on shelves like laundry detergent and jelly, but schools can and should have a well-thought out USP. What makes your school different? What do your students and families receive that isn't offered in other settings? Considering all the pros and cons, why choose your school?

A strong USP helps the marketplace find you. No one drives onto a Volvo sales lot looking for a cheap, fast car. Volvo stands for safety and longevity, not cheap thrills. Customers are already pre-qualified when they drive onto the lot. Make your school known for its hi tech, innovative programs and families who are looking for hi-tech, innovative programs will find you.

## Find your complex duality.

Brands and people are more interesting and memorable if they embody a little complexity- not too much, just a little. Dairy Queen, now that it serves both food and ice cream, calls itself Grill n Chill. Target is not just known for low prices, but for low prices on sophisticated, chic items. Tesla cars are not merely electric and therefore eco-friendly, they are also luxury and high-performance.

Princess Diana was both royal and common. Ronald Reagan was known as both strong and warm. Students find teachers who cannot be described with a single descriptor more compelling and memorable. For a teacher, it's better to be known as organized- and occasionally spontaneous, than as organized- and occasionally obsessively organized.

Find your school's unique blend of attributes that complement one another. A school that positions itself as hi-tech and hi-touch, is more compelling than a school that is hi-tech and online.

## Design your brand representation.

With a clarified brand message in mind, one can then determine what combinations of logos, colors, tag lines, images, stories, and behaviors best represent the brand to constituents. Remember the sequence. First, clarify the brand message. Then, design brand representations that are congruent to the brand message. So, don't first fall in love with the color blue, then create your brand message. But, if your brand message is trust, dependability, and strength, then choose the color blue to represent that message, just like Dell, Lowe's, HP, American Express, and Ford.

The most powerful brand representations are often behaviors, not images, logos, and color selections. Chik-fil-a customers are consistently greeted by the words "It's my pleasure to serve you" or, simply "It's my pleasure." Ritz-Carlton hotel employees are trained to, when engaging with a guest who is lost, never point to their destination. Rather, they escort the guest to the destination. Luxury retailer Nordstrom famously allows returns on all items with or without a receipt at any time (no expiration date) after the purchase. These are examples of behavioral representations of a brand.

A brand is most impactful when the full spectrum of its representations- the visual, audible, emotional, and behavioral, are both coherent and consistent.

### Permeate your brand message into all aspects of school life.

Brand building is most effective when it is consistent and pervasive. Once a brand message and a set of brand representations have been determined, seek to embed them into as many aspects of school life as possible. Some starter ideas... school letterhead, other school stationary such as note cards, email signature icons and messages, social media hashtags, beginning and/or ending of school announcements over the PA system, stickers, posters, yard signs, banners, crawling messages on video boards, morning rituals, lunch rituals, end of day rituals, newsletters, social media images and profiles, t-shirts, koozies, Yeti's, magnets, clips/binders, front door signage, school buses, etc.

### Create an elevator speech.

An elevator speech is a human resource concept that arises from the possibility that upon interviewing for a job, one just might end up in the elevator with the CEO. What if the CEO asked "why should we hire you?" At that point one has only the time it takes the elevator to reach the top floor to make the case. In real life the elevator/CEO scenario is probably rare. However, it is still quite an advantage to have one's brand message distilled into a short talk that spans no more than 30 seconds or so. Preparing an elevator speech sharpens and tightens the brand message, making it clearer and more memorable. After preparing an elevator speech, it is surprising to find how many non-elevator opportunities one encounters each day where all or parts of the elevator speech can be used to great effect.

## Build a brand narrative.

Stories and narratives are superb mental models (Rutherford, 2013, p. 87-90). They allow the human brain to recall, process, and transfer great amounts of information.

*"Story is a sense-making device. It identifies a necessary ambition, defines challenges that are fighting to keep us from achieving that ambition, and provides a plan to help us conquer those challenges. When we define the elements of a story as it relates to our brand, we create a map that customers can follow to engage our products and services."* (Miller, D. 2017, p.9-10).

NY Times bestselling author Donald Miller, in *Building a Story Brand*, lays out a template for an effective brand story: A character (the hero)... has a problem... and meets a guide... who has a plan... and calls the hero to action... that helps the hero avoid failure... and ends in success. (Miller, D. 2017, p.21). According to Miller, the most effective brand narratives DO NOT position themselves as the hero of the story. The customer/client is the hero. The brand plays the role of the guide... who has a plan, calls the hero to action, helps the hero avoid failure, and helps the hero realize success (Miller, D. 2017).

School leaders can apply this template to their school's effort to build a brand narrative. The heroes of the story are students, the school plays the role of the guide, who calls the heroes to action, helps them overcome problems to avoid failure, and achieve success. Stories are made even more compelling if they also include villains, external struggles, internal struggles, side-kicks, obstacles, and last-minute heroics.