

What's Your Brand?

Your district's brand sends a strong message about who you are and what you hope to accomplish.

By Veronica V. Sopher



Every year, administrators and board members declare the need to update the school district's image or, in some cases, create one for the first time. Why? They contend that the district needs to move into the 21st century with a new logo, tagline, colors, and everything else that constitutes an official brand.

So reactive administrators quickly change their logo's colors, refresh their website design, and spend

thousands of dollars to change the look and feel of the district's print materials without understanding how or why.

Why do school districts need a brand? A brand is not about a pretty logo or tagline; it's about a consistent positive message. At the end of the day, *it helps our students*. If your district has a strong positive and believable brand, your parents get more involved, taxpayers and local businesses become more supportive, and students

try harder because they all believe that they are a part of something special.

A brand isn't a name, a company, a logo, a product, a person, or an advertising campaign. A brand is a promise. Your brand gives your organization strength, identity, and a defining role in the community.

As an organization, you must live and breathe the brand at every point of contact and consistently over time. Your brand must be relevant to the people you want to influence. It's not about you; it's about them.

Here are the basic steps for branding your school district.

1. Position Your Brand

We introduced our school district's new brand to our principals by hosting a brand camp, a brand personality powwow with campfire games and s'mores.

One of the first things we shared with our principals was the idea of *brand positioning*—the way we want people to think about our brand, how they will differentiate us from our neighboring districts. Simply, it is a way to explain ourselves, and it helps our audience understand who we are through emotional connections and shared values.

As a school district, you want to focus on your values and people's emotions when they interact with your teachers, staff, and facilities. You want your brand to evoke positive emotion and inspiration.

The brand's positioning must be believable and consistent with its performance. It has to be enduring and consistent with the organization's beliefs, knowledge, behavior, and experience. An example of good brand positioning is the YMCA of the USA. The organization underwent a two-year rebranding process to better understand how the public views the YMCA and

designed a branding strategy that crystalizes its cause and unifies its message. Throughout the country, the visual system, the messaging, and the architecture of the YMCA's communications are unified for every location.

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One of the first steps a school district needs to take when positioning its brand is to identify the *target*. In other words, determine the needs, motivations, and concerns that the brand will address. Once the target has been determined, district personnel should find common ground among *segments*—commonalities that transcend demographics and unite people.

After identifying the target, the district must *frame the reference* for its audience by communicating the district's focus. In that way, you set a backdrop. For example, "Our district is focused on providing a high-quality education for our students."

Now, it's time to identify the most compelling benefit in a singular thought. The benefit should address the needs and desires of the target. It can be rational or emotional, and the brand should be able to convey it.

At the end of the day, the brand must set your district apart from other districts; it must make you distinctive. And it should remain relevant for a long time. If your team identifies more than one compelling benefit, try to find one that ties them all together.

Here's one example of brand positioning from Children's Medical Center of Dallas: "To people who believe that children deserve the best, Children's Medical Center is the pediatric health care provider that sets the standard of comprehensive care."

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In the education world, Bloomfield Hills School District in Michigan offers "For families who want more for their children, Bloomfield Hills Schools ensures the most opportunity for personal growth through an extraordinarily rich curriculum, wide-ranging services and resources, and an enduring commitment to individual excellence."

My district, Leander Independent School District in Texas, brands itself with "Every LISD graduate is prepared with the knowledge, academic foundation, and life skills to be a productive learner, an effective



communicator, and a responsible citizen in order to be successful in an ever-changing world.”

2. Create a Brand Personality

The next step in the brand development process is to identify your *brand personality*, which is a short list of district characteristics that define the brand’s behavior—a set of human traits that help bond the target audience and brand at an emotional level.

Whenever possible, avoid such commonplace words as “experienced,” “different,” and “innovative.” For example, consider these brand personalities:

- Home Depot—heroic, neighborly
- Hummer—sophisticated, rugged, bold, and irreverent
- Perot Museum of Nature and Science—vital, exploratory, exciting, engaging, inspirational
- Children’s Medical Center of Dallas—compassionate, trusted, magical

So how do you start the dialogue about brand personality? Survey your stakeholders using focus groups, online surveys, or community forums. Your stakeholders include board members, administrators, principals, teachers, staff, other district employees, current and future district parents, students, taxpayers, thought leaders, and business leaders.

How do you start the dialogue about brand personality?

Ask them about their perceptions of your district. What are the top five things they believe the district can do to affect those perceptions positively? Ask “Who is district XYZ?” “What makes us special?” “What do people think about us?”

- Using the data from the surveys, create the brand personality list.
- From that list of words, create the brand positioning statement.
- Create the one message that you want your brand to convey to your targets.
- Identify brand ambassadors who can carry your message into your communities.

After you identify the current perceptions, you can start to change them. Brand your district with the desired perception according to the data you’ve collected.

3. Market Your Brand

Here are some ways to strategically market your brand to your community:

- Incorporate it into the look and feel of your district and campus websites.
- Design posters and other materials for the campus with your brand so visitors can see the district’s promise.
- Create a marketing piece or page on your website that explains your brand, how you are using it, and how you got there. Stakeholders want to see that their feedback was used in the process.
- Write press releases about your programs and tie in the brand personality.
- Write monthly articles in which you tie in the brand personality, and bring it back to the district’s promise.
- Ensure that all departments are using the branded materials so the stakeholders are receiving the same message.
- Design incentives tied into the brand for employee recognition, such as T-shirts, pins, bumper stickers, key chains, certificates, and so on.
- Add the brand to your school calendar and school lunch menus.
- Brand pens, mugs, highlighters, sticky notes, rulers, and anything else you would normally buy for your programs.
- Ask your business partners to market your brand, especially on social media sites.
- Vinyl-wrap district vehicles with photos, logo, tagline, and so on to convey the message of your new brand.

Be creative, and always remember to live up to your brand so it maintains its validity. Remember that perception is reality, and everyone in your district has hundreds of opportunities to make a connection with your stakeholders; arm them with the belief that the brand is reality, and your district is the best.

Once you have your brand, your brand ambassadors, and your district’s promise to the community, spread the word. Remember to live up to your brand’s promise and to find opportunities to improve on it continuously. You really can be who you say you are.

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