

Marketing Best Practices for Readington Schools

Introduction

1. The speaker and his qualifications.
 - John Painter majored in business and political studies and minored in education at Roger Williams University. He has spent the last 15 years as Marketing Director and Business Development Director in an entrepreneurial setting marketing services, software and hardware to businesses and to public schools.
2. Can modern corporate marketing and public relations theories and practices be used in school districts to improve communication and stakeholder satisfaction?
 - In a word: “yes”. Techniques used every day in the business world to connect with customers, to build branding and to cement long term relationships translate very well to the realm of public schools.
 - Thinking beyond simplistic “public relations” efforts and examining district communications in a wider marketing context can result in stakeholder relationships that are deeper and far more productive. (Not just passing a referendum.)
3. The limitations of thinking of a school district as a “business”.
 - It is important to be wary of taking business world models too far. Schools are not profit centers, children are not production units, and a successful school district must be defined very differently from a successful business.

Marketing Theory

A quick overview of some important marketing models and theories that can be applied to schools is useful for understanding a school district in the marketing context. Here are four to consider.

1. EKB model of consumer behavior [Attached]
 - The Engel, Kollat and Blackwell model of consumer behavior is a complex model developed in the late sixties and revised continuously ever since. A diagram is attached.
 - This model is the basis for entire college courses, but here we will just note a couple of points. The Decision Process column is the main area for explaining the process of evaluating products, or for our purposes here, evaluating ideas and services. [Brief verbal examples to follow]
 - Important areas in the model to note for our purposes here include the Cultural Norm and values under External influences, Normative Compliance under Decision Process Variables, and the Input column. [Brief explanation of each to follow]
 - An example of how this model could apply might be when a potential voter is faced with a school budget referendum. [Brief explanation of EKB processes to follow]
2. Barriers to communication
 - Marketers identify certain barriers to communication that must be overcome to be persuasive. Balance theory suggests that people seek information consistent with their own attitudes and avoid that which is not consistent. These are known as *selective exposure* and *selective perception*. We listen for what we want to hear.
 - To overcome these barriers, marketers use repetition, they engage opinion leaders who have the widest credibility, and they seek communication mediums with the greatest *perceived* objectivity. [Note EKB tie-in]

3. Marketers classify communication as threatening or nonthreatening. [Jack R Gibb, 1961] It is important to know the difference in order to be persuasive. Some examples are:
 - Evaluation versus description. A statement that by implication evaluates the listener based on the values of the speaker is threatening. A statement that simply describes facts or information is nonthreatening. "You should have been at the board meeting!" versus "I looked for you at the board meeting."
 - Control versus problem orientation. "You must start reading to your son!" versus "We should examine some ways to help your son learn to read."
 - Strategy versus spontaneity. Communication perceived as a manipulative strategy is threatening, communication perceived as spontaneous is nonthreatening.
 - Neutrality versus empathy. "You will serve without pay." versus "it certainly isn't fair to you, but we cannot afford to pay you for service."
 - Superiority versus equality "I will direct the following policies to be implemented." versus "Together we will implement these policies."
 - Certain versus provisional "There is no better method to teach reading." versus "We have not yet found a better method to teach reading."
4. Perception is reality
 - We have probably all heard this term at one time or another. In other fields the catch phrase has no footing. In the field of marketing, it is accepted truth based on decades of experience. People believe and are persuaded by what they think they see, what they want to hear and what has been reinforced by many iterations of the decision process.
 - Understanding perceptions is critical to being persuasive.

Stakeholder Research

Understanding the perceptions and beliefs of district stakeholders in order to better communicate with them requires the knowledge of who these stakeholders are and where they get their information.

1. Who are the stakeholders?
 - The question of identifying district stakeholders may seem obvious, but there are many reference groups that are infrequently mentioned as stakeholders. There is also overlapping identity within these groups.
 - Some of the obvious groups might include parents, children, town residents and taxpayers, teachers, administrators, school staffs, voters, and board members.
 - Some less obvious groups might include realtors, homeowners, small business owners, our high school district, school vendors, news organizations, and more. These groups have specific bonds with our district, yet they often go unrecognized.
2. What are their current beliefs and attitudes? (EKB model: Cultural norms and values))
 - Once stakeholder groups have been identified, it is necessary to understand their unique viewpoints so that communication can be tailored and be persuasive.
 - Some groups will have overlapping identities and overlapping viewpoints. Some groups may be at odds with others. By understanding the differences, communication can be developed that avoids confrontation to the degree possible and that fosters a symbiotic cooperation.
3. Where do they get their information?
 - Stakeholder groups will get their information from different sources. Newspapers, internet sites, verbal contact with teachers, discussions with neighbors, board meetings, backpack flyers, students, businesspeople, and many other sources are all possibilities.
 - Knowing the most *likely* information sources of each distinct stakeholder group will allow for the most efficient use of district resources to reach what are deemed the most critical groups.

4. How can research be conducted cheaply?
 - Research gets more expensive with every level of detail. Fortunately, the level of detail required to improve district communications is not particularly great, and, fortunately, the district already has part of a research team on the payroll.
 - With 150 plus teachers in district, there is an easy source for information about some of the most important stakeholder groups. Teachers speak with parents, other teachers, and other district employees everyday. They are a resource easily tapped, as will be shown in the next two sections.
 - Research can also be conducted through the use of surveys, school tours, and other inexpensive methods that take advantage of the willingness of stakeholders to share their viewpoint.
 - The key to making informal research like this effective is to be strict about compiling, sorting and evaluating the gathered information to find patterns and consistency in what might otherwise be random noise.

Tactical Examples

Having had a little background, let's discuss some specific examples of the application of marketing best practices and techniques in Readington schools:

1. Formulating a unified message based on research
 - After documenting the beliefs and desires of district stakeholders, a unified message can be developed that speaks to the greatest number or to the most significant stakeholders in terms of accomplishing district goals.
 - The "unified" message means that in all of the forms of communication used and in all of the communications written or spoken, there is a single and common core meaning.
2. Developing criteria for communication with stakeholders
 - In order to keep communications uniform, unified and meaningfully recurring it is necessary to develop simple guidelines to be used by all of the district communicators.
 - This does NOT mean that communicators should be orchestrated or coached in their style. That would violate the strategy versus spontaneity rule. Instead, a simple listing of guidelines describing the district message and the likely reaction by stakeholder groups will suffice to unify the message without stifling individual voices.
3. Tracking and evaluating written communications
 - Knowing exactly what goes out is crucial to determining the effectiveness of the message and the vigor of the communications program.
 - A central authority must have a copy of virtually every official communication in any written form and a chart or spreadsheet showing the frequency of communication with each stakeholder group being targeted.
4. Recruiting early adopters and key influencers
 - Three boxes in the EKB model can upset the apple cart or become the tipping point for success: "reference group family", "informational influence", and "other stimuli".
 - These boxes come all come into play when opinion leaders within stakeholder groups exert their influence. Opinion leaders are those people within a group who are dealers in information (whether actual or perceived understanding) and who make it their business to be the first to distribute their opinions.
 - These key influencers are an unknown and they can make or break your communications program. By actively recruiting them for your own purposes, you greatly increase your chances for success.

5. The importance of humanizing
 - As described in the neutrality versus empathy rule and other rules, humanizing a message significantly increases the chances of being persuasive.
 - It is easy to disagree or criticize a communicator who is a stranger. It is much more difficult to do the same to a communicator who is known, appreciated or understood. Humanizing communicators results in more persuasive communications.
6. Press releases/befriending members of the press
 - Members of the press need and want your message, your communications and your personal viewpoint. *You* can tell your story to them, or you can have *someone else* tell your story to them. It is as simple as that.
 - The South Orange/Maplewood school district has a cultivated reputation for inclusiveness and progressive world-view policies. They are regularly written up in newspapers like the New York Times and other media far outside their local domain precisely because members of the school board and the administration have befriended reporters sympathetic to their goals.
7. Consistency in all communications
 - A modern business selling widgets makes certain that the logo and tagline on the widget packaging, the company website, the company letterhead, the newspaper ads, the television spots and all other forms of communication are identical because *repetition* overcomes selective perception and reinforces the common message.
 - Whatever the message, it must be consistent and *pervasive* to be effective. The district communications must be seen as an integrated program and not a series of disjointed flyers.
8. Driving the information stream/preemptive strikes
 - Key influencers and opinion leaders are pushing information at their stakeholder groups as we discuss this. Reporters are talking to other sources about you for their next story. A realtor in town is giving her unique take on our schools to a prospective buyer. Missing from these and a thousand other communications everyday is *your* message.
 - *You can drive the information stream yourself, or you can be driven by it.* You cannot, however, be persuasive or be perceived as trustworthy by *reacting* to the messages of others.
 - When bad news must be delivered or unpleasant subjects must be discussed it is marketing suicide to wait for the news to leak out or to try to keep things quiet. Such a tactic is perceived as untrustworthy and it promotes further disorder. Preemptive strikes that divulge information early and readily are actually less risky and far more likely to promote accord.
9. Using the web to push and to pull
 - Websites, email lists, discussion groups, and other electronic communication are a boon to inexpensive but effective communications. Even better, web statistics can tell you exactly how your message is working in near real-time.
 - The web can be used to push information *out* by publishing web pages, by sending regular email broadcasts, by linking to complementary sites, and other means.
 - Perhaps more importantly, the web can be used to *pull in* stakeholders by keeping archived data and communications available there, by publishing exclusive content there, by setting up two-way (moderated) discussion groups, by publishing electronic documents too big to distribute in paper form there, by publishing time-sensitive information there, and other means. Creating content that is exclusive, timely, or unique means that stakeholders will *seek you out*, rather than the opposite.

Action Plan

There is no time like the present. Here is a recommended action plan that is effective right now and cheaper than dirt. It can be easily modified to suit changing goals. Templates and specific recommendations are attached.

1. Research/gathering information
 - Readington has 150 plus teachers who have been communicating with parents and other teachers since the start of the school year. Use the attached forms to verbally query these teachers on their understanding of these two stakeholder groups. Two staff members or teacher volunteers can each contact 7 or 8 teachers each day, conduct the short interview and have the research done in two weeks. The responses must then be analyzed for common patterns or previously hidden perceptions by stakeholders. The top five or six patterns should be the basis for evaluating the district message.
 - A short survey (attached) can be published on the district website, mailed, or sent by backpack to parents to gather more information.
 - Staff members or volunteers should be enlisted to attempt to contact some of the more unique stakeholders such as realtors, businesspeople, news organizations, etc. Opinion leaders and key influencers should be sought out for their perspective.
 - All information gathered by any means should be compiled centrally and searched for patterns.
2. Formulate a unified message
 - With first wave of research completed, the administration and the board members should seek to develop a simple, nonthreatening message that addresses the patterns found in the research and that is easily repeatable across mediums.
 - The message should not be so bland as to be meaningless and it should touch on as many stakeholder values as possible. This is the rallying cry for the district. It defines who we are now and where we want to go.
3. Develop communication criteria for staff and board members
 - Develop and brief all district communicators on the message and on the criteria for dispensing that message. An example of those criteria is attached.
 - Note the importance of communicators speaking with a single *message*, but not a single *voice*.
4. Sample press release/press goals
 - Identify the top five members of the local press who have previously published articles on the district. Find their contact information and determine their deadlines. The Superintendent should call each one, introduce herself, and let each one know how to reach her if the need arises.
 - A sample press release is attached. Never let two consecutive weeks go by without issuing a press release on some aspect of the district, no matter how minor. Assign this responsibility to a single person. Enlist students, teachers, or other volunteers to write the releases if necessary.
 - Assign at least one board member to be the spokesman for board issues and for quotes on district matters. That member should also call the five reporters by way of introduction.
 - Publish a section on the district website for the press that includes archived press releases, background information, and contact information.
5. Identify early adopters and key influencers
 - Identify the top 12 opinion leaders across as many stakeholder groups as possible and get their contact information. Have a district representative make contact in some small way with these key influencers at least once a quarter or more often in times of turmoil.

These people will likely be found at board meetings, sports events, and other gatherings anyway, so contact will be easy.

- Identify at least three key influencers from within each school, each a member of a different clique or faction. They might be a teacher, a janitor, a principal or a classroom volunteer, but they will all be at the center of a hub of information.
 - Once the early adopters and key influencers above have been identified, keep them well fed with accurate information and attempt to humanize the district to them. They are your adopted ambassadors.
 - Identify the top 12 realtors selling residential houses in our area. Put together a three page information packet for them that can be copied and handed out to prospective buyers. Once each school year organize a walk-through of one or more schools for these realtors.
6. Track written communications
- Start a centralized repository of all written communications and keep it available for the school year. The easiest way of doing this is to have all communications co-written in PDF format and published on the district website under an archive. Parents will be able to download the flyers that perished in backpacks, residents will be able to see what only parents could see before, reporters will be able to find background information, etc.
 - Continue to monitor all written communications for consistency in message and adherence to the district criteria. Mentor communicators who are missing the boat.
7. Begin website revamping
- The district website is currently set up under the “push” model, and it isn’t pushing very hard at that. Change the focus to a “pull” model.
 - There is no more impressive example of a district website using the “pull” model than Ridgewood Public Schools: www.ridgewood.k12.nj.us. This website should be studied and emulated for content, tone, organization and capacity. Only some minor graphic inconveniences and a few missing pieces of information make it less than perfect.
 - Track website statistics weekly for number of unique visitors, the most popular visiting days and the pages most often viewed.
 - If money must be spent on communications, the website is one area worthy of professional help.
8. Board meeting opportunities
- Board meetings are vital opportunities to discover and corner both key influencers and members of the press. They are gathered right in front of the board and the Superintendent in neat rows! Take the opportunity to meet, greet and humanize.
 - The current physical layout of board meetings is not particularly conducive to communication or to humanizing. Consider moving tables into a different format that doesn’t foster a threatening “us versus them” feeling among participants. Tables could be located on either side, for example, or put into a semi-circle. Pull the now blind Bill Weber out of the projector light. Throw the speaker podium into the dumpster. Find some microphones that work. Sit in the audience section when you can. Try to create a forum that looks as though a two way exchange is expected and welcomed.
 - Put the table of handouts right in front of the door so people trip over it when they walk in. Pile it high with anything recent.

Script for teacher survey

Hi _____, we are taking a short survey to try and get a handle on the current thoughts and concerns of parents and teachers in our district. Since teachers speak with both groups all the time, we are hoping for your help. The survey is anonymous; we are just looking for common patterns.

In the briefest terms, what are the top three subjects that parents have asked you about this school year?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

When you speak with other teachers in meetings and in the halls, what are the top three subjects that usually come up there?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Example Public Survey

The Readington School District is interested in knowing more about your thoughts and opinions concerning the management of our schools and the quality of education our children can achieve. We would appreciate your thoughtful and candid responses to the following:

What do you feel are the top three educational issues facing our schools?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

What do you feel are the top three school management issues facing our district?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Currently, what is single greatest strength of our district?

Currently, what is our single greatest weakness?

Help us understand your background. Circle all that apply.

I am a [parent] [Readington resident] [taxpayer/homeowner] [Readington BOE staff] [Other BOE staff]
[local businessperson] [local realtor] [school vendor] [Other _____]

Thank you for your participation! If you have further comments, please write them here:

Example Communications Criteria for Staff

Readington BOE Employees:

We are all ambassadors for our school district. Recently we have embarked on a mission to improve communication with our district stakeholders, including you. After researching and evaluating the opinions of many different groups, we have compiled the common concerns of our stakeholders and we would like your help in addressing those concerns. To do so, we would like you to study the criteria below that should be used in all written communications from our district. We all have different opinions, different voices, and different styles. These criteria are guidelines that are designed to make our communications consistent without silencing our individual voices.

Our research has shown that the top concerns common to most of our stakeholders are:

- ABCDEF
- ABCDEF
- ABCDEF

To address these concerns and to help us all focus on our common goals, our communications to stakeholders will now stress the following themes whenever possible:

- ABCDEF
- ABCDEF
- ABCDEF

A logo will be produced that includes these themes for use on written communications.

In addition, all of our written communications from administrators, teachers, and other staff will follow these guidelines:

- The date the information is released and the origin of the information (school, staff member, etc.) will appear on each communication at the bottom of the first or last page. In addition, the method of release (backpack, postal mail, handout, etc.) should be included.
- Each communication (individual teacher-parent communications excluded) will be forwarded to _____ so that it can be reproduced in electronic form for the district website.
- Wherever possible, the district themes above will be mentioned or included in logo form.
- A contact for further information, with phone and email, will be included in each communication.
- Electronic communication (email, etc.) will include a link to the district website at the bottom.
- Events should be announced at least two weeks in advance and include a descriptive agenda, contact information, and directions to the physical location.
- Communications that happen to be related to the themes above deserve special consideration and they should be discussed with the principal of your school or the superintendent before release.

Press Releases

Press releases are painless to write by using a simple formula. Editors like to see a basic format in place, and this is one area where fancy presentations will get you nowhere. Simple, clear writing is best.

First, the headline of the release should convey the basis of the news, it should be as short as possible, and it should be enough of a tease as to encourage further reading. The place and the date of the release should follow. For uncomplicated subjects, three or four paragraphs are plenty. The first paragraph should sum up the news and be able to stand on its own. The middle paragraphs should add depth to the subject and include at least one quotation from a person directly involved in the news. The last paragraph should either give short background information on the subject or the people involved in the news, or it should add a punchy quote. It would be difficult to imagine a press release from a school district requiring more than a page of information.

At the end of the release, the text is ended by three marks such as, “# # #”, to indicate that the public information is ended. After that, a contact is always given for further information. If there are other people who would be willing to speak with a reporter and give extra comments, they should be listed here too.

The next page shows an example press release that was put out in January and actually used by two newspapers.

Publishing your release can be accomplished in several ways. It is best to know the preference of the editor to whom you are sending the item, but generally email and fax are accepted methods today. If you use email, put the headline of the release in the email subject. If you are faxing, make certain that the district letterhead or official logo is used somewhere to prove authenticity. A short note to the editor is acceptable, especially if you have worked with the person before. Unless the news is earth-shattering, it is best not to bother the editor with a phone call.

Some releases will be used, some will not. Either way, it is important to continue releasing your news because you will be building a relationship with the editors. Once editors know that there will be a steady stream of news coming from our district, they will make room in their newspapers. When releases are not used, the information is still read and it helps to keep the editors up to speed with our district and the people running it. They will know where to turn when an expert quote or background information is needed for another story.

Press releases should be archived on the district website for reporters and editors to reference in the future.

Example Press Release

READINGTONPARENTS.ORG APPLAUDS SCHOOL BOARD ACTION
Readington, NJ. - January 11, 2005 -

The ad-hoc organization of Readington Township parents known as "readingtonparents.org" after the website of the same name is applauding the motion approved at the school board meeting tonight. Board member Mark Berry proposed to provide publicly accessible voice mail for individual board members by adding voice mailboxes to the district system. This was a surprise motion not on the planned agenda. Previously there has been no mechanism for members of the public to contact board members individually. Many board members have unlisted home phone numbers.

John Painter, editor for the readingtonparents.org website, remarked "Mark Berry took a courageous leap forward in making this proposal. Now we know that at least five board members fully understand the meaning and the requirements of democracy American style."

In a tense exchange, two board members, Marsha Parrish and Denise Kenney, first argued against the surprise motion and then made another motion to table the idea. After some discussion about the rules of order, the motion to table Mark Berry's idea was voted down and then another vote was taken on the original motion. Five members voted for the proposal, allowing it to pass. The readingtonparents.org website and supporting mailings in the past few months argued for individual contact information as is provided in most other districts in New Jersey.

Readington resident Bette Ann Fort noted in her public comments to the board that "the pendulum is swinging back toward the openness that was once there."

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EKB Model Attachment (Engal Kollat & Blackwell Model of Consumer Behavior)

