

Telling Your Story

If you don't like what's being said about your school, change the conversation

By Joe Sanfelippo and Tony Sinanis



The issue is relatively simple when it comes to the perception of schools: The people telling the story of your school have little to no affiliation with your school. If you are an educator, or someone close to your heart is an educator, you know what happens when the topic shifts to education, especially when the majority of people in the room are noneducators. The noneducators begin painting with broad strokes and pointing out all that is wrong with education. Our charge is to rewrite the narrative in education so everyone understands all the awesome things happening in our schools!

How do we accomplish this goal? We use our voices to tell our collective stories so that we can flatten the walls of our buildings and brand the experiences unfolding in our schools. That's right—we aren't going to allow people outside of our schools to tell the story of what is happening inside our schools. Heck no! We are taking control of the perception the community has about how we instruct children and are sharing stories, emails, images, blog posts, and videos that spotlight much of the teaching and learning that is unfolding in our classrooms, schools, and districts.

While flattening the walls of the school is a priority, making certain that the brand is transparent to the members within the organization is critical—we must all be telling the same story that we believe in and can stand behind. Work needs to be done during faculty gatherings, informal conversations, and various meetings

to ensure that the brand is consistent and transparent to the entire team within, and eventually beyond, the organization. This is imperative if we are going to effectively sell it outside of the school and ensure that the brand promise matches the brand experience, which is the most important component for our students.

That is step one in this important journey—making sure the brand promise matches the brand experience. If you tell the community you are a 1:1 school, then technology had better be integrated in meaningful ways on a daily basis. If you tell the community that you embrace the workshop model in the areas of reading and writing, then there had better be instruction rooted in the gradual release of responsibility for learning from the teacher to the students. And if you tell the community that you value their input, then there had better be formal structures in place for families and students to offer feedback that we can act on. Telling your story is not about making empty promises; instead, telling your story begins with clarifying and establishing a singular community vision and then leveraging various platforms to accelerate and amplify the story.

The possibilities for how schools and districts go about telling their stories are endless, but in order to successfully tell the story, we must all begin by exploring the importance of telling our stories, the necessity of building our school or district brands, the role that social media can play in branding, and the tools and resources that can be used to bring



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the story to life so we can hook our audience. The time has come for educators, students, and families to use their voices, take control of their stories, and begin thinking about how a classroom, school, or district community can begin branding their space.

Branding is defined as the marketing practice of creating a name, symbol, or design that identifies and differentiates a product from other products. Stop and close your eyes for a minute and picture the Golden Arches, or the Nike swoosh, or the Apple on many of your devices. Those logos cause people to react and reflect, and they even evoke specific feelings and emotions. That is the power of branding. That is why telling the story of our districts, schools, or classrooms is essential to changing the narrative—we want the community to know what is happening, and we want them to feel a certain way about what is happening. We want to create an identity that everyone can relate to when they think about our schools, walk through our districts, or engage in our story via social media. In fact, we have both successfully clarified the notion of identity within our own schools by devoting time to branding our spaces and telling our stories through the words and experiences of our students and teachers.

As you begin thinking about how you will go about branding your space and telling your story, we offer the following guiding questions to anchor your planning:

1. Does the brand promise of your school or district match your own brand experience?
2. What do you believe in? What do you want for your students and staff?
3. If your staff were asked the questions above, would they answer them the same way that you did?
4. If your students were asked the questions above, would their responses match up with what you answered?
5. If your community were asked the above questions, would they answer in the same way?

What we know is that many people in most communities do not have children in the local schools. While many school districts don't invest time in engaging the community members who don't have children in their schools, we see things differently. We want those community

members to be on the journey with us, on their terms, not ours. We know that people in any given community want to connect, regardless of whether or not they have children in the local schools, but they want to do it on a schedule that fits them. We are completely OK with that because at the end of the day, it is not about the time of the connection, but whether or not it happens. Our goal is to bring everyone together with an accurate picture of the amazing work our kids and teachers do on a daily basis.

We look at time as a commodity—one that we can harness, but not control. Parents and community members will engage in what we do if we give them the opportunity, but do not force the issue of time on them. With this in mind, we developed an ABC approach to community engagement. Find your *audience*, build your *brand*, and *celebrate* kids.



Find Your Audience

According to Statista, 78 percent of adults have a social media profile of some kind. As a school or district, we needed to find where those profiles “live.” For example, in Fall Creek, Wisconsin, after surveying our community, we found that adults preferred Facebook, students preferred Instagram, and alumni preferred Twitter. So, that is where we engage socially. We don't have to be present in every social media platform, just the platforms that are relevant to our people. Once we found where people “lived,” we started engaging them online through social media contests such as Throwback Thursdays, Find-It Fridays, and giving Cricket (the school mascot) gear to the first five people to find me at a game and share the vision of Fall Creek Schools.



Build Your Brand

While the term “brand” can have a negative connotation, we believe it is important to know what people say when you are not there. Promoting the positives helps shape the narrative and create a shared identity. Building our brand through our respective hashtags, #gocrickets and #WeArePlainedge, has helped us share the work of our students in multiple areas and in different ways. For example, putting the hashtag on Cricket apparel and giving it to the community at events built a tremendous amount of



DO THIS

Interested in how the authors used Twitter to build their schools' brands? Check out these hashtags for ideas and inspiration:

#gocrickets
#WeArePlainedge

momentum for our district. We also added a “Where in the World Is Fall Creek Pride” virtual map and told our community to take pictures of themselves in their Cricket gear on vacation so we can spread the message. It has allowed us to show off a #gocrickets item in all 50 states and beyond. We have tried to turn those Go Crickets moments into a Go Crickets movement.



Celebrate Kids

The work done in our schools is amazing. We educate *all* kids; we move them academically and emotionally; we provide a safe haven for those who need it; and celebrating that work should be at the forefront of what we do as school systems. At Cantiague Elementary School in Jericho, New York, we celebrated kids by allowing them to tell the story each week in a video newsletter that went out to all families. The students researched and gathered the information at the start of the week, and then we came together during lunch later in the week to shoot a video that was about four minutes long. The video contained information about the learning that was unfolding on each grade level in a current and dynamic way so that our families were engaged in it as it was happening, not after it was over.

In Fall Creek, as a board, we set a goal of seven to 10 nonathletic positive posts per week. Our community knows that the space is to celebrate, and we want everyone to join us on the journey through our established connections.

We provide the opportunity to connect, and through that connection we develop a great deal of social capital with the people in our world. That social capital is pivotal for trust. A picture, video, or post can have a profound impact on emotions. The world has always belonged to the storytellers, and always will. Schools are full of them, all with the desire to have their voice heard. When they don't have the platform, we provide it. When we do, everyone has a chance to come along for the ride. We are the hub of our community. We are the voice for our kids.

The issue is often not about what is happening in schools—it's the perception of what is happening. The reality is that everyone didn't have a great school experience when they were younger. The thoughts and feelings they had as students often linger to a point that their perception of what it was becomes the reality

they convey to others. That perception can change if your voice, and their new experience, is positive. The interactions you have through social media and in person have an incredible impact. Focus on the positive things happening in your building; the result is powerful for those who don't see it every day.

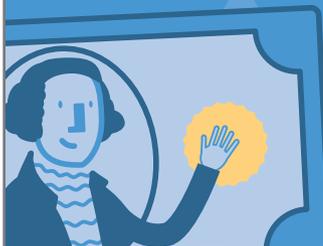
We all have a story, and instead of allowing others to tell it based on second-hand information, misperceptions, or a self-imposed autobiographical layer, we need to devote time to this important aspect of our professions. The world belongs to the storytellers, and our schools are full of them just waiting to be unleashed.

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