

Independent School Guide to Communication

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Part 1

The **5 Most Important** Questions About Your School's Outreach Performance

1. Why do you communicate?

Goals are essential. Communicating for its own sake is not a goal

Developing beautiful, information-packed websites and creatively using today's most effective channels to tell your story are gratifying activities that are likely to be part of any successful independent school's external communications plan. But executing tactics such as these are not goals — they are just means to achieve your goals.

Great goals address your greatest opportunities

The right set of communications goals can energize your entire school and effectively propel your story into the world. To do so, your goals must get to the heart of the key factors for success at **your** institution. For example, your school may be challenged by new sources of competition, demographic shifts, or even an identity crisis. You may have a clear picture of your biggest challenges, or you may be looking instead at a perplexing set of symptoms without a clear sense of the causes.

Look before you leap

Before you can do an effective job defining your goals, you need to assess your situation. Many different approaches can be very successful, and schools often decide to combine several. What works best for your school will depend on what you already know and how open your team is to various points of view.

Hint: Be as open as possible!

Every audience and stakeholder has a point of view that you can learn from.

The most valuable perspectives may be surprisingly easy to tap into. For example, what might you learn by hosting a pizza-fueled discussion with families who recently chose your school and asking them to describe what made your school best for them? How about reaching out with brief phone calls to families who requested information but then made other choices?

A vital source of information is the Admissions team, of course. What do they see as the school's biggest challenges in attracting mission-appropriate families? What about the Development team? Alumni are sources of referral and of intelligence. Virtually every constituency within the school and the community (and don't overlook opinion leaders such as top-performing realtors) may be willing to share valuable insights.

Be sure to set aside a reasonable amount of time to gather perspectives from the people who know your school and your competition before you sit down to define your communications goals. The clearer and broader the picture you have, the more straightforward it will be for you to develop a set of goals that will breathe life into communication that will energize all your school's key audiences.



2. Are you reaching your best-fit families?

Define your must-reach audience

For most independent schools, connecting with prospective families is job 1. Geographic location and ability to pay are key defining factors for targeting communications. Given that most communication budgets are modest, the ability to identify families in the right locations with the right financial resources is essential. Communications that are spread too broadly use up limited budgets too quickly and have too little impact.

Students themselves often decide

To complicate matters, especially for boarding schools, the most important family decision-maker is often the student. And he or she is not looking at traditional external communications channels. If your story isn't easily findable on a mobile device, it may never be seen by the one person who must be convinced that your school should be on his or her short list.

Redefine your “neighborhood”

Are you a boarding or day school, or both? You might assume that most families in the geographic area from which you traditionally draw students know that your school exists and what makes you special. That's not something you should take for granted. High awareness in your traditional neighborhood may not ensure that enough families will consider your school. Demographics may have shifted, alumni might no longer live nearby. A little investigation could show that it's time to shift your focus to other areas. Start this analysis by mapping where your current families are, and where they were, say five years ago. Any changes? If so, it's probably time to rethink your boundaries.

One day, a “neighborhood” boarding school meant any school within a six-hour radius. Today, there are fewer families in that range compared to families ten years ago. Plus, the six-hour circle has only a few zip codes with the resources to pay full tuition. With a solid understanding of who their ideal family is, and a targeting plan to find the right combination of income and talent, they will make the most of their communication efforts.

Full-pay is important...No kidding!

Without full- or high-pay families, you don't have a school. What's your current tuition mix look like? Focus your communications efforts on reaching families with the means to pay. There are structural issues at play that you should be aware of. If you're in the Northeast or Midwest, your population is growing more slowly than in the South and West. All families are smaller than they used to be. Boarding Schools are heavily concentrated in the Northeast, and competition is burgeoning. Boarding schools, day schools, parochial, charter, for-profit and of course, public schools, all compete for your families. That's not a situation independent schools have dealt with before! Your challenge is to discover where the potential high-pay families are, and then figure out how to meet them there.

Savvy communicators need to know

Are you using communications channels that reach families in the right locations with children in the right age range and with income levels that indicate they can afford your tuition? And does useful, personality-revealing information about your school show up where parents and middle- and high-school students are most likely to come across it? Is the cost to reach each mission-appropriate family reasonable? If you are unsure about the answers to these questions, chances are that you have a significant opportunity to refocus your communications efforts where they can make the biggest impact for your school.

Your job isn't just telling your school's story. It's making sure it reaches the right families and the right family members, certainly, but it's also about engaging those families in an ongoing conversation. That's how modern organizational communication works!

Most searches for independent schools are “branded,” meaning the school name is what's searched for. That places a premium on existing awareness. The relatively small volume of “best boarding school in STATE” makes it hard to stand out on that search. Your integrated communication plan needs to combine paid, earned and owned media to take full advantage of the ability to drive baseline awareness. For boarding schools, this can be a daunting effort amid the many options available. Don't forsake media relations, content marketing and other innovations in communications!

3. Are you using the best channels?



Today's families are not sharing sections of the newspaper

Many schools put the biggest part of their external communications budget into print-based media. Two big reasons why this is almost always a mistake:

- First, millennial parents and middle and high school students are not looking at or listening to traditional channels;
- Second, the cost/benefit equation just doesn't add up. Communicating via print-based media is expensive and measuring the results is challenging.

There's still an important role to advertising in your local media, but that's more of a community relations role than one that drives the right families to your school. Advertising can help ease the way for media stories about your school, and there may be special features or sections that wind up passed around, but those are few and far between.



Two different paths

Affluent Americans are traditionally the lightest users of media in general, making them notoriously difficult to reach. But research shows that their use of digital media is increasing. In particular, they are spending more time on phones and tablets, making digital more important than ever.

Tried-and-True Blue School

The communications team at independent high school A is working to encourage prospective full-tuition families to learn more about the school at its annual open house. They mail invitations to the 10,000 homes in their target area. They also send invitations home with every student and reach out to parents to encourage them to bring friends. They also post invitations on every public bulletin board in the area, buy sponsorships on the local NPR affiliate, and for the three Saturdays prior to the event place advertisements in the regional daily newspaper and the local weekly. On their website, they commission a pop-up message so that all visitors get reminded about the open house. Graphic design, printing and ad space are extremely inexpensive in their area, so the total budget to communicate the event runs just \$5,000.



Meet-‘Em-Where-They’re-At Prep

Independent high school B in a similar market has the same goal for its open house. But they rely much more on digital communication. They buy display advertising on a syndicate of websites that serve their local market, and buy an email list of 500 affluent families in their area who have children ages 11-14. A link in the email goes to a page on their website that contains professional photography from last year’s event and information on this year’s, including a simple form to allow visitors to request information (and asking them to provide a little information about themselves in the process). They also email invitations to the students and parents of every currently and formerly enrolled family asking them to forward the invitation to families they think might like to attend.

Moving beyond the invitation, school B also updates their Google My Business description and edits their listings on referral sites (such as BoardingSchoolReview.com) to highlight the annual open house dates. They add a handful of open-house-centric words to their Google Adwords buy (paying only when searchers click to visit their website). They purchase ads on Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat that target their geographic area and “friends of friends.” They create an event linked to their Facebook page and encourage followers to forward it to their friends. They publish a blog post about the “6 Things to Look For When Attending an Open House to Evaluate an Independent School.”

On YouTube, they post a montage of Open House video snippets they got by encouraging attendees to shoot and share video at last year’s event and then giving those snippets to a willing student to edit. And because last year’s event was carefully planned to highlight aspects of the school most appealing to students (maker space, arts, sports, rocket club, etc.), the video gains likes and shares. Their total budget is also \$5,000, which they used to purchase their targeted email list, graphic design, photography and social media advertising. Other tactics are either free or very low cost.

Price is what you pay. Value is what you get¹

Schools A and B paid the same to communicate their events. School B, however, got much greater value. They will be able to track every click generated by their ads, video and digital invitations and track them to specific decisions on their website to inquire, apply, download reports, sign up for the open house or ask for a visit. Consequently, they’ll know which channels worked best, what content resonated the most and what didn’t. For their next event, they’ll be able to focus their resources even more effectively.

Note that these examples are for illustrative purposes only. It’s unlikely that any school would rely exclusively on traditional media or digital media. Effectively combining the two should be your strategy.

¹Attributed to Warren Buffett: <https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/w/warrenbuff149692.html>

4. Are you findable?

Google yourself lately?

The most important place to be findable is Google — the most-visited website in the world. In general, a site that performs well on Google will perform well on other search engines. The most important thing to understand is that there are a lot of things you can and should do to raise your rankings as well as how you are displayed in Google search results.

Start by Googling yourself at least two ways:

- a) search for the name of your school,
 - b) search more generally using terms such as “private schools near me” (or near a city name).
- And while you're at it, Google your competitors and any peers you admire. Do so first in a regular search, then turn on Private Browsing (Chrome) or the equivalent in Internet Explorer, Firefox or Safari and do it again. Say “no” if the browser asks you to allow it to know your location. This should enable you to see yourselves as people outside of your local area do.

If everybody knows your name

If your school has a unique name, you should appear at or very near the top of the page when searching by name. If your name is more common (e.g., St. Mary's), adding your city and state names should bring you near the top. If you're still much further down in the results, you have work to do. This is the first place to focus—if prospective families are searching for you by name, you don't want to tarnish your image with them by being difficult to find. Appearing near the top of a search for your own name is essential.

But let's face it, everybody does not know your name. Among those people, you need to be findable. That's why search engine optimization is so important, and why using advertising and other communications helps. Most schools don't have the necessary expertise on their teams, and the time to spend to do the ongoing management and testing needed to get to the first page of results. An attainable goal is to be somewhere on the first page of a targeted search. But that's only if you've got the right content on your site to match what people are looking for. Because the majority of searches are by school names (or variations on school names), you'll want to place SEO in proper priority if you have to make hard choices about resources.



You can do some things yourself

Some SEO tactics are things you can start doing immediately. Make sure page content and image descriptions include the words that searchers use when trying to find you. Matching search with content, and checking your Google Analytics to see where visitors are coming from and to which pages. Adding a blog that offers real help for families and students, not just content that promotes your school. Educate yourself and your team – Google offers online certifications and tutorials that can take you from zero to hero.

Got expertise?

You may need expert help to pursue some of the more complex things that influence your findability.

- Offsite factors (cues about your site that are not actually located on your site) account for 60 percent of Google's ranking. The number one offsite factor is inbound links — links to your site from other sites that have quality content and long-term, naturally occurring relationships with your site. Update your profiles on BoardingSchoolReview and PrivateSchoolReview and make sure you have up-to-date imagery.
- Local factors apply when location and proximity are part of the search criteria, so unless you're boarding-only, you need to have content that connects you to your community. That could be important anyway as you look to hire staff, administration or faculty, or contract with suppliers or vendors.
- Google AdWords and other digital advertising might be helpful, and you pay only by click, so it's cost-effective. It does require some science and some art to get it right! Testing different messages, imagery and situations takes some time, and having professional help can save you time and frustration.

Moving beyond Google

Social media – Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter and YouTube are the big five. Snapchat is surging. Increasingly, social sites serve as the social commons. It's where questions are asked and answered, where connections are made, information exchanged and topics debated. The TABS "ReadyforMore" Facebook page about the North American Boarding Initiative has nearly 90,000 followers.

Parents are on. Students are on. The only question for your school is which networks to be active on.

Typically, Facebook is where you'll find current and prospective parents. Twitter you'll find a mix of audiences, and the microblogging site is mainly a news feed – your school can post links to its own content and share other content that's relevant to your audiences. LinkedIn can be helpful in locating and engaging alumni. Instagram is used heavily by students, and its link-free ethos and photo-reliant system make it ideal for your school to show what it's like to be on campus.

Snapchat, with its impermanent content (it cycles away in just 24 hours) is popular with kids. Creating filters around events you have on campus (like Open House) can be a great way to engage, since the site is all about storytelling. A recent survey showed 76 percent of teens on Instagram and 75 percent on Snapchat.²

And–YouTube is the second-largest search engine in the world. You should be there.

² New survey: Snapchat and Instagram are most popular social media platforms among American teens, NORC at the University of Chicago. April 2017. <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2017/04/170421113306.htm>

5. How do you measure success?

How far have you come?

It takes resources to communicate effectively, and getting and maintaining resources is a lot easier when you can clearly demonstrate the tangible impact of your efforts. When you can demonstrate a value, budget dollars are much easier to come by.

We know that there are three main steps in measurement: Outputs, Outcomes, and Organizational Impact.

Outputs are the activities communication performs – the advertising campaigns, the web content refresh, the SEO – and their immediate results in clicks, traffic, engagement and web stats like visits, views, comments, likes, etc. Outcomes are what happens next – downloads, inquiries, campus visits, applications and/or referrals. Organizational impact is the final stage – enrollment, matriculation, donations.

Measure at each level and develop a model that tells you what will happen in the future. How much web traffic to get how much increase in inquiries and applications from mission-appropriate families?

At one school, they averaged about 450 inquiries a year over three years. Following changes to the communication activities, including the general school communications and in the Admission department targeted communications, that figure had doubled, with a significant proportion of inquiries from higher-pay families.

At another school, the same strategies flipped the higher-pay and financial aid budgets, resulting in significant increases in net tuition revenue. Measuring week by week during the admission season, and monthly thereafter, kept the team on track and allowed for testing different strategies to find the ones that worked best.

Generating your own data

You also may find it worthwhile to demonstrate success in moving the needle on less tangible factors such as awareness and understanding. If so, you need a benchmark, a target, and a timeframe.

Using tools like SEMRush, you can see what the search volume for your school is – how many times have you been searched for in a given period. You also can inexpensively conduct simple surveys to discover how well your school's mission is understood and how favorably it is perceived by your key audiences. SurveyMonkey is very cost effective, and it offers solid on-board metrics. Repeating your survey periodically will provide a clear measure of progress.

Conversations with relevant constituencies – simple interviews, or small group discussions – can be a deep pool of information. Besides, people love to be involved and love to be heard!

Investing in a modest amount of expert advice as you design your approach to collecting data will help to ensure that you end up with valid measures that contribute to your success. College professors are always looking for data, whether for their faculty research responsibilities, or for course exercises. Reach out to find good options.

Addressing opportunities for improvement

With communications focused on achieving core goals, efficiently reaching key audiences, making your school easily discoverable, achieving solid first impressions and effectively measuring your progress, you are solidly on the path to connecting with the right families and members of your community to build together your school's legacy.

Even so, there is always room for improvement. Read on in Part 2 to discover the top 5 things you can do to improve your school's communications effectiveness.

Three main steps in measurement:



Outputs



Outcomes



Organizational Impact

Part 2

The **5 Most Important** Things to Improve Communication with Families

Our suggestions for getting serious about external communications target two different communications teams. First is the “finding your way” organization, which may have some effective communications activities in place but has not yet brought them together into a comprehensive strategy. The second type is the “upping your game” school, where a communications plan is in place but progress toward achieving objectives has been too slow.

1. Develop a comprehensive communications plan

Finding your way

For your school to gain the many benefits of effective communications:

- You need an integrated communication plan
- Your plan needs an owner
- The owner needs resources

Objectives — the WHY

The most basic and important element of any communications plan is its set of objectives. For many schools, there will be one primary organizational objective, and there's a good chance it will have to do with increasing net tuition revenue, or the proportion of higher-pay families. Communications objectives are best expressed in terms of things you need audiences to think, feel, or do in order to increase the likelihood of attaining your organizational objectives.

For many schools, the primary communications objective will be to increase the number of families with the means to pay higher tuition who choose to send their children to your school. Supporting objectives may address related needs. You will probably also have some additional objectives that don't directly support your primary objective, but unless you have unlimited resources, they must be kept to a minimum.

Beyond objectives — the WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHEN and HOW

Your communications plan will also define your target audiences, key messages, and the primary methods you will use to deliver those messages.



Audiences:

Defining and targeting audiences provides focus and when done well, ensures that the communications budget is spent effectively. Targeting communications to those with the income level and family composition your school needs who are in only the locations that make sense eliminates the waste of “spray and pray” techniques. It’s most helpful to build a realistic set of audience member and call them by a name. Establish who this person is, what they do, where they live, what things they like and dislike. We call those “personas” and they guide a lot of communication strategy and planning. Make one or two personas for each audience your school is trying to reach. Your admission department may already have created personas, so start by asking them.



Messages:

Developing the right messages for your school requires understanding what information your target families are seeking. This understanding is best accomplished through collaborating across departments within the school and by gathering insights from existing and potential families. Messaging helps guide the stories you will tell that illustrate your school’s mission and value. Again, rely on your admission team – they know these families better than anyone!



Methods:

For most schools, digital communications methods should be the focal point for communications efforts.

Your website is your top priority. It must be findable and must speak directly to prospective families. Effectively delivering the content they seek should be the site’s primary purpose. There are other constituencies on campus, sure. But without a constant flow of new students, there won’t be alumni or parents to communicate with! Separate these latter constituents and focus on the admission world.

Establishing social platforms that serve your school’s existing community while at the same time providing a genuine, candid picture of school life for potential families is worth the significant commitment.

Traditional methods can still add value, but due to their high cost per prospect, they must be used strategically. Paid space in search results and on social platforms, for example, can be much easier to target with precision than paid space in print publications. Public Relations activities can drive awareness and help build your school community, so keep those in the communication mix.

Upping your game

Once you've developed a solid set of communications objectives that address your school's greatest needs and have outlined your key audiences, messages and methods, you're on your way. Now the question may be how to accelerate results.

Integrating your strategy magnifies its impact

An integrated communications plan makes sure that you consistently deliver messages, images and ideas both online and offline that relate to and reinforce one another and add up to a unified picture of your school. Consistency helps your audience understand and remember your message and increases the likelihood that they will take action. Integrated communications also optimize your budget, helping ensure that you put the right resources toward supporting the most effective tactics that yield the best results.

Supercharge your content

Another key to increasing communications effectiveness is focusing intently on the messages section of your plan. Adopt a "you have questions, we have answers" filter as you develop the content you'll deliver via all your communications channels. This is very different from the more typical "you have questions, we are the answer" mindset that leads many organizations astray.

The more content we adaptable human beings are exposed to, the more efficient we become at filtering out the irrelevant and homing in on the valuable. So, while we all spend increasing amounts of time gazing at our screens, especially hand-held ones, our increased exposure is balanced by our increased "blindness" to anything that feels promotional.

On the other hand, useful content, not merely promotional content is helpful for every aspect of your communication mix. Your head-of-school-authored blog on why bullying zero-tolerance programs don't work, or the video on choosing a college, or the presentation from a faculty member on new techniques for supporting a student's math homework does not feel promotional. It feels useful and actually is valuable to readers. Google rewards sites that match search priorities with good content!

Content tools to up your game

Use a **content calendar** to help everyone be clear on what the school is saying through its communications channels. This editorial planning helps with integrating your strategy, and it also gives the school's administration one-stop visibility to provide oversight to make sure the desired balance is being struck among the various school stakeholders.

Develop a **message architecture**³ that describes the impression you want to create with your communications. This isn't "content on the shelf" that you insert into your channels. Instead, it describes the overall understanding you want your audience to take away from your content. It is a guide to help everyone representing the school deliver consistent messages in all types of content.

Your message architecture is a guide for content decisions, and can be used to review and upgrade your existing content and identify stories you can tell that prove your messages.

Be sure to:

- Commit to basing all communications on the message architecture
- Keep it up to date, revisiting it annually, if not more frequently
- Repeat these steps continuously

³ Use This Simple (& Fun) Tool to Design Your Content Marketing Message Architecture, by Marsha Riefer Johnston. May 2017.
<http://contentmarketinginstitute.com/2017/05/message-architecture-tool/>

Here's an example.

For years, Garden City Day School, a historically successful K-6 school in a close-in suburb of a major metropolitan area spent most of its communications budget on running the same quarter-page ad in the metropolitan magazine each month, year-round sponsorship of two local public radio stations, maintaining a fairly static website, and publicizing an annual open house run by admissions each October.

For the past few years, applications and tuition income were trending down at GCDS. Two years ago, the school adopted an integrated communications strategy, focusing on its reputation as a nurturing environment where bullying is proactively eradicated through an emphasis on social emotional learning. Advertising and NPR sponsorships were reduced to placements in October only, and the savings were invested in a refresh of the school's website, where social emotional learning was now emphasized on the home page. A new blog that regularly features useful advice for parents from school representatives and guest experts was started and promoted to existing families. The annual open house was taken over by the communications department and redesigned into a fun-but-educational format featuring both meet-and-greets with educational experts as well as performances by entertainers such as an American Idol finalist who delivered a positive, anti-bullying message. Full-pay enrollment is up and a portion of the increased tuition revenue is earmarked for a total website rebuild. And the development department is excited to have such a compelling mission with which to engage donors.

2. Navigate the digital landscape to be findable and memorable

Finding your way

Don't look at digital communications channels as optional. To succeed in reaching families, you have to be where your audience is, and virtually everyone is online.

What's more, your digital communications have to cut through the clutter. For schools wanting to do more in the digital space, there is a logical sequence to follow.

First, make your website work harder

The foundation of effective digital communications is a workhorse of a website that tells your story while putting the needs of your visitors front and center. Even if you know today's site isn't really doing the job, building a new one from scratch may not be feasible. A website rebuild is a major investment not just of dollars but of the communications department's time. It may be necessary to focus on improving the website you have while you put other parts of your communications plan in place.

As the entryway for your site, the homepage should focus on meeting the needs (that is, answering the questions) of new visitors. Assuming that increasing inquiries and applications from higher-pay families is a primary communications objective, the homepage should be the landing page for prospective parents and students. It should go without saying that this is not the place for a history of the school or a description of the details of a new building project. The compelling images and messages on the home page will also be of interest to enrolled students, their families, faculty and staff, but each of those groups should have their own dedicated landing pages where they can easily find what they seek in their day-to-day visits. Your faculty, student and parent portals are NOT your website, they are internal communication tools that deserve their own space. It's better to send them to a separate website and focus on your admission constituents.

Eradicate dense copy and mediocre images

As you work to improve your existing website, you should re-edit every word of copy and re-evaluate every image. Sentences and paragraphs should be brief and the tone should be friendly and helpful. Images should be interesting and faces should express emotion.

Professional writing and photography are ideal, but submitted content can be effective as long as you are selective. Let teachers, parents and students know that you'll be happy to find a place on the site for good-quality photos and video of academic and extracurricular activities that reflect the school's key messages. Put less-awesome content in photo albums on Facebook.

Next, make sure you are findable

Search engine optimization is best done by technical specialists and it is worth the cost to get professional help. But there are some basic steps to improve your ranking in search results that you can take if you maintain your own website. For example, develop a list of key search terms prospective families would be likely to use and make sure they are explicitly used appropriately on your site in a) titles and in content and b) title tags, headers, link text, alt text and meta descriptions. Other basics are outlined in Part 1 under the heading "Are you findable?"



Google my what?

Your school is not a business, (technically speaking) but even so, “Google My Business” is something you should take advantage of — and it’s free. It helps you to take charge of what people see when they do a local search for your school. Once you’ve claimed your “business” and verified your listing, it will be eligible to appear in a knowledge panel on Google Search and Maps. Be sure to keep your listing up to date, and add a variety of photos to show off your school’s personality. Post updates on happenings and encourage current and alumni students and families to post reviews which boost your placement in search results.

Use social media

As we noted in “Moving beyond Google,” on page 11, you can’t communicate effectively if you are not on social media. But do more with social than just sharing your own content. Engage with your school’s fans and offer useful content from yourselves and others.

Keep your eyes open

Using a basic media monitoring tool can be extremely helpful for keeping up with topics with which you want to be connected. Say, for example, that your school embraces social emotional learning as a core element of its curriculum. There are many experts on this topic blogging and posting articles on websites. By setting up a Google Alert on the subject, you’ll receive regular emails alerting you to what new content Google is turning up on the topic, allowing you to comment, share and otherwise get in on the discussion. Follow other schools on your own social networks to keep abreast of what’s happening in independent schools. TABS, the Enrollment Management Association, NAIS and CASE are all great sources of intel about this world.

Don’t overlook referral sites

While perhaps less exciting than your presence on social media, your listing on referral sites such as privateschoolreview.com can play a significant role in the decision-making process for prospective families. Make sure your message architecture is the foundation for the School Notes you submit. Take the time to provide complete information. Check to see what YouTube videos are being scraped into the feed and commission some new ones if what’s there is dated or not supporting your message architecture.

Depending on your market, local real estate guides, city magazine listings, local bloggers, etc. may also be important places where it’s worth your while to make sure your school listing is the best it can be.

Avoid controversy

Even though 88 percent of parents of children under 18 say they have never felt uncomfortable about something posted about their child on social media by a spouse, family member or friend, that means that 12 percent have.⁴ A good policy is to ask parents of children under 13 to sign a photo release form and for older students to ask both parents and the students themselves to give permission for use of their images for publicity, promotional and/or educational purposes including publications, presentations, print or online media.

⁴ *Parents and social media*, PEW Research Center, July 2015.
www.pewinternet.org/2015/07/16/parents-and-social-media/

Upping your game

Once you've addressed the basics of online presence and findability, the next step is to create a more detailed strategy for digital content creation and promotion.

Advertising

There are two primary ways most schools can achieve excellent returns on digital advertising dollars.

- The first is to buy **Google AdWords**. Your ad appears above search results whenever Google users in the geographic region you specify search for the terms you have targeted. You pay only when they click to visit your website or to call.
- The second is to purchase **Facebook Ads**. Here, you can choose your audience based on demographics, behaviors or contact information. By uploading the email addresses of current and alumni parents, you can use Facebook's "Lookalike Audiences" feature to target your ads to people like them.

Each platform has its own special features. On **Snapchat**, for example, you might reach friends of students by setting up a location-based "filter" that users can superimpose on their snaps when they're on campus.

Just like print advertising, to achieve awareness with your target audience, your presence on social media should be as consistent and as frequent as possible.

Visual impact

The importance of impactful visual content online cannot be exaggerated. Professional-quality images and video are worth the cost—especially on your homepage and on referral sites. You need to set the standards high for graphics and photography in key positions. Don't just apply this understanding to special projects such as a website refresh. Make sure there's a talented individual behind the camera taking photos and/or video at every major opportunity to show off what makes your school special. And never, ever, allow the use of clip art on any communications.

Be aware of the copyright laws regarding images you find on the web. Despite claims otherwise, if your school's purpose is to use content to generate revenue, your not-for-profit status won't insulate you from copyright infringement. Read the fine print. There are appropriate aggregators that will allow you access to good imagery. The same goes for copyrighted music, video or other content.

Rebuilding your website

A website rebuild is a major project and the cost is significant. But building it on a modern platform will help keep the long-term cost of ownership much more reasonable and will ultimately make for a much more effective site.

Up front, you'll need to make major decisions in how you'll approach technology and content. First, let's talk **technology**. Assuming you do not have a web technician on your team, you need the ability to make straightforward updates to content. Otherwise, your site will be much more static than it should be. Websites are built on technology platforms known as content management systems.

Your content management system should make it easy to do things like create blog posts, perform basic SEO house-keeping such as adding keywords to newly added images, offer a variety of ways to present imagery and multimedia content, and capture and report full usage metrics. One thing you need to do a lot (and therefore you want to make sure it will be easy) is add pages to support special events and communications campaigns and remove such pages from navigation when they get stale.

The big **content** question to address when launching a rebuild is how best to structure the information architecture to result in a site that is easy for users to navigate. If you start by conducting basic usability research on your existing site, you'll gain insight into the relative usefulness of the current content, which is invaluable when deciding what to include and how to structure the new site.

Putting together a new website is hard work, and time consuming. There are suppliers – Finalsity, Blackbaud, School Website and many others – that have experience in the school realm. Just be sure the package you're buying gets you a scalable site that can grow with your school, has responsive design, so it's usable on mobile devices, and enables you flexibility. You don't want your site to be a carbon copy of another school's!

Offsite factors in findability

Although it may be counter-intuitive, the most important factors for determining your site's ranking in search results are not located on your site. Google works continuously to improve its search algorithm to deliver useful search results to its users. If onsite factors such as the number of times the word "awesome" appeared on the site, for example, were the primary factors, site owners would have too much control over search results and Google results would be less useful. Offsite factors are outside the direct control of site owners, and that's what makes them so valuable.

It's good to be pointed at

The first thing to focus on is increasing the number and quality of offsite links to your site. One strategy is to publish a blog that delivers sharable content that users will link to from social media and their own blogs. Be advised, a blog takes care and feeding. You should make sure that new content is posted every week at a minimum. Spend some time checking out other schools' blogs for ideas on how to keep the content fresh. Avoid burning out the head of school by including faculty, staff and student voices and focus on shareable content. Be quotable!

Let them talk about you

Another factor that's become important in search rankings is reviews. Find way to encourage students, parents and visitors to submit reviews on Google and Facebook. Be aware of Google's conflict of interest policy. Reviews from staff, incentivizing others to write reviews and setting up kiosks to ask for reviews are not allowed (and it's unethical!). But you're free to remind people that reviews will help new families find the school and to engage with those who do write reviews to build dialogue.

Beyond the social media basics

Once your activity on social media starts to bear fruit by engaging your community, you may want to do more. Manage your **YouTube channel**, improving the content to be more useful to more families.

Be deliberate about joining additional social platforms. You may decide not to invest time **Tweeting**, for example, unless you can be fairly sure it can reach at least 25% of parents or staff members, though it is a great vehicle for sharing the latest school sports news! Platforms like **Snapchat** has a certain 'ambiance' from its here-today, gone-tomorrow vibe, so as long as students express interest and someone on your team can leverage that style, go for it. At the other end of the spectrum, a more buttoned-down site like **LinkedIn** may be only minimally effective reaching parents, but it could be a great place to recruit staff, follow NAIS and other professional organizations, develop your own voice on issues and connect with Alumni.

Don't buy links, or followers.

There's a huge industry in "guaranteeing" a certain number of inbound links, or a vast number of new followers. Remember, your school needs more good links, more appropriate followers. That's going to take some effort, not merely writing a check.

3. Target your communications with precision

Finding your way

Connect with true prospects

You can't afford to waste resources on communicating with the wrong audiences. It will probably cost less to purchase an email list to send your invitation to your winter concert to 10,000 households with school-age children in your region than it will to purchase a targeted list of 500 families with an income level that suggests they can afford higher tuition as well as a stated interest in classical music. But you should spend the extra money. What good is reaching people who aren't of the persona you need?

The **true cost** of hosting attendees from the bigger list who have no interest in your school other than your free concert can be substantial. Their participation can cause you to miss out on the opportunity to create an experience for true prospects that meets their hope of being met on your campus by other families with similar interests and values.

Targeting advertising

Most schools make room for some advertising in their communications budgets. Traditionally, this may have meant advertising in local print media, which does carry with it some geographic targeting. But spending most of your advertising budget on digital platforms allows a degree of targeting that is akin to comparing a laser to a searchlight. There's still a place for advertising locally, but it's more community relations than admission-driving strategy.

Upping your game

Detailing your audience definition

The more precise you are in defining your audiences, the more accurate you can be in targeting your content. For example, if you are a boarding school that wants to reach higher-pay families with appropriately aged children in a three-state region, you can focus your communications geographically on markets where Fortune 500 companies, regional medical centers and universities are located.

But if you have further defined target audiences as parents who are either skiing or golfing enthusiasts, you can get their attention by sending them targeted content about your school's ski and golf team activities and performance. You can purchase lists to target these groups, target them with advertising or you can ask website visitors to self-identify as enthusiasts.

Convert casual interest into genuine relationships

Even the highest quality email list is not as valuable as a list of people who have responded to one of your communications efforts by visiting your website and invited you to contact them. This is a treasure you must grow yourself. Here's one way to go about it:

- All your communications to prospective families include links to dedicated website pages where you have provided more information including photos, videos, quizzes and other engaging content. This even works well with print materials because the web addresses are simple (e.g., www.yourschool.org/octoberopenhouse)
- Each of these dedicated pages contain a call to action in which you invite visitors to sign up to receive email notifications of new blog posts and/or to download the e-book your head of school has authored.
- When visitors click on the link in the call to action, they are asked to submit their email address and check off answers to a very few demographic questions, such as, "I am considering independent schools for my child(ren)." They are also asked to check to be added to your mailing list to receive emails when new blog content is posted.

Choose the right channels

With some experience and a little detective work, you can confidently focus on the communications channels that have proven to be most effective for your families. For example, if you set up specific web pages to link with each communications channel you use to publicize that e-book your headmaster wrote, your website analytics tool of choice can tell you exactly how many clicks each placement generated. This works for digital and non-digital channels alike. Just be sure the pages contain an attractive reason for users to provide you with their email address and some brief demographic information. The Daily Herald and the Facebook landing pages can contain identical content – only the addresses need to be different.

Developing a clear picture of which channels produce the most interest makes planning your strategy and your budget much easier.



4. Develop communications ambassadors

Finding your way

Reaching out to learn about your community can be a great step toward increasing its understanding of your mission. For day schools, the community includes staff, current and alumni students and parents, and neighbors within a geographic radius. For boarding schools, geographic radius may be less important, but still a consideration.

Find out what they know about you

Whether you are hoping to develop greater awareness and understanding of your mission among the people in your town or the parents of your students, a good place to start might be a simple survey to find out how much they already understand.

Locally, you might decide to go door-to-door, possibly engaging older students in the process. This is a great project for the newspaper team at a high school, for example. Or host a volunteer event for parents where one of the activities is to spend an hour knocking on neighborhood doors to solicit answers to a short list of questions. Give your volunteers refrigerator magnets to leave behind with the phone number and website of the school and perhaps the date of an upcoming neighbors-invited event.

For the far-flung boarding school community, online surveys can provide truly useful insights. But look before you leap. Go ahead and use SurveyMonkey or a similar site, but define your purpose closely, outline your audience selection method and draft your survey to be as brief and simple as possible. Test the survey with a few people in your audience and make sure what you're asking is clear. This is another opportunity to enlist a college professor to help vet your survey – and help you analyze the results.

Create a communications coalition

If your school's mission, vision and key messages are not well understood within your community, you clearly have work to do. Finding and creating ways to communicate and reinforce this basic understanding is essential. But you don't have to wait until your community has a perfect understanding of your message architecture before inviting them to help communicate with your external audiences. Getting comfortable with the idea of many voices talking about your school is essential in today's multimedia world. It's going to happen anyway, you might as well facilitate it.

Do your best to make sure that **all employees** understand the school mission, vision and strategy and enlist them into your coalition to communicate effectively to existing and prospective families. Hold an all-staff and faculty workshop on serving as ambassadors for the school. Involve staff and faculty when developing or updating your vision and mission statements. Talk to them about how they use social media and get their suggestions on making the school more visible in highly positive ways.

Give existing and recent **students and families** a range of tools and encourage them to use the ones they are comfortable with. Tried-and-true methods such as window clings and yard signs are inexpensive, and they work—generating interest and starting conversations. And don't neglect newer channels. For example, give community members guidelines and suggestions for what is appropriate to post online while on campus. Share suggested hashtags for things like sports events and arts performances. Provide space on your website for submitted content (videos and photos, especially) and guidelines for what you're hoping to post there.

Donors and alumni are often enthusiastic community members. Give them reasons to visit campus, and encourage them to bring guests.

Is your façade noticeable and welcoming?

Take a look at your physical presence from the point of view of your community. Review signage and landscaping and other public-facing elements of your campus. Make sure they are appealing to your community and reflect the image you want to project. To increase your visibility, consider inviting community members to use your facilities for appropriate events and meetings. Hosting the monthly meeting of a young professionals' association, for example, could be a great way to develop awareness among a potentially important audience.

Reaching out to learn about your community can be a great step toward increasing its understanding of your mission.



Upping your game

Deepen your understanding

Some questions about what your community understands don't lend themselves to surveys. For example, knowing what it is that parents believe about your school that make them happy their children are with you would be very useful—the kind of information you could use to strengthen your message architecture. But a multiple-choice format on a question like this requires you to guess at the many likely answers. And even if you do a good job of that, the responses are still going to give you only superficial understanding. Yes, you could include this in a survey by asking an open-ended question, where people have, say, 1,000 characters to write a response. But a much better approach to getting into this kind of meaty topic is to conduct interviews and/or focus groups.

Often, the idea for conducting focus groups surfaces immediately after you have conducted a survey and you find yourself asking questions such as, “Clearly our parents would like to get more involved on campus, but what kind of involvement are they interested in?” If you find yourself wondering Why...? and How...? as you review your survey results, focus groups may be the best next step.

Stimulate community-wide interaction

To strengthen your community, come up with ways to interact more with community members. For example, host events that more community members can participate in such as:

- Talks by staff experts or accomplished alumni on parenting, bullying, and other topics of interest that can be shared via online video platforms
- Student performances geared to youth audiences to which local parents are invited (and are also shared on YouTube)
- Community service projects that are big enough to draw the interest and attention of donors, alumni and parents.

Meet the press

Take on the challenge of getting media coverage for at least one big story per year—one that provides plenty of hooks for your message architecture. For example, a big community service project. And when you get the coverage, communicate about it on your website, in the blog, on Facebook, Instagram, everywhere.

Develop relationships with your local education reporters:

- read their stories; get familiar with their coverage
- reach out to introduce yourself and the school
- drop them emails or quick calls on topics of interest, such as your latest blog post
- invite them for a campus tour; prepare key staff with discussion points

Get routine press coverage by hosting events that are open to the public, such as a speaker series, on topics of wide interest such as bullying or childhood obesity. Send out news releases on smaller things, too. Such as faculty and student honors, alumni fellowships, books or papers published, a boarding student with an unusual background, your outstanding alumnus of the year award.

Your local newspaper might be more inclined to cover you if you run some ads – it's not supposed to be that way, but for many media, it's the only way to survive. Again, that might be just good community relations at work, but it can help.

Once you have a news media piece, don't just let it sit there. Get reprints directly from the outlet and help your admission team get them to prospective families!

Strengthen your community
with events such as:



Talks by staff or alumni



Student performances



Community service projects

5. Getting it all done

Finding your way

Take a breath

Chances are, communications haven't always been a top priority at your school. And chances are your budget is very limited. And you're probably a department of one. You've read this far and you realize how much work there is to be done. So, yes, it's a big challenge. Here are some ideas to help you make the most of the resources at hand.

Zero-based planning

If you haven't done so lately, clear your calendar for an hour or two and conduct a clear-eyed assessment of your resources. For the sake of this exercise, eliminate all assumptions about how communications dollars will be spent. The fact that you have advertised in the local newspaper's annual "Focus on Education" section for the past 15 years is not in itself a compelling reason to do so again this year. Be brutal. If you can't show direct, measurable results from a past tactic, chances are it should not be part of your plan going forward. That doesn't have to mean ONLY net tuition revenue. Think about the outputs, outcomes and organizational impact we discussed earlier – nonfinancial value is still valuable.

With the results of your zero-based budget tally in hand, your next step is to create a preliminary plan. You'll want to define your communications objectives, audiences, messages, and methods. Identify the other roles within your school (development, admissions, leadership) who should be part of the planning process and solicit their support.

Getting help

Developing a communications plan is much easier to do with some help and this is an excellent time to consider consulting with a communications firm that specializes in helping independent schools connect with their audiences. A few reasons:

- Even in preliminary (no strings) discussions with the consultants, you'll get perspectives and insights that will expand your thinking and amplify your strategy.
- An agency will have a good feel for how much things cost, helping you manage expectations from the get-go.
- With the right agency, you'll be able to get as little or as much help as you need — often starting with a limited engagement that grows once you can demonstrate success from initial tactics.



Upping your game

Develop a tight communications consultant relationship

Every school is different, every communications firm is different and there are a limitless number of ways to engage professional communications assistance. Here are some tips that apply universally:

- Be upfront with your consultants on how much you can spend. If you don't feel you can trust them with the knowledge, find someone else to work with. Likewise, if they seem dismayed at the figure, keep looking for a firm that plays well in your size of sandbox.
- Your plan should be aspirational, but be careful not to over-promise. And beware of agencies that do so.
- Don't overlook any existing research data. That survey the development department did two years ago probably contains potentially valuable insights.
- It's important to know what your competitors are doing, if for no other reason than to be able to give your administration a reasonable estimate of how much money they are spending on communications.
- Ask your agency to help you show your administration how robust planning and research leads to targeted communications tactics that cost much less than shotgun techniques.
- Even if you are a seasoned pro, when venturing into new-to-you areas such as search or social advertising, save a lot of time and money by seeking out and partnering with a specialist firm.
- Keep in mind that many great agencies have areas where they are not experts and therefore should be open to working with specialist firms.
- If a website rebuild is on the horizon, take the time to perform a careful search for potential partner firms that can showcase successes helping schools similar to yours achieve similar goals.
- Insist that every tactic be designed to be measurable. How many people in the target audience saw it? How many visited the website? How many requested the PDF? How many attended the event?
- Don't choose a partner that is shy about tying your communications objectives to improving the school's key data points such as admissions inquiries and application requests.

Prepare for Success

Developing trusting relationships with talented communications firms can do more to improve your results than anything else you do. Move at the pace you are comfortable with, be as open as possible in both successes and disappointments and prepare to achieve a profound sense of satisfaction as you help your school become the best it can be.

