

STORYTELLING
IS THE BEST
MARKETING!

SILENCING THE NEGATIVE DRUMBEAT

Using Strategic Communications to Tell Your Story

By Kim M. Smithgall

“American schools are failing!”

“New York has the highest per pupil spending in the nation and ranks 37th in the nation for high school completion.”

The news media is full of headlines and articles bemoaning the state of education today, both nationally and around the state. This steady stream of education bashing – most often from politicians and reformers – is disheartening to teachers and school leaders alike...and many educators feel it's one factor leading to teacher shortages.



THE GREAT PERCEPTION GAP

Even with the steady stream of negative press coverage, when people are asked about their schools, the perceptions seem to be quite different. In the September 2017 Phi Delta Kappan (PDK) "Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools," 49 percent of Americans gave their local public schools a grade of A or B. And one in seven Americans gave their school an A, the highest percentage in more than 40 years of PDK surveys.

When parents' results were separated out, the attitudes about local public schools were even more positive, with 62 percent giving their schools an A or B.

Joshua P. Starr, CEO of PDK and a former school superintendent, wrote in the PDK report that the advantage of the poll is that it reveals the feelings of "the silent majority."

"This year, as in many recent years, the poll showed a wide gap between what the most strident policy makers and reformers are advocating and what the American public actually wants and believes," Starr commented. "School and district leaders are in a unique position to help close that gap."

DEFINE AND SHARE THE NARRATIVE

In New York, education leaders and school communications professionals are using a broad variety of approaches to highlight today's classrooms...and, in effect, close the perception gap. And while the activities vary from district to district, the most effective strategies have a few characteristics in common – namely, they're intentional, strategic, proactive and ultimately focused on building relationships.

Tony Sinanis advises making sure your mission drives your message. He was recently named superintendent of Hastings-on-Hudson Union Free School District and is the former principal of Cantiague Elementary School in Jericho. He is also a social media powerhouse, author of two blogs and co-author (with Joseph

Sanfelippo) of the book, *The Power of Branding: Telling Your School's Story*.

The "branding" Sinanis discusses grew out of a desire to reinforce his school's values and to engage families. "There's something to be said for creating a narrative that's rooted in fact and becomes the manifestation of your mission or vision," he explained. "At Cantiague, we were very conscious and intentional about what we shared. The stories weren't about spotlighting adorable kids or amazing teachers. It went so far beyond that to 'this is the learning that's happening here and this is why we're doing this.' In my mind, it comes down to being intentional about everything you share, thinking about why you're sharing and how it contributes to the bigger narrative."

It doesn't have to be difficult or time-consuming. For example, when tweeting out a photo of students working together in class, Sinanis would simply spend a few extra seconds to add a caption that reinforced his school's ongoing commitment to small-group instruction.

STRATEGIC PLANNING

For the more than 50 public information specialists in Capital Region BOCES' Communications Service who serve school districts throughout New York, defining the educational narrative begins with developing comprehensive communications plans that are aligned with the client school districts' goals.

"If you think back to the basics, public relations is, by definition, deliberate and strategic. So, I use the communications plan as a road map," said Alyssa Pagano, who is assigned to Liberty Central School District. "For a long journey, you're not going to get to your destination without a map...and without a communications

plan, you're more likely to get off target."

This foundational planning is working well for many other districts, too. "At Broadalbin-Perth, we're in the midst of a long-term strategic plan called 'Innovate,' said Michele Kelley, the district's communications professional. "So, much of what we do when we're telling stories about what is happening in our classrooms or in our clubs ties back to that strategic plan, meaning stakeholders are constantly reminded what the district is working toward."

Kelley gave an example of covering an activity that will be taking place in a marine biology class, which is a new middle school elective. "The Broadalbin-Perth students will be setting up a Google Hangout [video chat] with professionals from The Turtle Hospital in Florida," she said. "I could just go in and cover it as a cool story about kids using Google Hangouts, but I'm using this as an opportunity to reinforce the strategic plan by stressing how we're expanding opportunities for students in innovative ways. It's also an opportunity to talk about the greater trends of STEM [science, technology, engineering and math] education and why our students need to be learning



this kind of stuff. This is taking what could be a one-off, cute picture and tying it back to the district's strategic plan. And by explaining the importance of the STEM aspect, we're giving the bigger picture 'so what' of the story, as well."

Garden City Union Free School District takes a similar approach with its multifaceted communications, including asking Coordinator of Public Information Catherine Knight to provide insights and training to teachers.

"Catherine and our assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction gave presentations at faculty meetings to stress taking a thematic approach to newsletters or any communications," explained Garden City Middle School Principal Peter Osroff. "For instance, we're always stressing the middle-level philosophy, which is addressing the academic and social-emotional needs of students. So that's a constant theme we ask teachers to incorporate in their communications, along with addressing district goals at the building level."

EMBRACE ALL OF YOUR STORYTELLERS

These types of communications-related discussions and trainings are a good



reminder that district staff members are an important part of your storytelling team. Whereas principals are often cheerleaders-in-chief, staff members can be ambassadors in the larger community.

"There has to be communications at all levels of the school," Osroff commented. "The more you have teachers doing updates and the more communication that's happening at the classroom level, the more the school as a whole starts getting a reputation for outstanding communications."

And don't forget about support staff. Secretaries, teacher aides and bus drivers are influential voices in the community and if they're well informed about district initiatives and happenings, they, too, will be ambassadors for the truth.

Garden City has tapped into students as storytellers, too - and, as the ultimate school district "customer," their authentic voices are powerful. In one series of student videos, graduates (all volunteers) return to the district and give their perspectives on their time in high school and whether they were well prepared for college.

"Basically, we asked the students how we did as a school," Knight explained. "It's been a wonderful experience. We've done the videos every two years with students attending different types of schools - public and private colleges, in-state, out-of-state, etc."

The idea for the videos grew out of challenging circumstances.

The district was losing up to 20 percent of its students to private schools once those pupils finished middle school. The private schools were using strong marketing campaigns that sometimes included misleading information about Garden City High School's ability to adequately prepare graduates for college.

"We used the student videos as a communications tool to combat the rumors and to tell the authentic story," Knight said.

And the strategy has worked

well. "The videos have been the major contributing factor to the fact that we now have only 11 percent of students going to other high schools. These videos really kick-started an educational campaign that allows the community to know about the great things going on at the high school," said Garden City High School Principal Nanine McLaughlin, adding that the school was recently named a Blue Ribbon School.

Garden City Middle School students also act as storytellers to ease the transition for elementary school students entering middle school. "We have a video orientation created by the kids," Osroff said. "So, instead of having adults giving these students a tour of the school, our sixth-grade students explain on video what a typical day is like. The video is posted on our website and fifth-graders are able to watch it with their parents. They're hearing from sixth-graders what the first day will be like, what they might want to wear. The sixth-graders introduce them to adults in the building and do a sort of period-by-period walk-through of a school day. It's been hugely popular; both parents and students have told us that the video has made the transition to middle school so much easier."

LISTEN UP! COMMUNICATIONS IS A TWO-WAY STREET

Videos, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, email, websites, print... the list goes on and on. With so many options for telling the story, how do educators choose the right tools?

"The first rule is to know your community; ask what the best mechanism is for communicating and listen to the stakeholders," said Deborah Bush-Suflita, director of communications and public relations at Capital Region BOCES.

"In Liberty, Facebook has worked very well because we can share news so quickly," Pagano said. "And now staff members are seeing the benefits and they're sharing their own classroom activities and triumphs on the district Facebook page."

In Garden City, the community has come to expect most information to be on the district website or to

be delivered via email. District stakeholders have also indicated they are open to many other forms of communications as well, including Facebook, Twitter, classroom newsletters, building-level newsletters, and Google Classroom. Of all the tools, though, the district's introduction of social media seems to have had the biggest effect on stakeholder interactions.

With so many tools available, it's also vital to communicate about the communications. "Whatever the preferred mode of communication is for teachers, we make sure that they go over that with parents at every single back-to-school night," said McLaughlin.

For Sinanis, social media and blogging worked well when he was a principal in Jericho. In his new position, the community isn't as comfortable with social media and Sinanis respects that.

"I'm looking at branding and communication in a different perspective now," he said. "I'm the new guy, the unfamiliar face. My job right now is to get to know the people and understand their values and to make sure they feel heard and respected. It's not my job to come in and try to create a story or force Twitter on the district."

REQUESTING FEEDBACK

In Broadalbin-Perth, Kelley has found a particularly effective mechanism for soliciting feedback on the district's communications efforts. "My favorite tool that we use every year is an exit survey at the annual budget vote," she explained. "Sometimes we ask specific questions about communications, but we always have one generic question about whether voters feel they get good, sound information from the district. It's one of those questions where, on its own, it doesn't really tell us a lot. But, because we ask it every year in the same way at the same time to essentially the same group of people, the results give us trend data.

Sinanis's listening/feedback regime includes intentionally carving out time to go to classrooms to interact with students and observe

what's happening, along with soliciting feedback directly. "I have a focus group with high school students. I call it 'Talking with Tony,'" he said.

Okay, so "Talking with Tony" might elicit some chuckles, but the two-way communication - the feedback loop - is highly effective in building trust and in building relationships.

"Communication is two-way and we do our best when it includes active listening, as well," Bush-Suflita said.

BE PROACTIVE - EVEN WITH THE BAD NEWS

And, as uncomfortable as it may seem, that communication should be occurring both when the news is good and when it's bad or could raise the ire of stakeholders.

"Communicating on the difficult issues is really important," Bush-Suflita pointed out. "We all like to say that we're the first and best source of information when it's good news. But if the public doesn't hear from you on the sensitive topics, then you're training them that they can't trust you to tell the whole story. There's that old saying, 'He who names it, frames it' and I think that's true in any situation."

A recent experience in Liberty serves to prove the point. Near the end of the summer (when sports practices were in full swing), the district had to close down all of its athletic facilities because irrigation problems were making the fields unsafe.

"Now, this is a community that is very invested in and supportive of its athletic program. We made a decision to immediately announce the closure on Facebook, even though we didn't have a solution yet. I have to admit, we all held our breath in anticipation of what the response might be," Pagano said. "But it was awesome. Parents thanked us for letting them know so quickly and offered supportive words and encouragement."

On bigger issues - budget cuts or school closings, for example - the ramifications of choosing not to share information could be disastrous.

"Silence breeds mistrust," Bush-Suflita stressed. "A planned, professional two-way communications program won't eliminate all of the difficult situations that abound in public education, but it can help you navigate them more skillfully so you don't get mired in controversy or lose the confidence of your community."

Sinanis echoed the comment. "By being transparent, you build social capital," he said. "And when you build social capital, people will follow you through change and through difficult situations."

IT'S ABOUT THE KIDS

Near the end of his book on branding, Sinanis offers his perspective on making a conscious decision to tell a school's story:

"It means we have to be confident in our choices. It means that we have to show that with every success, there were at least three failures. It means that we are comfortable flattening the walls of our school and proud of the brand we are marketing. In the end, when we give families insight into how and why we do things (which is central to branding and telling one's story), we switch gears from family involvement to true family engagement."

Multiple research studies show that this family engagement leads, in turn, to improved student performance in school (and perhaps some different news headlines?).

At the end of the day, though, the communications tools used to garner that engagement don't matter as much as the reason we're communicating in the first place: It's about the kids...and there's nothing more important than that...

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Social Media Bits and Pieces

“Social media is where people are consuming information,” said Deborah Bush-Sufflita, director of communications and public relations at Capital Region BOCES. “Not being on social media is like walking into a room full of people with your hands over your ears. Just because you’re not listening doesn’t mean they’re not talking.”

In fact, research from the Pew Research Center and other sources shows that half of the world’s 7.476 billion people are on the internet and up to 79 percent of those accessing the internet are also actively using social media. And the numbers keep growing.

Facebook remains the most popular social media tool, with 1.18 billion daily users. Twitter and the photo-sharing sites Instagram and Snapchat are widely used as well, along with video-based YouTube. To help with your efforts in this ever-changing world of communications, below are some social media “bits and pieces.”

- Social media campaigns are a great way to encourage interactions with your stakeholders. Ask families to send in “first day of school” photos; post these throughout the first several days of the new school year. You can also use campaigns that are themed around specific district events, such as homecoming or spirit weeks. Use photos supplied by families during these campaigns as an ever-changing array of Facebook profile pictures.
- Want to know the fastest way for a principal to amass a huge Twitter following (including students)? Garden City High School Principal Nanine McLaughlin can clue you in. “One of the most important things students want to know is when school is closed so they can sleep in,” McLaughlin mused. “We have an automated phone system that sounds out texts, but that can take some time. I started tweeting out the school closings and let me tell you, my Twitter followers grew exponentially!”
- Cross-pollinate your social media communications. For example, include your school website address in tweets and Facebook postings to drive traffic to your website. On the flip side, make sure social media icons are visible “above the fold” on your website home page.
- Consider how you’ll use social media if a crisis hits your district. You can even prepare posts ahead of time for different crisis situations so they’re ready to go.
- Add context to your posts and make sure posts align with the district mission or goals. “I could just tweet out a photo of our great new classroom furniture,” said education leader Tony Sinanis. “But, it’s much more impactful if we explain that we got these new desks because we believe in flexible learning spaces because research says that kids learn better if they’re able to move around.”
- A picture is worth a thousand words. Social media posts that include photos, videos, or graphics are ranked higher and are seen by more people than posts that are text-only.
- Turn the tables! “When I’m at events like an honor roll breakfast or graduation, I love taking photos of the students,” said Public Information Specialist Alyssa Pagano. “But then I turn and take photos of the parents and families in the audience. Their reactions are priceless! And when these are posted to Facebook, the response is amazing.”
- Many scheduling tools are available that allow you to schedule your posts ahead of time. Hootsuite is one of the more popular ones.
- Social media platforms have tools that allow you to analyze your impacts. “We consistently review the analytics for our website and social media platforms,” said Broadalbin-Perth Central School District’s Michele Kelley. “The analytics can tell us which web pages and posts are getting the most hits and how long people are spending there. They also tell us when people are most often looking at our materials, so we know the best day of the week and hour of the day to be scheduling posts.”
- Remember the marketing adage, “If you want to catch fish, fish where the fish are.” If parents and grandparents are the target audience you’re trying to reach, Facebook is your best bet. If it’s students, Instagram or Snapchat is more likely to be the best option. Stay apprised of new social media tools and who’s using them!

And if you haven’t entered this new frontier of communications, you’re missing huge opportunities to engage with stakeholders. You can start small as being a passive observer. For example, create a Twitter or Instagram account and simply follow your favorite school districts or education gurus to see how they use these tools. It’s a perfect way to gain insights and ideas for your own social media efforts.