



# MARKETING IN A NEW WORLD

The COVID-19 pandemic stopped us in our tracks, literally. As we grappled with a new way of thinking and adopted working-from-home strategies, it began to slowly dawn on us that this was unlikely to be a short-term bump in the road. Justin Smith, Managing Director of Chameleon Training and Consultancy, looks at how an effective digital communication strategy can help schools keep in touch with students, parents and stakeholders.

Among the myriad of complex challenges facing us sits the question of how we can effectively communicate with stakeholders. Effective communication is at the heart of a crisis management strategy, and there has been no doubt that some schools have appeared better equipped at dealing with this than others.

Websites are the primary source of information for schools, but how agile and dynamic has yours been? Was it up to the task of comforting anxious parents who were desperate for home learning resources for their children and wondering how the school was responding to the latest government advice? In the absence of lettings income, how digitised were your school

fundraising campaigns? Can we still market ourselves to prospective new job applicants using virtual tours and online interviews?

The pandemic is unprecedented, but we can address some of our shortcomings to ensure resilience against a future crisis or a second/local spike in the current one.

## Believing in your values and brand

Do you know what your school brand is and what it represents? A brand is the promise you make as a school, and your reputation is how well your parents and stakeholders think you are living up to that promise. ►



Justin Smith



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Successful brand identity will build loyalty, reputation, awareness and empathy. This is so important, not only in giving you an edge over others but also in offering a buffer, some resilience when things don't go according to plan.

Mission statements written in isolation lack credibility and purpose. A brand cannot be a series of statements just for others to learn and repeat because this makes the school look robotic and insincere. Understand what makes your school unique and ensure staff really know how that applies to their role. You can do this remotely via virtual department or team meetings, which can help find and share stories that show the school brand being lived in difficult times.

### Agile communications

Essentially, good marketing is all about being in control and being on the front foot so you're able to respond quickly and efficiently. Having a website that enables you to update content, introduce videos and provide links with resources is critical. In light of the fact that there may be another coronavirus lockdown as the winter months approach, a dedicated landing page for home learning materials and reassuring advice can make such a difference.

Videos are a brilliant way to engage with people. A school I work with was especially good at developing resources to help anxious students prepare for their return to school, assembling a series of bite-size introductory videos for parents and students, virtual tours of the site showing how social distancing will work, mini 'daily reflection' videos from staff, virtual careers events, and short guides on accessing online tutorials.

It is always important to script and storyboard a video before you actually make it. Scripting creates

the key messages and determines who's involved, and storyboarding matches images to the script to deliver your 'story'. You can then upload the video to your website and share on social media.

Finally, you need to manage fundraising remotely. A 'support us' tab on your website detailing campaigns and how to support them, downloadable key facts and impact statements, and how to make online donations can be supported by regular tweets and posts encouraging engagement.

### Telling the story

Living up to your promise requires you to continue telling the story. This means making sure your students and staff are still visible, so if lockdown occurs again, share stories, especially light-hearted ones, featuring staff and how they're coping. The children will love this, and it shines a light on their teachers' lives outside of the classroom. Keeping connected shows you care and are still there.

You also need to tell prospective parents how you managed through the crisis. Now, more than ever, it is important to tell your school's story.

### Crisis management plan

I've not come across a school that had a plan for the pandemic, but the essential elements remain the same, whatever the situation.

- Anticipate what could go wrong (especially policy changes – could listening help resolve these earlier?).
- Have a clear chain of communication (especially during holidays).
- Agree who will write and issue your statements.
- Ensure you can access communication tools (website, social media, parents' emails).
- Tell all staff what you will do (and what they should and shouldn't do).
- Give your 'audience', who could be anyone from staff to parents and the wider community, an opportunity to respond and ask questions (or they will talk to the press).
- Hold a crisis exercise – desktop and an actual drill.

Being clear on delegated responsibilities is also important, so ensure you know who has access to passwords to update the website and manage social media feeds. ■

