Telling the District's Story

Branding and Marketing Strategies for Public School Districts

District Leadership Forum

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1) Executive Overview

To tell their respective stories, communications teams at all profiled districts select and promote mission-based brands. Because student success typically drives the mission of public school districts, communications teams tend to focus district brands on student success. For example, the communications team at **District E** based its brand off of the tagline, "academics, opportunity, and success." Communications teams also expand their respective brand to areas beyond student success to differentiate their districts from others. At **District D**, for example, a goal within a previous strategic plan serves as the foundation for the district's brand. The goal states that the district will strive to advance student success and foster a collaborative culture through empowerment and innovation.

The communications teams at all profiled districts use Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram for marketing and communications, with Facebook typically serving as the most important platform. Contacts note that social media is key to district-wide marketing activities because the platforms are versatile, free, and popular among district stakeholders. The communications teams at **District C** and **District E** post the same information on each platform; they simply adapt Facebook posts (i.e., shorten them) for sharing on Twitter and/or Instagram. In contrast, the communications team at **District B** posts unique information on Twitter and Facebook. While the team reserves Facebook posts for highly engaging stories, they use Twitter to share both stories and logistical information (i.e., event details, snow day updates).

Communications teams at all profiled districts rely on visuals to engage viewers through district websites, social media posts, and district newsletters. Because visuals increase viewer engagement with marketing materials, the communications team at **District D** does not publish a social media post until it has a correlated visual. To encourage the use of visuals, the team maintains a digital photo gallery. Similarly, the communications team at **District C** incorporates professional-quality video into marketing materials whenever possible as their analytics have shown viewers to be more engaged with posts that involve video. Contacts at District C also note that their Instagram posts spur a higher level of viewer engagement than Facebook and Twitter posts due to the visual-centric format of the platform.

To educate community members about important district initiatives and reinforce their respective district's brand, the communication teams at *District A, District B, District C,* and *District E* plan and execute marketing campaigns. These campaigns typically span one or two months and require that communications teams create new marketing materials to share through district websites, social media platforms, and/or newsletters. Marketing campaigns often reach community members who are not directly connected to districts through students, but who are taxpayers in the area. For example, District A's campaign for a new facilities plan serves to educate the community about the plan for which the district will require taxpayer support.

Communications teams at all profiled districts, except *District E*, comprise two or three members who have unique responsibilities. A Director of Communications typically leads communications teams, with support from one or two communications specialists or staff members. Typical responsibilities for communications specialists include graphic design, photography, media relations, and website maintenance. The communications staff at **District E** consists of six individuals, including a Chief Communications Officer, two communications specialists, a web specialist, a community relations coordinator, and a department secretary.

2) District-Wide Branding

Crafting a Brand

Communications Teams at Profiled Districts Leverage District Brands to Make Progress on Strategic Goals

Given increased competition in the K-12 space and growing public skepticism about the value of public schools, administrators at public school districts increasingly seek to leverage district brands to tell their district's stories and counteract public skepticism. Additionally, given the decline in local newspapers, districts must assume ownership over the marketing and communication of their brands. If districts fail to do so, they risk allowing external entities to shape their public image.

Communications directors at **District A** and **District E** view branding as integral to gaining widespread recognition among students' families and the greater taxpaying community, two groups whose buy-in the district often depends on to accomplish strategic goals. For example, administrators at District A and District E note that their respective brands help their districts accomplish goals related to increasing parent engagement. Parents are more likely to engage with a district when they understand the district's identity and goals. Similarly, the communications teams at **District B** and **District C** view their brands as particularly impactful in recruiting high quality teachers and staff.

Develop a Brand Based on the District's Mission

A district brand communicates a district's identity and often speaks to a district's overarching mission. Administrators at all profiled districts use their respective district's brand as a guide for their communications teams' marketing activities.

When developing a brand, each communications director at profiled districts considers the underlying mission that encompasses the efforts of their district's teachers, administrators, students, and parents. These missions shape the identities of the districts and therefore inform the districts' brands. As a district's mission changes, the brand can also shift. For example, when the communications director at **District B** originally developed a brand for the district, the district was provisionally accredited and faced challenges related to student performance. Thus, the district brand focused solely on academic success. As student performance improved and the district gained full accreditation, the communications team shifted the brand to communicate the district's identity as a school of choice that prepares students for their futures.

Foundations of District-Wide Brands at Profiled Districts

The communications team based their district's brand on...

District A	...the district's **mission statement**. The statement encourages innovation and academic success.
District B	...the district's **identity** as a school of choice for the community that prepares students for their futures.
District C	...the district's **mission** to prepare students to be successful during their K-12 education and after.
District D	....a **strategic plan goal**: the district will strive to advance student success and foster a collaborative culture through innovation and empowerment.
District E	...the district **tagline**, "academics, opportunity, and success."

Establishing and Reinforcing a Brand

Use Logos, Mascots, and Mission Statements to Promote Brand Recognition

As a first step in the branding process, the communications teams at **District A**, **District B**, and **District E** updated district and school logos and mascots. Contacts note that that these pieces helped the districts launch new brands in an organized manner. Logos represent the district brand, serving as a reminder of the district's identity. Thus, to develop brand recognition, profiled districts incorporate their logos, often alongside mission statements, into marketing materials. Contacts at District E note that by consistently including the district's logo within marketing materials, the communications team promotes widespread recognition of the logo within the community.

To encourage appropriate use of logos, mascots, and the mission statement, the communications team at District A published a brand guide for administrators and teachers across the district. The guide provides district staff with the logo for the district in multiple color schemes as well as the logos for each of the district's schools. The guide also includes advice on how to best use district branding materials.

Maintain Consistency in All Marketing Activities to Establish a Well-Known Brand in the Community

Marketing materials (e.g., social media posts, newsletters, articles in local newspapers, blog posts on websites) serve to communicate important information to district stakeholders and reinforce a district's brand. The communications teams at profiled districts connect the content of their marketing materials to their district brands to ensure consistent branding strategies.

Strategies for Maintaining Consistency in Marketing Materials

Connect All Content to the District Brand

At **District B**, where administrators constructed a brand based on student preparedness, the communications team consistently ties all marketing materials to student success. Similarly, if a piece of marketing material does not support the district brand, the communications team at **District D** reevaluates its content.

Centralize Control of Marketing Content

Contacts at **District B** note that the small number of people that create marketing materials allows the district to maintain consistent branding.

Provide Guidance to Principals on School-Wide Communications

Because principals and school administrators may not have significant marketing experience, the communications team at **District C** regularly offers guidance on how to leverage the district brand in school-wide communications produced by principals' offices.

3) Marketing and Communications

Digital Communications

Incorporate Visuals and Streamline Website Navigation to Improve the User Experience within a District Website

The communications teams at multiple profiled districts cite districts' websites as challenging to maintain. Contacts note that it is difficult to preserve clear website navigation given the combination of district-wide information and school-specific information on district websites. Additionally, contacts share that redesigning a district website results in a cumbersome and lengthy process, often spanning a year or more. Yet, district websites remain a critical platform for district marketing; contacts at **District A** and **District C** share that many parents and community members without social media accounts rely on the district website as their main source of information about their district. Administrators at **District B** note that the website is not the district's most popular communication platform, yet it houses a significant amount of important logistical information. To effectively communicate through their websites, profiled districts incorporate their respective district's brand, feature visuals, and carefully design the websites' navigation.

Strategies for Effective District Websites

Incorporate the District Brand

Contacts at **District D** recommend incorporating district colors, logos, and mission statements into the website. To evaluate the website's design, communications team members ask themselves, "what impression does the website have on new viewers?" The team strives to make this impression align with the district's brand. Additionally, the first option on the main navigation panel of the District D website is a 'Why District D' webpage. This information gives viewers an understanding of District D's identity.

Feature Visuals

The communications teams at **District B** and **District D** incorporate visuals throughout their district websites when possible. However, contacts stress that communications teams should maintain and carefully enforce a do not photo list of students who wish not to be photographed. Most profiled districts include vibrant, scrolling photos at the top of the district home page. **District A**'s home page features videos of students and teachers alongside text of district news.

Design Navigation Tabs to Serve Viewers

District websites should be organized to provide the websites' viewers with information that is relevant to them. Each navigation tab includes resources for parents, students, and staff. At **District C** and **District D**, communications team members also include a tab for community members. To further aid website navigation, the communications team at **District A** periodically reviews each website page to ensure all pages are updated and housed within the appropriate area of the website.

Profiled Districts Use Social Media Platforms, Especially Facebook, for Effective, Free, and Versatile Marketing

The communications teams at all profiled districts use Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram for marketing and communications. Three of five profiled districts cite Facebook as the most important social media platform for district marketing activities.

The communications teams at most profiled districts help administrators at each school within the districts set up and post to school-specific social media accounts. For example, at **District D**, the communications team maintains a digital photo gallery to encourage school administrators to incorporate visuals into their social media posts. At **District C**, the communications team provides social media guidelines to administrators at each school. The team asks that each school post on Facebook once a week and Twitter once a day. Contacts at District C recommend that communications teams create social media accounts for each school within a district even if the school is not prepared to use the account. This allows the district to prevent others from taking the school's name as a Twitter or Instagram handle, or Facebook page name.

The communications teams at all profiled districts upload videos to YouTube, which allows the teams to then post these videos on social media platforms and district websites. Profiled districts do not typically use YouTube to engage with stakeholders directly. Contacts at **District D** note that YouTube automatically provides subtitles for videos, which is helpful for ADA compliance. However, contacts stress that administrators should check the subtitles for accuracy and fix them when necessary—the automatic subtitle service is not 100 percent accurate.

Encourage Communications Staff to Engage in Professional Development to Improve Photo and Video Quality

Multiple profiled districts recommend that administrators engage in professional development to improve the quality of visuals used in marketing materials. Contacts at **District D** stress that all communications staff should be trained on the district's equipment.

Districts can encourage communications team members to expand their photography and videography skills through free, online tutorials.

Social Media Strategy at Profiled Districts

Facebook

Audience

Contacts at **District A** and **District C** note that parents compose the largest audience for the districts' Facebook pages. At **District B,** women ages 30 to 44 are the most engaged demographic. Contacts at **District E** note that both students and parents engage with the district's Facebook page.

Content

The communications teams at **District A**, **District B**, and **District E** typically post photos and videos on Facebook. Contacts note that posts with engaging visuals typically receive the most likes, comments, and shares. The communications team at **District B** posts engaging, and often emotional, stories to Facebook, rather than logistical updates and district news.

Specific strategies

- **Event pages: District D** creates event pages through the district's Facebook account. Contacts note that this strategy serves as a good reminder for event attendees—Facebook users that click "attend" on the event page receive notifications about the event.
- **Facebook messenger: District B** uses Facebook messenger to directly respond to questions from students and parents (e.g., "At what time does Kindergarten end?, "Will we have a snow day?"). The Director of Communications typically responds to these questions within an hour, even outside of school hours.
- **Facebook page in Spanish: District E** created a "District E Español" Facebook page. The page includes the same posts as the District's English language page, but all communications are in Spanish.

Twitter

Audience

Contacts at **District A**, **District B**, and **District C** note that Twitter is popular among teachers and staff, as well as some students.

Content

The communications teams at **District C** and **District E** adapt information posted on Facebook (e.g., shorten posts) to share on Twitter. **District B**, however, posts unique information on Twitter and Facebook. While the communications team reserves Facebook posts for highly engaging stories, the team uses Twitter more broadly to share logistical information (e.g., event details, snow day updates) in addition to stories.

Specific strategies

Hashtags: The communications team at **District D** uses hashtags to maintain continuity across events (e.g., #ctemonth) and broader district themes.

Instagram

Audience
District A, District C, and District D cite students as the most engaged demographic with their Instagram accounts. The communications team at District D found that Instagram also engages 24-48 year-old mothers of current students.

Content
Most profiled districts post professional quality photos on their Instagram accounts. The communications team at District A posts poignant stories of district staff and students on Instagram.

Specific strategies
Hashtags: District D uses hashtags within captions on Instagram posts to establish continuity across the district's posts on Instagram and other social media platforms.

Use Facebook Insight to Assess the Impact of Social Media Posts

All profiled districts use Facebook Insight, Facebook's analytics tool, to track the impact of their social media use. Facebook Insight provides an overview of a page's performance including the number of total and new page likes, the reach of posts on a page (i.e., the total number of people who saw the post), and post engagement (i.e., the number of people who engaged with a post by liking, sharing, or commenting). Contacts report that communications teams model future posts on posts that exhibit successful metrics on Facebook Insight. Along with metrics on Facebook utilization, the tool also provides metrics on Instagram accounts that are linked with the Facebook account.

District D also uses Twitter analytics to track the reach and engagement of their tweets. The data inform their Twitter strategy and future tweets.

Consider Emailing Newsletters with Important District-Wide News to Parents and Community Members

The communications teams at District B and District C send out email newsletters every two weeks. At District C, the team sends the newsletter to all district parents. At District B, the team sends newsletters to both parents and community members. The newsletters at both districts include district-level announcements and important high-level information. Both districts also feature exciting stories and current marketing campaigns within the newsletters. At District B, the communications team includes links to social media posts within newsletters. This increases the reach of the district's social media pages.

To supplement district-wide newsletters, the communications team at District C asks each school to send home a monthly newsletter to parents. The communications office designed the template for the school-specific newsletters to ease the process for school administrators and to ensure that the newsletters remain on-brand and professional in appearance.

Local Media

Cultivate Relationships and Maintain Open Communication with Local Media to Establish Credibility

The communications teams at all profiled districts cultivate relationships with local media contacts to increase their districts' media presence and influence stories that might otherwise reflect poorly on the districts.

Strategies to Improve Relationships with Local Media Contacts

1

In-person meetings

Meet with local media contacts in person. Set expectations with contacts about limitations to communications team comments (e.g., will not comment on a student records).

2

Prompt responses

Respond to media contacts' inquiries as quickly as possible, even when responding "no comment." This makes the contacts more willing to work with the district in the future.

3

District advocates

Identify and build relationships with local media contacts that have ties to the district (e.g., alumni, parents of district students). These local media contacts are more likely to be excited by district news and willing to publish district stories.

Pitch Only the District's Best Stories to Local Media Contacts to Avoid Overwhelming Contacts

Contacts at **District C** and **District B** note that public school districts compete with many entities for coverage by local media outlets. Rather than passing leads for commonplace stories (e.g., debate team qualifies for regional tournament), contacts recommend that communications teams pitch only their best story each week. This allows districts to gain exposure in the local media without inundating media contacts with everyday information. The communications team at District C sends leads to local media contacts that focus on district-wide events that evoke emotion.

At **District E**, the communications director sends local media outlets an excel spreadsheet each week. This spreadsheet outlines key updates and news occurring from the district and serves to keep local media contacts informed on district news.

At **District D**, local media contacts often publish articles written by the district's own communications team members. This system allows the communications team to incorporate the district brand into articles within local media outlets. The articles also heighten the district's profile within the community. Contacts at District D note that the quality of their marketing content and strong relationships with media contacts allow for this.

Marketing Content

Encourage District Staff to Share Tips to Ensure the Communications Team Stays Informed on Everyday District News

The communications director at **District A** begins every school year by visiting each school in the district to introduce herself to teachers and staff members. During her visits, the communications director encourages teachers and staff to email or call the communications team when something exciting is occurring in their classrooms, offices, or schools. In response to teacher and staff member tips, team members attend special events to take photos or videos and interview individuals about school news. Team members then build marketing materials featuring the event or story.

The communications team at **District E** sends an email to all staff members each week with a Google form. The Google form allows teachers and staff members to submit information about current and exciting work (e.g., class projects, extracurricular events). The communications team uses the resulting submissions to create marketing materials and send stories to local media contacts.

Employ Marketing Campaigns to Support Major District Initiatives

All profiled districts carry out organized marketing campaigns in addition to regular communications. These campaigns often span months and support specific district initiatives. To gather support for district initiatives, communications teams often create and share booklets or reports that provide in-depth information on the particular initiatives. To supplement these larger materials, communications teams post about the initiatives on social media or include brief information within email newsletters. Occasionally, communications teams will host events for particular district initiatives (e.g., a presentation of the district's new facilities plan).

Sample Marketing Campaigns at Profiled Districts

Campaign	Purpose	Marketing Strategies
District B: **Child Development Education Campaign**	This campaign educates parents within District B about how to best prepare their students for college and careers. The campaign supports the district's mission to support student success both during their K-12 years and after.	• The communications team created three booklets that outline steps for parents to take to support their children's education and development. Each booklet discusses a different portion of a student's career: birth to pre-kindergarten, kindergarten to fifth grade, and sixth grade through 12th grade. • To expand the reach of the campaign, the communications team included a tab dedicated to the campaign within the district website's navigation bar. • The communications team shared these materials across social media platforms.
District A: **Campaign for Facilities Plan**	District A's campaign for a new facilities plan serves to educate community members about the facilities plan and encourage taxpayers to invest in the district.	• The communications team published a resource center for the facilities plan on the district website. At this webpage, viewers can access data sheets, a fiscal overview, a timeline for the plan, an FAQ page, and videos on the initiative. Additionally, viewers can submit questions through the webpage on the facilities plan. • The communications team shares the materials housed on this webpage across social media platforms to expand the initiative's reach.
District C: **Learning in District C**	Learning in District C reinforces the district's mission to promote student success by highlighting the district's curriculum and educating parents about the district's approach to education.	• The communications team published three videos that outline the district's approach to education in each subject area (e.g., math is taught through big ideas rather than formulas for students to memorize). The team shares these videos on the district website and across social media platforms. • The communications team wrote and published blog posts on the district website and incorporated the campaign into district newsletters. Posts all include the same hashtag.

Campaign	Purpose	Marketing Strategies
District E: **Campaign to Educate Local Stakeholders**	This campaign educates families and community members without ties to students in the district about the role of the district in workforce development for the local community.	• The communications team published a report in both English and Spanish. The report features engaging visuals and text regarding workforce development programs and student success. • The communications team mailed the report to community members and shared the report across social media platforms and on the district website.
District E: **Inspiration Campaign**	The inspiration campaign serves to instill pride in the district's students.	• The communications team published inspiring stories about 15 students who have overcome obstacles. The team published the stories a website dedicated to the campaign and shared them on social media platforms with a shared hashtag. • Each story includes a video interview with the student that opens with a quote from a superhero character. • The communications team also created a poster for the campaign and distributed the poster among the district's schools.

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4) Communications Team Staffing

Staffing

The Communications Team at Most Profiled Districts Consists of Two to Three Members

At all profiled districts, except **District E**, the communications teams consist of two to three members that have unique responsibilities. However, given the small size of the communications staff, staff members frequently assist each other in their work. The communications staff at District E consists of six individuals. These individuals include a Chief Communications Officer, two communications specialists, a web specialist, a community relations coordinator, and a department secretary.

Sample Communications Staff Roles and Responsibilities

Director of Communications and/or Public Relations
- Oversee media relations
- Oversee marketing content and strategy
- Oversee community engagement
- Maintain social media accounts
- Lead crisis communications

Consider offering students interested in marketing careers the opportunity to support a communications specialist's work.

Communications Specialist 1
- Lead graphic design projects
- Take photographs and videos at district events
- Lead website maintenance
- Draft marketing content
- Support media relations

Communications Specialist 2
- Support community engagement
- Lead event planning
- Support budgeting and financial processing
- Translate materials into Spanish
- Copy editing

5) Research Methodology

Project Challenge   Leadership at a member institution approached the Forum with the following questions:

- What initial steps did contacts take to cultivate a district brand?

- What district-wide communications goals shape the district's marketing activities?

- Which platforms do contacts use to communicate the district's story with stakeholders?

  – How have contacts refined and expanded marketing activities through these platforms?

  – Do contacts use specific platforms to reach different stakeholder groups?

  – Do contacts enforce district-wide guidelines concerning the use of these platforms?

- Which platforms do contacts see as particularly effective in telling the district's story?

- What additional strategies, if any, do contacts use to tell the district's story?

- How do contacts ensure that district communications maintain a consistent and positive message?

- What challenges have contacts encountered while creating a district narrative?

  – How have contacts overcome these obstacles?

- Who at the contact district oversees branding and marketing activities?

- How many staff members are dedicated to district communications?

- How are branding and marketing responsibilities divided between staff members?

Project Sources   The Forum consulted the following sources for this report:

- EAB's internal and online research libraries (eab.com)

- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (http://nces.ed.gov/)

- Profiled district websites

Research Parameters

The Forum interviewed directors of communications and public relations at public school districts in the United States.

A Guide to Districts Profiled in this Brief

District	Region	Approximate Student Population
District A	Midwest	8,900
District B	Midwest	2,600
District C	Midwest	7,000
District D	Mountain West	26,400
District E	Midwest	22,400

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