SchoolCEO

The Principal's Guide to School Marketing

From multi-channel communication to social media

If you look at books about marketing on Amazon, you'll see subtitles like "how to set fire to your business's growth" and "making your product indispensable." The vast majority of information about marketing is made for people working in the private sector. But if you are reading this guide, it means you recognize the need for schools to market themselves.

In this short primer, we'll walk you through the essentials every principal should know about school marketing. We'll tell you which communication channels you should be utilizing to reach your audience with your school's message. Finally, we'll show you opportunities schools are missing when it comes to social media marketing, and a few ideas from the private sector you can steal.

But before we can get to all that, it's worth your time to ask: if I'm not working in the private sector, what is marketing, anyway? First, we'll answer the most common questions we get from school leaders about how to market their schools. We'll also offer a case study showing how a superintendent in Washington is implementing effective marketing strategies in the real world.

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CAMPAIGNS	MESSAGING	SOCIAL MEDIA	BRANDING
$200	$200	$200	$200
$400	$400	$400	$400
$600	$600	$600	$600

What is Marketing, Anyway?

When Dr. Nathan McCann arrived in Ridgefield, Washington as the new superintendent, he saw the district's unlimited possibilities. "I came here specifically because I thought Ridgefield could become the state's premier school district," he says.

But not everyone shared McCann's vision of Ridgefield. Unclear on what the district had to offer, area students flocked to a 4A high school the next district over, seeing the promise of a larger school.

But McCann had a plan to change the community's perspective of the district. His solution? **Marketing**. McCann took concrete steps toward a strong marketing strategy. Working with faculty members and even students, he gradually changed the community's perspective on Ridgefield, building a strong district brand.

As we'll see in the case studies that follow, marketing helped McCann and his team streamline their communication, disseminate their core message, and even quell community tensions after a teacher strike. Through marketing, Ridgefield took control of the ongoing conversation about its schools, and changed it for the better.

"Someone's going to tell the district's story whether we do or not," says McCann. "So we'd better be telling this story."

1 What is a brand?

In simple terms, a **brand** is a symbol that represents your organization. Brands can be logos, names, images, or even people. Anything that represents your school is part of the school brand. But in a broader sense, brand is your school's reputation. The status of your brand is the way people currently think and feel about your school.

Brands have always been about distinguishing one thing from another. The first "brands" were shapes seared into a cow's skin to denote ownership, or patterns pressed into pottery as the artist's signature. Thousands of years later, companies distinguish themselves from their competition by branding their products with names, colors, and logos. For example, you don't get Tide laundry detergent in a plain cardboard box; it comes in a distinctive orange bottle.

In the same way, your brand should distinguish your school from others in the area. When the community hears your school's name, you want them to feel something positive and unique, something distinct from the way every other school makes them feel. But how do you build that reputation—your brand? The answer is marketing.

2 What is marketing?

It's a common misconception that marketing is just another word for advertising: branded T-shirts, billboards, and pop-up ads. You might also confuse marketing with public relations: getting your school into (or out of) the local press. But really, advertising, branding, and PR are just pieces of an overall strategy. Marketing is the practice as a whole.

In the context of schools, **marketing** is the practice of influencing how people think and feel about a brand. Right now, people already have an opinion about your school's brand... but maybe not the opinion you wish they had.

Marketing aims to build your brand—to make your audience think about your schools the way you want them to. Your brand is the destination; marketing is the path that takes you there.

You make this shift in perspective through associations. Let's look at an example from the private sector. When you think of Coca-Cola, what comes to mind? If you're like most Americans, it's not just a bottle with a red label. It's anything from having fun with friends to Santa Claus to polar bears frolicking in the snow. Of course, nothing in the taste of Coke calls polar bears to mind, but the company's marketing team has trained you to associate their soda with other ideas—through what marketers call impressions. An impression happens anytime someone interacts with your brand. When someone walks into your school, the way they are welcomed is an impression. So is a call home from a teacher. Football games, theater performances, report cards, and newsletters are all places where the public interacts with your school's brand. They're all opportunities for marketing.

Each impression you make should leave your community with a sense of what your school is all about. This means that to market your school effectively, you need a core message.

Ridgefield Case Study

As Ridgefield's superintendent, McCann has stepped up the district's branding game. "The expectation of what we publish and put out there has gone up considerably," McCann says. "Everything looks much more professional." For example, the district's community report, once four black-and-white pages, is now 12 pages in full color.

But McCann realizes it's about more than professionalism; it's about brand recognition. Everything that leaves the office needs the distinct Ridgefield touch. This means getting precise about things like fonts, slogans—even the perfect shade of Ridgefield orange. (It's Pantone 1495 C, if you were wondering.)

"Anything that leaves our hands looks and feels a certain way now," says McCann. "We're just getting more intentional about protecting and building our brand."

In the context of schools, this is the practice of influencing how people think and feel about a brand.

3 I want to make marketing a priority for my schools. Where do I start?

Before you do anything else, you need to determine your school's **core message**: a short statement that indicates a problem and provides your solution. A great core message will highlight a need in the community, argue how your school uniquely meets that need, and define your school's identity.

Start building your core message by making lists that answer these three questions:

- **What do families in your area desperately want from a school?** You know what parents in your particular community value. Maybe they appreciate a small-town feel, world-class football coaches, or innovative arts programs. But go beyond these concrete concerns to imagine more abstract wants and needs: safety, or diversity, or a sense that their child belongs. List everything a parent's ideal school would offer.

- **What does your competition offer?** What's pulling students away from your school? What do others nearby claim to offer? Take note of every asset your competition has—whether or not your school can match them.

- **What makes you most proud of your school?** What are the things you love telling people about your school? Some schools talk about their STEM program, personalization, or exceptional teachers. List every positive aspect of your school, from excellent resources to strong values.

Now, take a look at your lists. Which of your parents' wants do you provide that your competition doesn't? The intersection of what parents need and what your district uniquely offers is the sweet spot—**your core message**.

You barely have to glance at any of Ridgefield's materials to realize exactly what their core message is. Right at the top of their district's homepage, you can see their purpose statement:

"Ridgefield School District aspires to be the state's premier district, leveraging strong community partnerships to provide each student with personalized learning experiences, opportunities, and skills that ensure success and unlimited possibilities."

McCann and his team have crafted a clear core message. For parents who might be moving to Ridgefield (and there's a lot of them—it's the fastest growing city in Washington), the statement highlights Ridgefield's unique community connections. For those who might be tempted by the nearby 4A high school, it plays up the benefit of a smaller school's more personalized experience. They've figured out what the parents in their community want and offered unique solutions, all in just one sentence.

Because this narrative is the backbone of their brand, it's everywhere. "We watch the big brands, and they just constantly push their message," McCann says. "It's a lot of repetition."

So Ridgefield is learning from the best: they're repeating their message over and over again. They read their purpose statement before football games and board meetings, and even include it in the footer of district emails. A boiled-down version—simply "Pursuing Premier"—shows up in logos, on school walls and even on Twitter as a hashtag.

As a result, practically anyone in the community, even people who aren't directly involved with the district, can tell you exactly what Ridgefield's about. "If you ask somebody in the district, just a resident, about Pursuing Premier, they'll say, "That's the Ridgefield School District,'" McCann says.

4 Right now, I can't do a full refresh on our messaging. Is there anything I can do in the short term?

Even if you don't have the resources to launch a full-scale rebrand for your school, you should be telling positive stories that connect what students are experiencing to your value. By flooding your school communication channels with these stories, you can begin to change the public narrative surrounding your schools—and you can start right now.

Next time something makes you proud of your schools—an innovative teacher making waves in her classroom, faculty volunteering at a community event, or a marching band performing at halftime—whip out your phone, and snap a picture. Write one line that ties what you're seeing to your core message, and post the photo on your school's social media. Just like that, you've become a storyteller for your school.

Marketing doesn't have to be expensive and time-consuming; it can be simple, quick, and completely free. Just find the everyday moments that exemplify your school's identity, and share them with the community.

What you provide

CORE MESSAGE

Community needs

What others provide

Find the everyday moments that exemplify your school's identity, and share them with the community.

5 What's a marketing campaign?

If your school's overall marketing strategy is a TV series, a marketing campaign is an episode. It still fits inside the overall story—your core message—but it has its own structure and goals. More technically, a marketing campaign is a plan for how you will get a specific audience to complete a specific action in a specific time.

Marketing campaigns help build your brand, but more than that, they can help you accomplish defined school goals. They can encourage people to come to events, urge voters to pass a bond campaign, or even convince new families to enroll in your school. Each marketing campaign has four main components: **audience, messaging, communication, and conversion**.

Audience: Who do you want to influence?

Since your marketing campaign is helping your school toward a specific goal, you'll probably want to focus on a specific audience. For example, if you're trying to boost attendance at parent-teacher conferences, you'll target people who aren't usually coming.

As you'll see, this affects the way you frame your messaging. In the private sector, a shoe company trying to boost their sales among businessmen won't market their loafers as having "the best style and comfort." They'll choose a slogan more relevant to their target audience: "Make an impression in your next meeting." In defining your target audience, you'll learn their unique needs—which is key in crafting your messaging.

Messaging: Why should they listen to you?

You'll build the message of your marketing campaign pretty much the same way you crafted your core message. What are the specific needs of your target audience, and how does your school meet them? Your audience might want something concrete (like a new floor for the gym), or something more abstract—like peace of mind following a lockdown situation. In either case, outline how you'll provide for those needs.

Communication: How do you get your message to your audience?

Next, you have to decide which communication channels will best reach your target audience. For example, say you're trying to market your school's after-school programs to single parents. Since single parents typically have a harder time making it to school events, you might not want to use a parent-teacher conference to convey this information—you might choose an email or phone call instead.

Conversion: What specific action do you want your audience to take next?

Campaigns focus on a single goal. For your school, you might want your audience to fill out a form online, show up for an important conference, or vote yes on a bond measure. Good marketers figure out ways to make it easy for their audience to "convert," or meet the campaign's goal. For example, if you want your parents to fill out a form online, you might include a button linking to the form at the end of your weekly newsletter. Whatever your end goal, building the campaign around a single target action helps focus your efforts.

As Ridgefield entered the 2017-2018 school year, the district was growing—and trouble was brewing. With around 3,000 students enrolled, and 400 more expected the following year, every school in the district was over capacity. "The growth in Ridgefield created a lot of tensions," McCann explains. Teachers grew concerned about not just their salaries, but problems like growing class sizes and large caseloads for the special education program.

Those tensions finally came to a head in August 2017, when Ridgefield's teachers went on strike. Teachers and administrators found common ground in just three days, and went back to school almost immediately. But McCann knew the strike would cause concerns among parents and the surrounding community.

The strike's timing was also less than ideal. After just passing a bond in 2017, Ridgefield was already in the beginning stages of yet another bond campaign. "We knew it was going to be a heavy lift," McCann says. "We're asking voters for an awful lot in short periods of time."

What McCann and his communications team needed was a marketing campaign that would put worries to rest and persuade voters to push the bond measure through. They targeted people in the community—including parents—who were concerned that Ridgefield's growth was changing it for the worse. The message? "We wanted to remind people that while the growth has created a tremendous amount of tension throughout the community, a lot of great things are happening, and some of them are directly related to the new, great people moving into our community," McCann says.

Ridgefield isn't just growing, he explains. It's "Growing Together"—and Ridgefield School District is the epicenter of that community closeness. For their communication method, Ridgefield chose video. "We think people consume video more readily than print," McCann explains. The campaign's overall goal? To soothe the Ridgefield community's concerns—and convince them to vote yes on the bond measure.

6 Can I just hire someone to do this for me?

We get it—as a school leader, you have limited time and resources. By this point, you might be thinking this marketing thing is going to take more effort than you have time for. Can't you just hire a marketing professional to do all this for you?

Well... not really.

On the one hand, you do have to know your limits. If you don't have skills in photography, video production, or writing, you might need to hire people (or recruit students) who do to make sure you're pushing out high-quality content. You might even hire a consultant to help you shape the way you think about marketing.

But on the other hand, you can—and should—take ownership of your school's marketing strategy. As a principal, you know your community's needs, your school's unique benefits, and your goals better than any external entity could. You're uniquely positioned to lead your school's marketing efforts.

7 My teachers are the face of my school—how do I involve them in marketing?

You probably already realize the power teachers have to influence public opinion about your school. So how do you turn your teachers into brand ambassadors—informed, passionate champions for your school?

First, make sure you're sharing your core message with your staff. Just like your audience, your teachers can't buy into what they don't know. Conduct brand trainings to teach your staff how to talk (or Tweet) about your school. As your "boots on the ground," they need to be using the correct school colors, logos, and language in their materials just as much as the main office.

Remember: every time your parents and students interact with your school's brand, including their teachers, they should be taking away the same consistent messages.

But more than that, marketing can be a tool to show teachers they're valued, both inside and outside your organization. According to a survey from Career Builder, 65% of people who are dissatisfied in their jobs cite feeling unvalued as their reason for dissatisfaction. What's more, only four out of every ten teachers feel like their opinions count at work. Your employees won't engage other people with your school unless they feel engaged themselves.

Highlighting teachers in your marketing materials, whether on video or in print, reinforces their great work, building their credibility—not to mention the school's. Teachers become a part of the brand, giving them ownership over a section of your marketing. What's more, telling teachers' stories on their best days provides your community a window into the amazing job your staff is doing.

Not every teacher will become an impassioned brand ambassador, but with the right combination of information and engagement, they're much more likely to promote your brand in their personal lives.

Ridgefield Case Study

In resolving a three-day teacher strike, McCann came face-to-face with the issue of teacher engagement.

"If people don't see our teachers at work, they don't recognize how complex that work is," he says. "People understand that a doctor's work is complicated, but with teachers, they assume it's simple."

Upping the visibility of teachers became a focus of Ridgefield's marketing efforts. The district began offering patron tours, which allowed members of the community to visit campuses and see a school day firsthand. Teachers are also a major focal point of the "Growing Together" video campaign.

"We were very intentional early on to get voices of teachers, post-strike," McCann says. One video is a feature on Alan Adams, an art teacher who is also president of the teachers' union.

McCann says the extra focus—both internal and external—has "created an additional appreciation and respect for teachers." More than that, it has "unleashed them to go out and take some calculated risks" in their classrooms and beyond.

Across social media, you can see the effects. Just look up the #PursuingPremier hashtag and you'll see passionate teachers promoting the Ridgefield brand.

"If people don't see our teachers at work, they don't recognize how complex that work is. People understand that a doctor's work is complicated, but with teachers, they assume it's simple."

8 How can I get people to quit being mean on our Facebook page?

The truth is, you can't. Even if you're doing everything right, there will always be naysayers, and they'll always have a voice on social media.

So you have a few options. You could decide to leave social media completely. If you force your parents and community to get your school's information through your app and website, you completely control their experience with your brand. With this approach, you make your audience play by your rules. But people look for information about your brand on social media, and if you leave, you'll be creating a gap.

Of course, social media also has major perks, and as we'll mention later, we think multi-channel communication is the best approach. If you do choose to stay on social media, you have to decide how you'll deal with the negative comments you'll inevitably receive.

You may decide not to respond at all. That's a perfectly valid approach (and sometimes the best one). But if you do feel compelled to respond, here's what we recommend: take it offline. Invite the dissatisfied commenter to your office, or offer to pay them a visit. Give them the opportunity to have a one-on-one, private conversation about their problem. Maybe they'll take you up on your offer, maybe they won't— but you're showing them (and anyone else who might be watching) that you care about your community's concerns.

You know your school and community better than we do, so you know what the best approach for you will be. Just use your best judgment.

No matter what you choose, be sure to push out your school's positive stories, whether on social media or on your app and website. Drown out negativity with positivity.

9 How do I avoid sounding like I'm bragging?

Lots of educators feel uncomfortable with marketing; they feel like they're boasting. Many don't feel comfortable promoting their facilities or programs because they don't want to seem arrogant or condescending to other schools. But if you're like most administrators, you probably got into education in the first place because you care about the kids. Channel that priority into your marketing.

The reality is that the best private sector marketers aren't talking about their products. Instead, they're talking about their customers. They do this through storytelling.

Take Nike, for example. They don't focus their marketing on their new technology or designs—they tell the stories of great athletes doing great things, all while wearing the Nike logo. Coca-Cola rarely talks about their new flavors or pricing. Instead, they show friends and families building relationships, all while enjoying a Coke.

To avoid sounding braggadocious, introduce your audience to the students succeeding at your school. Let's say you want to highlight the way your STEM program gives students

access to coding classes, laboratories, and industry experts. Instead of saying, "Our chemistry labs and teaching staff can't be matched," focus on students. Talk about the program's impact. Tell a story.

When you frame your posts this way, you make the message about the student—in the context of your programs. Parents hear about the innovation in your school, and the community gets to know your students and faculty.

10 Are you sure I can do this?

Absolutely! Marketing professionals don't have any secret magic; they've just been in the business longer. They've learned over time how people consume information and how to impact their thinking.
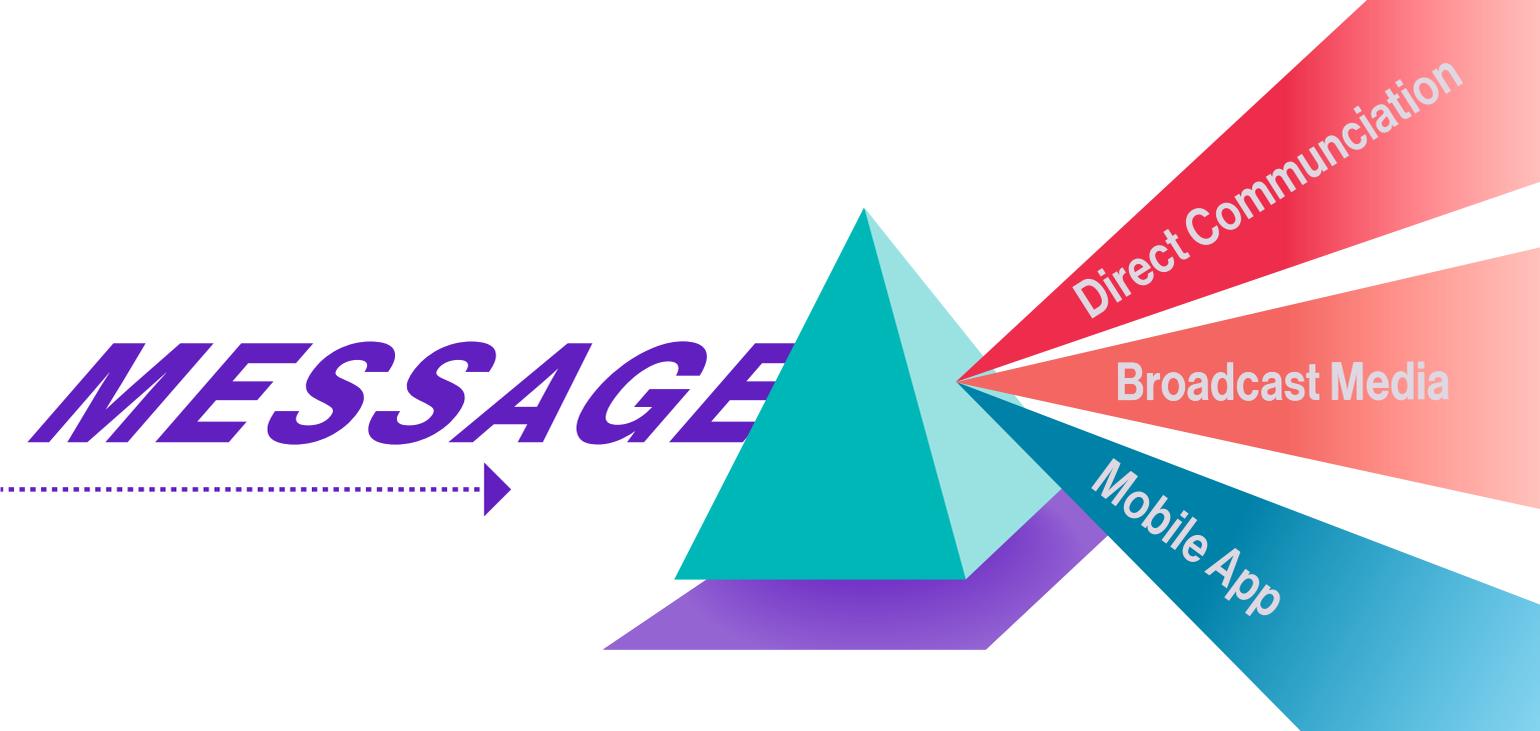
To keep getting better at marketing, be sure to use your resources. McCann, for example, reads books on social media and branding to expand his knowledge on the subject. Plus, we know this great magazine called SchoolCEO (if you want, you can subscribe at SchoolCEO.com).

And don't forget that other schools count as resources. Keep tabs on what other schools across the country are doing with marketing, and don't be afraid to steal any good ideas you come across.

"I'm always looking up what other schools will do," says McCann. "If we see a good idea somebody else is using, we will take that idea, make it Ridgefield, and we will use it."

The whole point of marketing is to stand out from the crowd, so you don't want to take ideas from your direct competition. But if you see a great video concept from a school from West Virginia, and you're in Colorado? Use it.

Here's the bottom line: marketing is a practice, a professional skill you can improve with experience. In the sections that follow, we'll help you keep growing your marketing skills, from school communication to social media.

MESSAGE

Direct Commuciation

Broadcast Media

Mobile App

School Communication: Where to Share

In 2019, your community—parents, faculty, staff and teachers—expects constant updates. With the answer to almost any question just a Google search away, they're used to finding information at the touch of a button. In short, technology has raised families' expectations for communication. And communication is no longer just handouts and phone calls; it's emails, text messages, school websites, Facebook, and Twitter—all at the same time.

The shift brings a growing pressure for your school to be always "on"—constantly accessible and available. Of course, staying up-to-date on a variety of channels is no small feat. But the alternative, picking one or two channels to spread updates about your school, means alienating families.

Private sector marketers have adapted to this change, learning how to best reach their customers on any and all channels they receive information. There's even a term for it: multi-channel communication.

What is Multi-Channel Communication

Principals often do a pretty good job engaging with parents and students at local events, school assemblies, and parent/teacher conferences. There, you're in your element—actually talking with the parents you serve and building relationships within the community. But when it comes to communicating outside of these events, school leaders run into some issues. Too often, school handouts get lost in student's backpacks, newsletters are misplaced, and information told by another parent can be quickly forgotten or worse, misconstrued.

When parents and community members are left out of the loop, they can feel disconnected from your school culture and feel like their voice isn't heard. Whether you're a school leader of 500 students or 10,000 students, effective school communication that reaches every parent is critical.

So the question is: How can school leaders reach parents outside of school events and include them in the school's culture? The solution is to inform parents and community members in multiple ways.
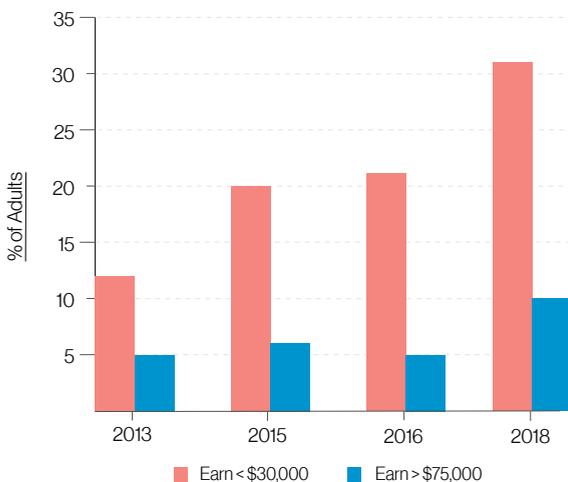
Multi-channel communication:

incorporating every communication tool available to send a message to a large audience

Multi-channel communication means incorporating every communication tool available to send a message to a large audience. For example, if you wanted to relay important information about test scores or an upcoming bond measure, you wouldn't just send a newsletter to inform parents. You would want to talk to them about it at a school assembly, call them, and post it on social media for them to see.

It's this use of multi-channel communication that allows a message to reach people in the way they prefer. By employing different avenues, you're able to effectively reach parents and community members with personal and meaningful communication.

% of U.S. adults that do not use broadband at home but own smartphones, by income

Data provided by Pew Research Center http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheet/mobile/

Reaching Every Parent

It's no secret that your multi-channel communication strategy should focus heavily on your community's mobile devices. According to a study done by the Pew Research Center in January 2018, 95% of American adults had a cell phone and 77% of adults had a smartphone. In fact, the 77% of American adults who own smartphones check them about 52 times a day—that's quadruple the time we spend on our desktop computers.

For low-income families in your school community, smartphones aren't just a preferred way to connect—they might be the only available option. From 2013 to 2018, reliance on smartphones rather than broadband increased from 12% to 31% for people with average incomes less than $30,000. Since they're more accessible, smartphones allow lower-income Americans to ditch the usual expenses that rise from buying a home computer, like having to purchase a router, modem, and an expensive broadband service. According to a 2017 study done by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, more households had a mobile data plan than wired broadband service. These same families often have trouble making it to school events due to odd work hours, and move around too often to be reliably reached through the mail—but through their phones, you can keep them in the loop.

By engaging with your parents—no matter their income status—through their cell phone or mobile device, you're able to tell them information quickly, keeping them informed about upcoming events, and connecting them to your school's culture.

Even narrowing it down to mobile communication, there multiple channels you can use to reach your parents and community members. Below, we listed out the pros and cons of popular school mobile communication tools.

Mobile School Communication Tools

School Text Alerts

What are they?
Short text messages that can be sent to both cellular and smart devices. Like call alerts, they are short, informative, and quickly received.

Pros:	**Cons:**
They can be sent out quickly, provide useful information, and be understood in less than 30 seconds.	If too many are received, parents could ignore them.

Push Notifications

What are they?
Short, informative message that pop up on any device with the mobile app downloaded.

Pros:	**Cons:**
As long as the app is downloaded, school leaders can inform parents about upcoming events, and they'll receive them whether or not they're using the app at the time.	Like all alerts, if you send out too many push notifications, there's a good chance your users will start ignoring them.

Probably the most polarizing communication tool in the 21st century is **social media**. Whether you hate it or love it, it's a **powerful** communication tool. The Pew Research Center reported that in 2018, 68% of American adults were on Facebook and 24% were on Twitter. But as we'll see in the next section, many school leaders aren't using these powerful tools to their fullest potential.

School Call Alerts

What are they?
Voice-recorded phone calls that can be sent to both landline and mobile phones. Messages are short, informative, and quickly received.

Pros:	**Cons:**
They can be sent quickly and can inform parents in less than 30 seconds, so they're useful in providing updates on emergency situations or school closings.	If too many call alerts are received about non-emergency situations, parents could ignore them.

School Mobile App

What is it?
A software application that can be downloaded from any smart device, like a smartphone or tablet.

Pros:	**Cons:**
It can help spread your school's culture, provide important information, and engage parents on their smartphones.	If the app has a bad user experience, isn't updated, and there is not a mobile strategy in place, your community members will not engage with it.

Responsive School Website

What is it?
A website that can be viewed on multiple devices, regardless of screen resolution (size of the device's screen).

Pros:	**Cons:**
Since responsive websites can be viewed on any device, parents who are engaged or interested in your school can learn more information with ease.	If your website isn't responsive, it can be time-consuming to fix the issue. Also, since it's compatible with different screen resolutions, it can take longer to load.

Social Media: The Disconnect

Apptegy researched the social media presence—or lack thereof—of 1,000 schools from across the country. We focused specifically on how each school used social media: where and when were they posting, and what were they saying?

We found a couple of major disconnects between marketing best practices—how private sector giants market themselves—and schools' social media.

Percentage of Districts on Each Platform

68% Facebook

53% Twitter

22% None

10% Instagram

Disconnect #1:
Schools don't show up.

Facebook

In our research, we found that approximately 32% of schools didn't have a Facebook page in 2017. When you consider that 75% of American adults — families, teachers, parents, and community members — are logging onto Facebook every day, it comes as a surprise that almost a third of schools aren't utilizing the most common social media platform.

Twitter

Schools use Twitter even less frequently than Facebook; only 53% of schools had a Twitter account. While Twitter has a smaller user base, it can be hugely important in shaping political and media narratives. In 2018, every member of the U.S. Senate and 98% of the House of Representatives had Twitter accounts. A survey from MuckRack, a journalism analytics company, showed that 70% of journalists actively use Twitter. When rolling out new policies, sharing press releases, and thanking community volunteers, Twitter becomes a high-value platform for professional communication.

Disconnect #2:
Schools aren't consistent.

The problem with the way most schools are using social media is a lack of consistency. The majority of schools aren't posting at all; many are sharing with seemingly little rhyme or reason; and a few are overwhelming their audience with minute-by-minute updates.
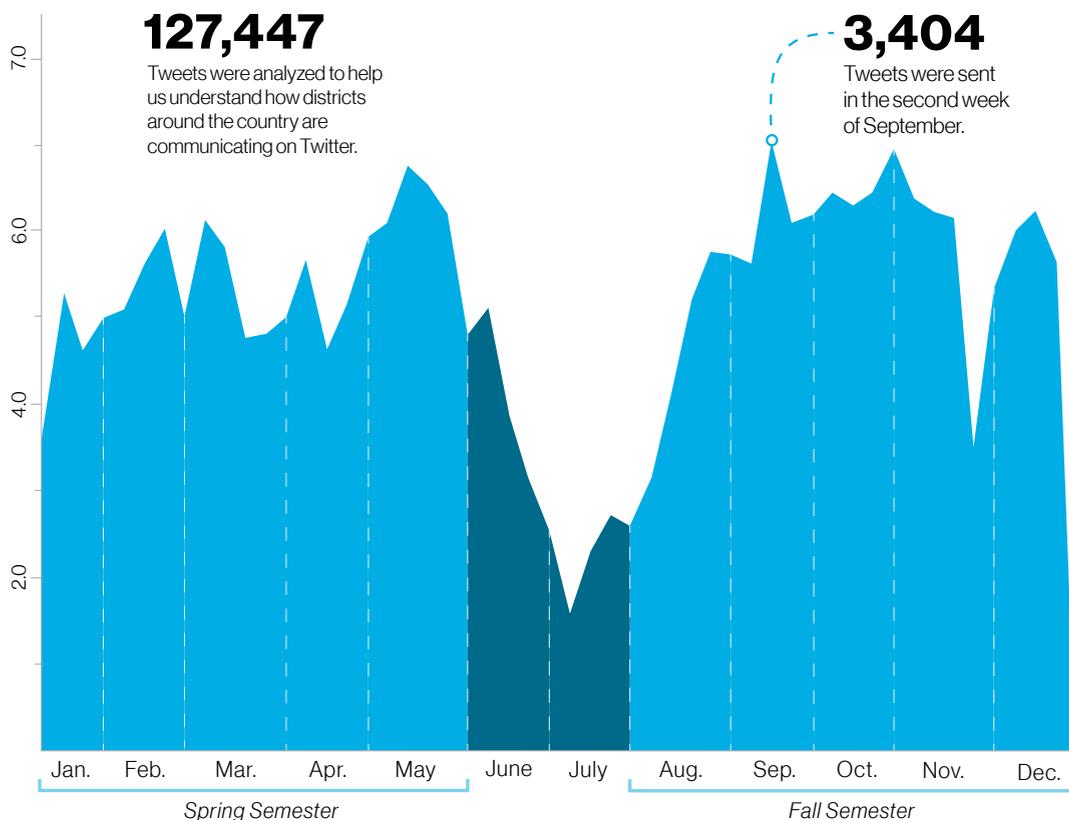
Instead of training customers to look to their social media for information, many school leaders act reactively to social media. They think that they have to bend to the world. The reality is that you can bend the world to you by consistently sharing information that's relevant to your followers through the channels where you feel the most in control.

To see if school districts were being consistent, we looked at school districts that had a Twitter and the usage rate of each account. The overwhelming majority—59% of school districts—had no usage on their Twitter. Additionally, 33%

underused the tool, 8% had proper use, and less than 1% overused the tool.

We also found that schools' Twitter usage corresponds directly with the school year. Districts begin the year full of energy, take a break from posting around Thanksgiving, post sporadically during the spring, and ignore their Twitter page during summer break.

It makes sense that schools would post less when students aren't on campus, but unfortunately, summer break is prime time for parents to decide where to enroll their child the following school year. Schools need to find a way to maintain their social presence year-round. This can be as simple as saving certain photos and stories to post in the future, creating a bank of posts available throughout the year.

127,447
Tweets were analyzed to help us understand how districts around the country are communicating on Twitter.

3,404
Tweets were sent in the second week of September.

Jan. Feb. Mar. Apr. May June July Aug. Sep. Oct. Nov. Dec.

Spring Semester   *Fall Semester*

Disconnect #3:
Schools miss opportunities to build their brands.

In the private sector, every post is crafted to spread the company's brand. Think of Nike — each photo or poster is paired with #justdoit. When schools are posting, on the other hand, they're not doing it in a way that spreads their messaging.

To better understand schools' social usage, we again looked to Twitter. We reviewed the posts of 1,000 school districts across the country. After downloading 127,447 Tweets from 2017, we pulled out a sample set and then coded each Tweet by category.

In some ways, the results are encouraging. When we coded the Tweets to find positive posts (stories of student achievement, event invitations, and congratulatory messages), neutral posts (administrative updates), and negative posts (posts responding to a negative event or engaging in confrontation), we found that 78% of the posts were positive.

For example, let's say your school's core message is "learning through grit." An unbranded story would be, "100% of students in Mr. Steven's AP biology classes scored a 4 or 5 on the AP test this year. Congrats!" A branded Tweet would be, "100% of students in Mr. Steven's AP biology classes scored a 4 or 5 on the AP test this year. This is how Cougars learn through grit."

That last part, "Cougars learn through grit," shares the school's messaging, which ultimately communicates the ways in which the district is unique. The biggest goal of any branding campaign is to differentiate your product. By linking student stories to the school's brand, your audience gets a clear picture of the unique experience of attending your school. Remember — if you want social media to make an impact, it's critical to write posts that tie your school to the core message you're hoping to impress upon your community.

Number of Tweets by Sentiment

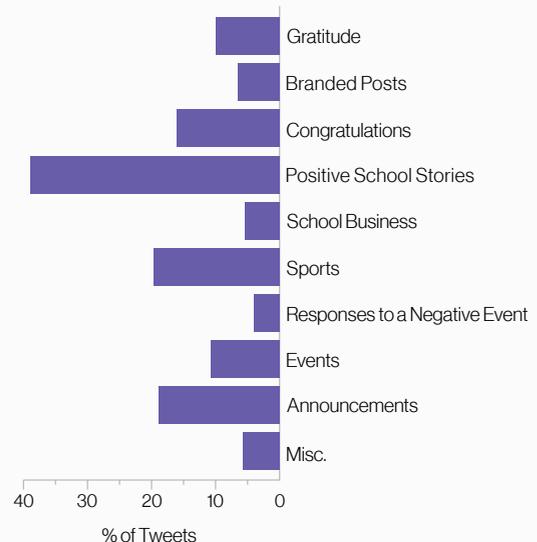**78%** Positive   **19%** Neutral   **3%** Negative

We further broke the Tweets down into categories based on similar themes. The largest category of posts were stories of the great things happening in each school, which is an excellent use of the platform. It's clear that schools see the power of sharing student stories.

However, we see that schools aren't being strategic about linking stories to the school's brand. We found that only 6.5% of the Tweets linked to a statement about the school's messaging.

Tweets by Content Category

Gratitude
Branded Posts
Congratulations
Positive School Stories
School Business
Sports
Responses to a Negative Event
Events
Announcements
Misc.

% of Tweets
40   30   20   10   0

Stealing Marketing Ideas from the Private Sector

Social media has changed the way people consume information. People choose products partially based off of the company's reputation online, making social platforms valuable tools in sales and marketing. The platforms provide companies the ability to connect with their audience in ways that were impossible twenty years ago; the fact that marketers have tracked their audiences onto the platforms is no surprise. As a result, many small companies have grown exponentially in the past decade by figuring out the mechanics of marketing online.

Let's take a look at what strategies schools can steal from these companies that will drive results in your school's marketing practice.

#1 Tell small stories that support your larger story

Airbnb is rethinking travel. The company has grown at a breakneck pace, bringing its value to over $31 billion today. One of their strongest marketing strategies is to share many small stories that build up a larger narrative about adventure and excitement.

Instead of posting about value, security, and special offers, they post about people trying things for the first time, forging friendships, and witnessing incredible views. When their audience continuously sees these stories, it strengthens their overall narrative of their brand: Airbnb is an affordable way to find adventure, connections, and experiences.

People respond well to personal stories. The more specific details you can share, the better.

There's no mention of an apartment to rent here. It's all about adventure.

The image focuses on people in action, not just the place itself.

> **Airbnb** ✓
> @Airbnb
> [Follow]
>
> When learning the ancient and forgotten art of effigy making from Chwee Lian, you're also helping to preserve her family's 120-year-old legacy.
>
> Find more #AirbnbExperiences that can teach you about the past: abnb.co/ndep4
>
> 11:14 AM · 11 Oct 2018
>
> 3 Retweets 12 Likes
>
> ♡ 1   ⟲ 3   ♡ 12

> **Airbnb** ✓
> @Airbnb
> [Follow]
>
> The canals of Amsterdam are best discovered on a boat with Robby and his endless supply of interesting facts, Dutch cheeses and lighthearted humor.
>
> 5:28 PM · 6 Sep 2018 from Amsterdam, The Netherlands
>
> 10 Retweets 81 Likes
>
> ♡ 2   ⟲ 10   ♡ 81

The detail about a "120 year-old legacy" plays into the idea of unique, rare experiences.

Multiple photos allows for a richer experience of an event.

For schools:
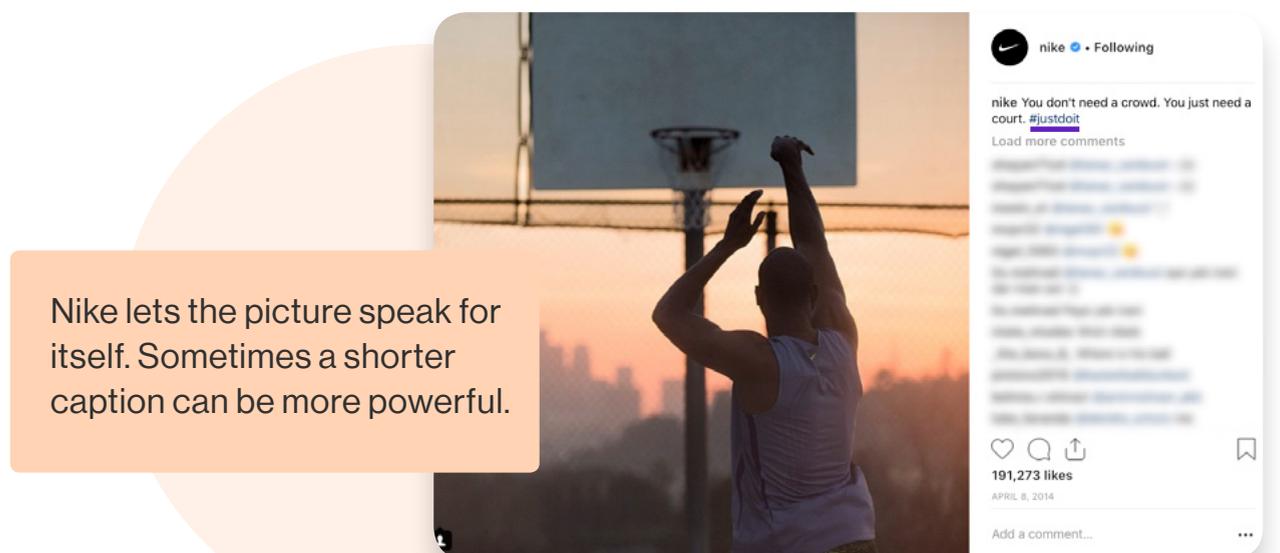
1 | Repeatedly share small, personal stories that relate to a larger narrative about what makes your school special.

2 | Keep sharing new content with the same core message.

3 | Use action images as a storytelling tool.

#2 Repeat yourself again and again

Nike uses their tagline, #justdoit, in post after post to drive home their branding. Companies in the private sector understand that getting your message across means repeating yourself again and again.

Each post is an opportunity to paint the company's vision. Nike attaches the same messaging, #justdoit, to inspiring athletes' stories, keeping their content fresh while maintaining their brand. Depending on the sports season, Nike shares updates about different athletes' games and races as they correspond with the company's messaging. Nike crafts posts that are meant to inspire, which fits into their branding narrative. The company inspires athletes to dream big, then provides them with the technology to meet those goals.

Nike lets the picture speak for itself. Sometimes a shorter caption can be more powerful.

Nike ✔ @Nike · 6 May 2017
Replying to @Nike
Eliud Kipchoge - 2:00:25
The barrier just got that much closer. #Breaking2 #JustDoIt

Eliud Kipchoge

💬 107   🔁 2.7K   ♡ 6.1K   ✉

Nike tells longer stories over time by posting about different races, letting the audience get to know their athletes.

nike ✔ · Following
London, United Kingdom

nike They wanted to measure London in minutes, miles and medals. All you wanted was to run a beautiful race.

Congrats, @kipchogeeliud. You did. #justdoit

Load more comments

479,756 likes
APRIL 22

Breaking stories into pieces makes athletes' victories more exciting.

For schools:

- Only a fraction of your audience will see each post, so repeat yourself to spread the message to every user.

- Continually link each post to the school's vision; Nike accomplishes this goal with #justdoit.

- Just as Nike shares stories about different sports, post student stories from a diversity of interests, relating those stories back to your school's values.

#3 Spotlight staff

Google frequently shares thought pieces from executive staff members. Each post focuses on something the "Googler" specializes in, allowing the staffer to put their best foot forward on social platforms. In turn, the company gains credibility in association with their staff member's knowledge. Oftentimes their posts will be shared across social platforms, even contributing to larger conversations on the topic. Allowing employees to share their expertise is a small way to highlight their excellence, improving employee engagement.

Google
October 11 at 8:36 PM · 🌐

"In the end, they learn about an algorithm of success: courage, creativity, coding and collaboration."

A Q&A with Komal Singh, a Googler who created the children's book #AraTheStarEngineer after her daughter said "engineers are boys" → goo.gl/ysPZ7j #DayoftheGirl

467   55 Comments 64 Shares

Spotlighting staff members' outside interests builds a culture that celebrates learning.

Let your audience get to know the team.

Google ✓
@Google   Follow ⌄

🦻 that? VP of Engineering Scott Huffman shares five things we've learned about voice technology since we introduced the #GoogleAssistant nearly two years ago → goo.gl/AkCmyM

📌 Save

1:23 PM - 22 Aug 2018

Build up your school's reputation by highlighting employees' accomplishments.

Google ✓
@Google

Follow ⌄

"We need to take a different approach to computer security that doesn't feel like playing whack-o-mole."

Chrome Director of Engineering @laparisa shares her optimistic dissatisfaction with the status quo of security → goo.gl/kEFQ49

12:00 PM - 12 Sep 2018

Portrait photos put a face to your brand.

Celebrating an employee's talent can boost moral.

For schools:

1. Get to know your team's passions and interests, or identify elements of their classroom that are truly exceptional.

2. Give your team a platform to share their expertise, like creating a schedule for blog posts.

3. Include a headshot that highlights their personality, putting a face to their name.

#4 Redirect to a private channel

To avoid a messy argument, most companies publicly provide users with the option to address the issue on a private platform. Apple is a great example; they generally request that customers send them a direct message on Twitter; it's one of their most consistent customer service tactics.

While this works well for large companies, a superintendent that we spoke to in Illinois emphasized the importance of getting people into your office. People are willing to say all kinds of horrible things online that they would not mention in person. Speaking face-to-face can deescalate the situation by humanizing both parties.
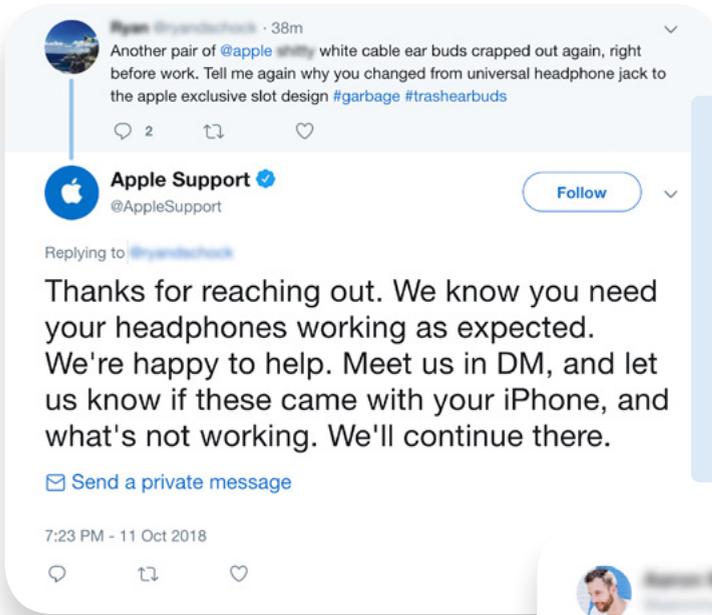
> Apple moves an angry conversation to a private direct message (DM).

> They politely ask for a rational explanation to an emotional post.

> Apple keeps the tone light while focusing on a solution.

> Repeating the user's concerns shows that they were heard.

> **Ryan** @ryandschock · 38m
> Another pair of @apple ~~shitty~~ white cable ear buds crapped out again, right before work. Tell me again why you changed from universal headphone jack to the apple exclusive slot design #garbage #trashearbuds
>
> 💬 2   🔁   ♡

> **Apple Support** ✓ @AppleSupport   [Follow]
>
> Replying to @ryandschock
>
> Thanks for reaching out. We know you need your headphones working as expected. We're happy to help. Meet us in DM, and let us know if these came with your iPhone, and what's not working. We'll continue there.
>
> ✉ Send a private message
>
> 7:23 PM - 11 Oct 2018
>
> 💬   🔁   ♡

Studies show that when people get angry at a company, they have a stronger connection to the company if the issue is properly resolved than if they had no issue at all.

Apple responds to a passive aggressive post with an earnest offer to help.

The user's frustration stems from feeling powerless, so they give them something to do.
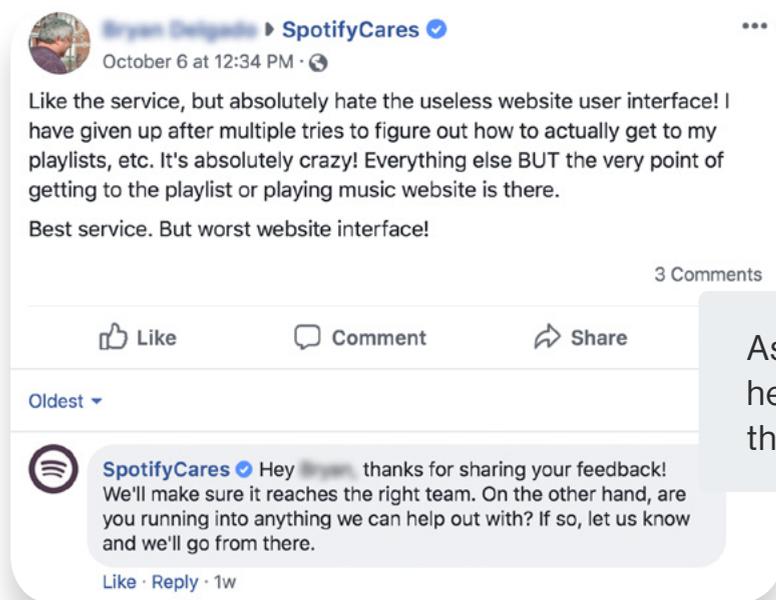
> **Aaron Woods** @aaronwoods   [Follow]
>
> Just setup a new iPhone. The majority of my messages are missing. There's no indication as to whether they are still downloading, or if something has gone wrong. I'm unsure as to how a billion dollar company hasn't yet solved syncing for their most popular service. cc @Apple
>
> 6:51 PM - 11 Oct 2018
>
> 💬 1   🔁   ♡   ✉

> **Apple Support** ✓ @AppleSupport · 12h
> Replying to @aaronwoods
> We'd love to help! Are you connected to Wi-Fi? Are you able to see the missing messages on iCloud on the website apple.co/1U2npx0? DM us to let us know, and we'll continue there.
>
> ✉ Send a private message
>
> 💬   🔁   ♡   ✉

For schools:

1 | Avoid addressing the user's issue in the comment field or in public messages.

2 | Provide users with all of the information they need to move the conversation into a private forum.

3 | Get them on the phone or in your office to address concerns.

#5 Respond quickly, with empathy

When users become upset on social media, it's easy for them to forget that they're interacting with human beings instead of a computer screen. Because of this phenomenon, anonymous users are somewhat dehumanized. Responding to a concern with empathy, however, shows the customer that you care. A word of understanding can stifle frustration in understanding customers.
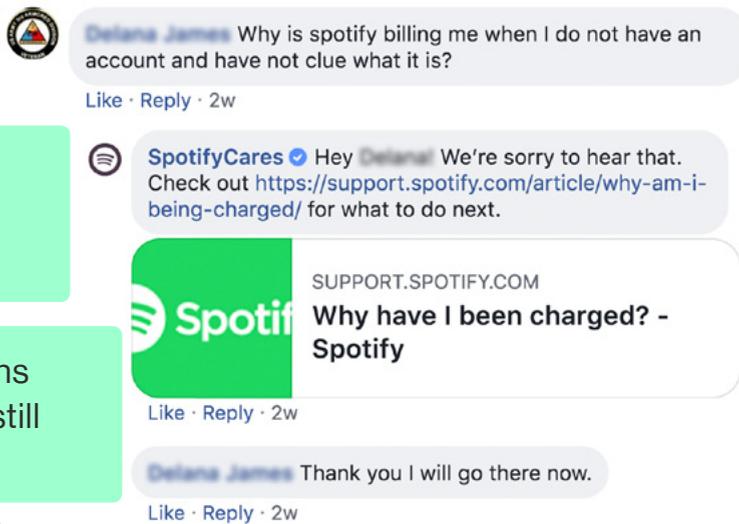
Spotify is known for their online customer service; the company doesn't even own a call line to address customers' complaints. Instead, they address concerns with SpotifyCares. SpotifyCares is a model public relations page. The group consistently takes the time to listen to their customers, addressing issues from the customer's perspective in order to find the most thoughtful course of action.

Asking for more ways to help out makes it hard for the user to stay angry.

When mistakes are made, apologizing quickly can defuse the situation.

Spotify's greeting contains less than ten words and still communicates empathy.

I NEED HELP FIXING MY STUPID ACCOUNT AND CANT FIND ANY HELP!

Like · Reply · 3w

SpotifyCares ✓ Hey ████, the calvary's arrived! Can you send us a private message with your account's email address? We'll check on a few things backstage https://www.facebook.com/help/142031279233975.

FACEBOOK HELP CENTER
How do I send a priva
message to a Page?

Like · Reply · 3w

Humor is another way to break tension and humanize the brand.

Spotify treats every concern as though it were highly important, showing empathy for the customer's needs.

I really want spotify app badly but this app is not available on my country INDIA so I'm not able to install from play store PLS HELP ME

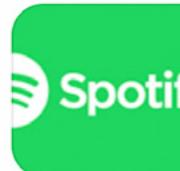Like · Reply · 4w

SpotifyCares ✓ Hey ████ While we haven't made it to India yet, we're launching regularly in countries around the world. Sign up here to be first to hear: http://spotify.com/why-not-available. Let us know if you have any other questions.

SPOTIFY.COM
Music for everyone.

Like · Reply · 4w

Even if Spotify can't solve the issue, they still provide the user with a way to move forward.

Responding to suggestions rewards users who are engaging with your brand.
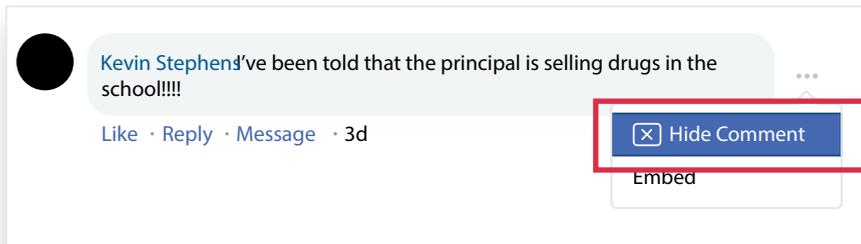
For schools:

1 | Respond quickly and politely to respectful concerns.

2 | Show empathy to users' complaints.

3 | Emphasize that you care about helping them.
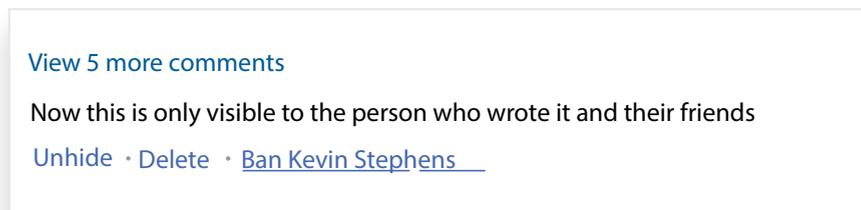
#6 Know when to hide, block, or report

Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter all give page administrators the power to manage malicious or dishonest comments on posts. When people see your page, they can also see the comments on every post, so tactically using these techniques will improve your brand image. Marketers in the private sector are quick to remove posts that are not constructive to the conversation.

Be advised that overusing these tools can make it seem like you are censoring your audience. We recommend only using them only when someone is intentionally malicious or dishonest. Responding to respectful criticism lets your audience see answers to questions they may have for themselves, similar to the way that Spotify responds to their customers' concerns.
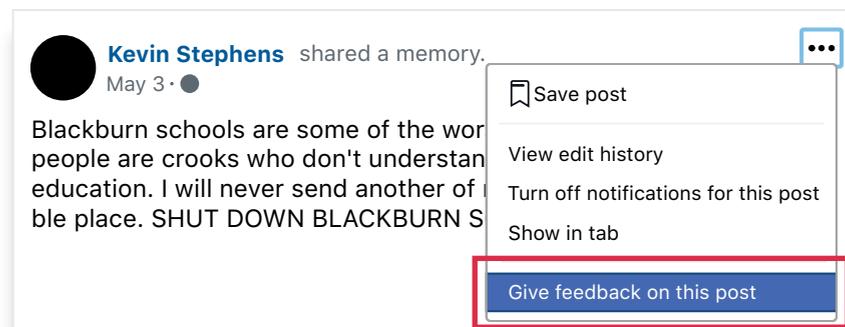
Facebook

Kevin Stephens I've been told that the principal is selling drugs in the school!!!!

Like · Reply · Message · 3d

[×] Hide Comment

Embed

Hide comments on your own posts.

View 5 more comments

Now this is only visible to the person who wrote it and their friends

Unhide · Delete · Ban Kevin Stephens

You can choose to block a user, after you hide their comment.

Kevin Stephens shared a memory.
May 3 · ●

Blackburn schools are some of the wor
people are crooks who don't understan
education. I will never send another of
ble place. SHUT DOWN BLACKBURN S

🔖 Save post

View edit history

Turn off notifications for this post

Show in tab

Give feedback on this post

Report posts that mention your page.

Twitter

John Simpson @JtheSimpson · Oct 25

I would like to punch Mrs. April in the Face!

5

Copy link to Tweet
Embed Tweet
Mute @JtheSimpson
Block @JtheSimpson

Block the user from seeing your page.

John Simpson
@JtheSimpson

Following

I would like to punch Mrs. April in the Face!

5 Likes

5

Copy link to Tweet
Embed Tweet
Mute @JtheSimpson
Mute this conversation
Block @JtheSimpson
Report Tweet

Report malicious tweets.

Instagram

I Hate Mr. Warton, worst coach!

You can swipe left on any comment on an Instagram post and delete or report the comment.

User guidelines

Given the news about widespread abuse on social networks, each platform has released a detailed user guide on what types of posts are not allowed. Anyone running a school website should read through these guidelines:

Facebook: www.facebook.com/policies

Twitter: https://help.twitter.com/en/ rules-and-policies/twitter-rules

Instagram: (we suggest searching "Instagram Community Guidelines) https://help.instagram. com/477434105621119/