

What is Marketing, Anyway?

Ten questions about marketing school leaders might be too embarrassed to ask



CAMPAIGNS

MESSAGING

**SOCIAL
MEDIA**

BRANDING

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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 magazine, it means you recognize the need for schools to market themselves.

Before you can get started with marketing, it's worth your time to ask: if I'm not a company in the private sector, what is marketing, anyway? In this article 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.

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 district is part of the district brand. But in a broader sense, brand is your district's reputation. The status of your brand is the way people currently think and feel about your schools.

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 schools from others in the area. When the community hears your district's name, you want them to feel something positive and unique, something distinct from the way every other school or district makes them feel.

From speaking to school leaders, we know a great reputation means more than warm fuzzies—it can make or break a community's support for the school. It determines your school's potential for financial support, your ability to attract high-quality talent, and even a student's confidence in their own education. But how do you build that reputation—your brand? The answer is marketing.

DAILY DOUBLE

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

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 district 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 district's brand. They're all opportunities for marketing.

Each impression you make should leave your community with a sense of what your schools are all about. This means that to market your district 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."

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 district'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 district 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 district 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 district? What do other districts claim to offer? Take note of every asset your competition has—whether or not your schools can match them.
- **What makes you most proud of your schools?** What are the things you love telling people about your district? Some districts talk about their STEM programs, personalization, or exceptional teachers. List every positive aspect of your district, 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.

Ridgefield Case Study

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 district, you should be **telling positive stories** that connect what students are experiencing to the value of your schools. 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 district's core message, and post the photo on your district's social media. Just like that, you've become a storyteller for your district.

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.



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5 What's a marketing campaign?

If your district'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 district 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 schools.

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 district 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.

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 district'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. In your district, 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.

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 district meet them? Your audience might want something concrete (like new sports facilities), or something more abstract—like peace of mind following a teacher strike. In either case, outline how you'll provide for those needs.

Ridgefield Case Study

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 district’s marketing strategy. As a school leader, you know your community’s needs, your district’s unique benefits, and your schools’ goals better than any external entity could. You’re uniquely positioned to lead your district’s marketing efforts.

7 My teachers are the face of my district—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 district?

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 district. 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 district office. Remember: every time your parents and students interact with your district’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 undervalued 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 district 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 district'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 provide 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 district'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 in general, 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 district 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 district'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 districts. But if you're like most school leaders, 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 in your district. 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 district, 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 another district 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 Twitter chat theme 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. Keep practicing, keep distilling your message, and above all, keep telling your stories.

You'll be a pro in no time.