

Your school brand



Are you proud of your school? Do your students feel proud to belong to it? How about their parents? And your staff?

There is, of course, always room for improvement. But that would be slightly missing the point, because pride is based on perceptions and perceptions take precedence over facts when determining the appeal of any branded product or service. Your school's brand is shaped by the distinct identity of your establishment and the promise it represents in the minds of its audiences—against which the experience must, ultimately, deliver. So, whenever the name of your school is mentioned the immediate feelings and associations it triggers in the minds of audiences are the most telling indicators of its 'brand' appeal.

Now, if we were discussing perceptions of a product chosen in a supermarket, rather than via a prospectus, it would go without saying that the brand promise would be readily accepted as a vital, even essential, component of the marketing proposition. With a school, however, we are more inclined to focus our efforts elsewhere.

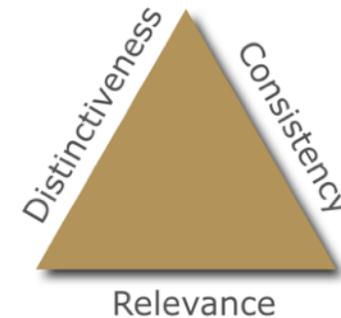
But brand values matter very much for schools. In the UK, if your school were Harrow, Sherborne or Dulwich, for example, you might well be feeling rather proud, as would your staff, students, alumni and parents because these are known to be among the most admired school brands. In fact so strong are these schools' brand reputations they have travelled far beyond the UK and all three have been able to capitalise on them by opening franchises overseas:

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Harrow in Bangkok and Hong Kong; Sherborne in Qatar; Dulwich in Beijing, Shanghai and Suzhou. In every case, however good the school may be (and all will, inevitably, have room for improvement), it is the strength of their distinctive brand reputation and promise that convinces parents to pay a premium and which confers pride on the staff and pupils.

Perhaps you imagine that a prestigious school with an illustrious history and years, even centuries, to build their image is an unfair comparison? You may be right, however, there are plenty of old schools with little appeal and many young ones with plenty. So what is the secret to developing a brand to be proud of?

All successful and enduring brands tend to have three defining qualities. They are to be:



Distinctive

What truly sets our school apart from any other (maybe it relates to heritage, facilities, specialties, culture, ethos, etc.)? Have you tested and quantified this? To what extent does your distinctiveness differentiate you from other schools in the minds of the audience groups we discussed earlier?

A lack of distinctiveness results in a blurred image in people's minds and, like a supermarket own-brand toothpaste, you risk becoming little more than the default choice of the indifferent rather than the considered choice of the discerning.



Relevant

To what extent is your school aligned with the expectations and aspirations of its audiences (subjects offered, extra-curricular activities, support for single parents, IT skills, cultural sensibilities/strictures, etc.)? How does your school compare with others in this regard? How well are you responding to whatever is happening in the marketplace to ensure that it remains relevant to future generations? A lack of relevance will deposition your school as a viable choice and result in disaffected students and parents. Irrelevance can also creep up on you—it's a bit like continuing to stock an aisle of CDs after your customers have moved-on to streaming their music on Spotify.

Consistent

How much attention do you pay to ensuring that everything your school says and does is consistent and recognisable? Do you monitor everything, from website and newsletters to staff meetings and noticeboards and correct them if they are not fully in tune with your brand values and characteristics? Are your messages consistent with your actions?

Inconsistency can, at best, diffuse your best efforts to be distinctive and relevant and, at worst, make you look incoherent or disorganised.

Apart from trying to assess the degree of pride you feel, how can you find out how strong your school's brand appeal is and would should you do about it when you have?

Define your aspirations

Start by determining your assessment criteria and then set your own target aspirations for each. These might include the level of satisfaction with, say, the scope of subjects offered, exam results, staff-to-student ratios, sports facilities, school culture or quality of pastoral care. You probably already have a pretty good idea where your relative strengths currently lie and which factors have the greatest need for improvement—they may even be noted in your school development plan.

“Describe your perfect school... what would have to change here to realise that ideal... what do you think would be the three biggest obstacles to our achieving this”



Assess your current reality

To research the impressions that live in the minds of each audience group you should consider using online questionnaires for the larger groups with moderated discussion groups and depth interviews for smaller ones—where deft interviewing can reveal the reasons behind the judgements. Use open questioning to unearth the deeper-seated insights that usually elude typical questionnaire, e.g. “describe your perfect school... what would have to change here to realise that ideal... what do you think would be the three biggest obstacles to our achieving this?”

Perform a gap analysis

Eventually, you will be able to compare two sets of criteria—the aspirations laid down in your future strategy or school development plan versus your current standing against these criteria. A straightforward gap analysis will enable you to bridge the two and set your future priorities.

We have, for the sake of this analysis, circumvented some pretty major imponderables like budget availability, management inertia and political constraints. Our experience in working with very different schools in the UK education sector, however, would indicate that the more you can involve all key stakeholders in the journey towards brand understanding the better the chances of success when it comes to proposing change.

So what are you waiting for?

‘Carpe diem’ (as they might say in Harrow).

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Qatar; Dulwich in Beijing, Shanghai and Suzhou. In every case though, however good the school may be (and all will, inevitably, have room for improvement), it is the strength of their distinctive brand reputation and promise that convinces parents to pay a premium and which confers pride on the staff and pupils.

Perhaps you imagine that a prestigious school with an illustrious history and years, even centuries, to build their image is an unfair comparison to the younger Australian marketplace? You may be right, however, there are plenty of old schools with little appeal and many young ones with plenty. So, what is the secret to developing a brand to be proud of?



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He lectures in marketing and business strategy, holds an MA in International Marketing, is a Chartered Marketer and Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Marketing.

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