

HOW TO SUCCESSFULLY PROMOTE YOUR SCHOOL – MY 10-POINT PLAN

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As Principal or Deputy Principal of a school, one of the issues consistently in mind is maintaining the community's perception of the school as one that has excellent teaching and learning but also caters for the holistic development of our students. Every school comes from a unique place, in regard to their local setting, some are in competition for places year on year and others don't have as much pressure for enrolment. Whatever your school's situation, it is important to portray the good work done in our schools to the wider community. After completing a Diploma in Public Relations, the following is some simple advice I would recommend for successfully promoting a school.



01 DEVELOP A SOLID SCHOOL POLICY

In this age of increased emphasis on privacy, child and data protection, it is really important to have a solid consent policy in place before you consider sharing promotional messages about the school online or in other forms of media. Consent

needs to be obtained from parents on admission to the school to share their child's photo or information on social media. There are many areas involved in PR of a school from policy to social media therefore it is best practice to set up a PR Committee/Team that will meet regularly to review, plan and organise steps to promote the school. My advice is to ask for volunteers that have an interest in this area to come on board and schedule regular meetings.

02 CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT STUDENTS CAN BE PROUD OF

Once the policy is taken care of, first and foremost, concentrate on the school environment. Pupils are by far the best and most frequent promoters of developments in their own school. Whether there are 300 or 1000 pupils in the school, each one of them go home daily to their parents and are asked by their extended family and the wider community how school is going and what is it like to attend your school? As we all know, people talk at the local GAA pitch or the local Foróige club and share stories. If the student is happy in school that will be portrayed into the local community. If we can get this right, then we are on our way! Simple things like recognition for achievements

big or small and the personal word on the corridor about their accomplishments, makes students feel valued. The majority of students like to have pride in their school, while they may give out about rules and regulations, they take pride in their uniform and representing their school. It is our job to instil this pride in the students and give them a school they can be proud of. Whether that's students going back to their national school to tell them about their school experience or leading in the student council where their voice is heard, the power of student leadership initiatives cannot be underestimated.

03

THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT – MAKE IT A PLACE WHERE STUDENTS ENJOY SPENDING TIME

Having a physical school environment that students enjoy spending time in is also important. All schools vary on their premises, some have a recently constructed building while others have students wandering through their corridors for many years. Whatever the status of your school building ensure it's a warm inviting place for students to spend time in. Having comfortable seating, designated areas, the use of colour and student recognition on the corridors all contributes to students being proud of their school and wanting to spend time there. Why not make the students part of the artwork or design giving them leadership roles to complete in designated areas? Get feedback from the student council on areas in need of improvement or ideas for development.

04

SOCIAL MEDIA – KEEP UP WITH CURRENT TRENDS

While there is much discussion about the impact that social media has on young people as individuals, it undoubtedly has a powerful effect when it comes to positively portraying a school. The use of Twitter, Facebook and Instagram can rapidly spread positive news about the school. Social media is everchanging, so we as school leaders must keep up with the current trends. Instagram seems to be most popular with students at the moment, while Twitter and Facebook seem to be the choice of more mature followers! While it is important to have control over the content put up on these sites it can be a huge task to keep on top of it all. My advice is to involve staff members that have a keen interest in social media to share the workload and encourage distributed leadership, while keeping an eye on the content.

05

SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS – VARIED AND VISUAL

In terms of content, ensure you share a variety of posts from teaching and learning innovations to recognition of pupil achievements. Posts with a picture/short video get a lot more attention than a post with just descriptive text. I find Facebook particularly effective as once posted, granny, grandad, mum or dad can be tagged, and the post is generally posted to their page creating a wider audience. My niece is 5 and I tagged her mum, my sister, in her pre-school photos saying how cute she was so I am the living proof of the PR potential of a proud aunty on social media!!! Taking short 1-2-minute videos of the school musical or choir performance can result in thousands of views depending on who shares it. Most local radio stations and newspapers are on these social sites and will also become regular sharers once you regularly submit items. It is hard to keep track of every achievement or out of school engagement a student is part of, therefore encourage parents to submit information in an easy to access forum outlining what their child has been involved in outside of school time.

06

BUILD RELATIONSHIP WITH FEEDER SCHOOLS

As school leader, it is imperative that we have strong relationships with our feeder national schools to ensure future generations entering our schools have a positive view of the school and are familiar with the great work being done. Regular visits to the national school, communication, and invitations to events such as matinee of school musical or Christmas carol service will involve younger generations. Devise a module such as safe internet use, anti-bullying, or transition to secondary school, train the transition years on how to deliver it and ask them to deliver it in the local national schools. Regular competitions such as a 6th class football tournament or a cookery competition can raise interest in the school and encourage contact with the school that ordinarily would not happen. Parents of national school children should also be invited to school mental health/parenting talks to build strong relationships with the national school community. A lot of schools focus on organising a polished open night, but it is far more impactful if it is building on existing communication with the national school and families that you are trying to reach. Asking the national school to share your school's news and updates on their own website or by their communication method to parents is essential.

07**MAKE SCHOOL WEBSITE INFORMATIVE AND WELCOMING**

The first point of contact that a parent has with a school as a prospective education centre for their child is often the school website. Ensure that it is inviting and informative to parents. Parents vary in what they want from a school so a broad range of issues should be portrayed – Special Educational Needs, Extra Curricular, Teaching & Learning etc. Ensure that it is not text heavy and includes lots of visuals such as pictures and videos. Call on a parent that is interested in photography to come to the school for a morning to take some specialised photographs. Ensure the website connects to social media to portray up to date information and bulletins. For follow up and to encourage engagements, provide contact points for staff members assigned to relevant areas such as year head, pastoral care etc. Interactive areas asking for parents/student's views through questionnaires and reviews not only attracts interest to the page but is also useful for School Self Evaluation (SSE).

08**CREATE A RAPPORT WITH THE LOCAL MEDIA**

It is important to have a good relationship with local media. Simply start by introducing yourself to the local paper and radio station and ask for a point of contact so you have the correct person to submit interesting items to. The relationship between the school and the paper is symbiotic as the school wants to be profiled in the paper, while the paper will be assured of sales if numerous families feature in it. Do not be afraid to ask for a yearly page, timed a few weeks before open night showcasing all that the school has to offer, followed a few weeks later by the open night advertisement. Newspaper articles and airtime on local radios rarely happen by chance so put your modesty away and ask for some time and space to cover developments/achievements in the school. I always think a thank you card at the end of the year or at Christmas goes a long way to recognising help and co-operation from local media.

09**HAVE A COPING STRATEGY FOR NEGATIVE COMMENTS**

Social media can be a friend or enemy, so it is important to focus on what to do if negative comments are placed on items that are posted. The number one rule is not to engage in written heated exchanges online. If there is an issue, I would advise contacting the parent privately to explain that you would like to discuss it with them face to face or over the phone. If it is a stranger to the school community that creates negativity on posts then I would follow the privacy settings of the site and possibly block the person. Many parents contact the school through social media for information and again I would redirect the majority through the school reception or appropriate channels. It is important for management to have a close eye on social media, even if members of staff are the driving force of it, for this reason alone.

10**BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE WIDER COMMUNITY**

Involvement of local businesses and organisations is extremely important to promoting your school in the local community. It is essential to build relationships and links with the wider community to ensure sustained positive perception of the school in the locality. Why not use local businesses as suppliers to the school such as printers, paper supply or canteen, get students to play music/do a few jigs in the local nursing home at Christmas, involve local services such as electricians or plumbers, ask businesses to be involved in school fundraiser initiatives or fundraise for local charities. This type of involvement of the school immerses and embeds the school in the local community and creates a long-term positive perception in the locality.

There is a fine line between a school having a positive perception and a not so positive perception in the local community and we know too well that negative publicity can develop overnight. With this in mind we need to keep on top of publicising all that we have to offer and giving our schools the recognition, it deserves even if we are not fighting for places. I firmly believe that if the pupils of a school are happy going home every day, getting a good education, feeling recognised, safe and valued then the external PR will just enhance the positivity but no amount of "external" PR will camouflage an unsatisfactory school environment.