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# ONcall

ready-to-use NEWS

## Can good public relations substitute for marketing?

A school district's communications department is generally responsible for as many aspects of communications as they can handle — and more. From letting kids know what the dress code is for the prom to keeping parents informed of upcoming bond issues, communicating with the community can seem like a 24-7 job.

What do we choose to share on our social platforms, and could we do it more effectively? Where are we spending our communications dollars, and is it in the most effective places? The answers to those questions lie in what your administration's goals are — and whether they are better achieved through public relations or marketing.

It's easy to confuse marketing and PR. They can sometimes look so similar they might as well be twins. Especially with the advent of social media, where a press release and a marketing campaign are released on the same platforms. The difference is, where public relations is a steady, careful focus on developing and maintaining relationships and reputation, marketing is sales, pure and simple.

### So... it sounds like schools really only do public relations?

Not anymore! Throughout the school year, the emphasis is on keeping parents, staff and students informed about events, requirements and special honors. And keeping them happy with the way their schools are running. That all falls under public relations. But marketing is important, too. School districts have to focus on getting and retaining students in a way that administrations 20 years ago never had to think about.

The American Marketing Association (AMA) Board of Directors defines marketing as “the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large.” ([www.ama.org/AboutAMA/Pages/Definition-of-Marketing.aspx](http://www.ama.org/AboutAMA/Pages/Definition-of-Marketing.aspx)) Communicating offerings that have value for society at large... that certainly sounds like today's schools, right?

By contrast, here is how PRSA (Public Relations Society of America) defines PR: “[Public relations] helps an organization and its publics adapt mutually to each other. Public Relations broadly applies to organizations as a collective group, not just a business; and publics encompass the variety of different stakeholders.” (<https://bit.ly/3wL97Is>) In other words, public relations is not about the specific offerings that marketing is communicating — it's about relationships. For schools, that's the relationships between the district and the community.

Traditionally, PR was the art of getting a person, company or other organization mentioned in the media, namely print, radio and television. With social media, the difference between “The

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Media” and media that is self-produced is so fine as to become almost unrecognizable to your target audience.

### **What are we selling?**

Bond measures always need selling, and schools in general are in greater need of marketing than they ever have been. Charter schools, voucher programs, private schools, and state laws that allow parents to enroll their students in schools outside their normal attendance boundaries have all had an impact on districts. And, as students leave a school system or a school, state money often goes with them. The last year of online schooling and household upheavals has made the situation for many districts even more precarious.

At the Novato Unified School District offices in Northern California, staff have been aggressively wooing departed families to return. “For months, district staff and parent volunteers have been using social media, school tours, YouTube videos, phone calls, email blasts and community meetings to persuade families that the district will be back in business post-pandemic — in-person and full time — when the 2021-22 school year begins on Aug. 17.” They also engaged a marketing firm and are running digital ads on television and social media platforms. “Because the state reimburses Novato and other similarly funded school districts at roughly \$10,000 per student, the decline [of 275 students] represents a loss of up to \$2.75 million — a budget hit the district cannot afford to take.”

*[www.marinij.com/2021/06/26/novato-school-district-expands-effort-to-restore-enrollment/](http://www.marinij.com/2021/06/26/novato-school-district-expands-effort-to-restore-enrollment/)*

“It’s not unusual for many districts to have fewer than 30 percent of households with children in the public schools. Losing their core parental constituency has forced school boards and administrators to embrace social media and move beyond traditional newsletters to explain their value to the broader community.” *<http://bit.ly/2aBhFLA>*

### **What does your community want?**

While the school board is responsible for shaping an educational program that the community can be enthusiastic and excited about, it falls on the communications department to identify community priorities for the board.

If you’ve done the PR part of your communications strategy well, you know your community pretty well. If you’re still figuring things out, polling is increasingly a good first strategy to see where people stand on an issue.

“Polling has increasingly become a way for school districts to engage citizens and ensure they feel heard. The resulting feedback can be invaluable for understanding community sentiment and which messages will resonate with which audiences.” *<http://bit.ly/2aBhFLA>*

Are the parents in your community leaning towards local Montessori or home schooling support options? Are they frustrated with graduation rates, or disappointed in SAT scores? Polling can let the school board know what areas need a greater focus to retain and attract students.

If your school has competitive programs to offer or has made improvements it wants the community to be aware of, that’s where a marketing campaign comes in. Most people in your community would be hard-pressed to know all the opportunities available through their public schools without your help. Schools need to not only provide a competitive product; they need to also sell it to parents and taxpayers. Marketing is how you let your community know that you can provide what they need.

## **So... public relations or marketing?**

PR vs. Marketing

August 2021

Page 3

The bottom line is that the steady drumbeat of good PR makes marketing possible. The relationship you build with your community through two-way communication and honest and timely information means that your marketing campaigns will be well received, ensuring that your enrollment will increase and you will have more funds to keep serving the needs of your community.

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*Contributed by Megan J. Wilson, Los Angeles-based freelance writer and communications consultant*