

The Hard Sell

When it comes to letting people – including prospective parents – know just how amazing your school is, there's no point focusing on marketing without PR.

Ruth Sparkes explains the difference...

September is when student numbers become of paramount importance. But with enrolment nearing completion the numbers may not be quite as expected, or promised – and that's when competition with other schools can become ugly.

These days it's a fact of life that schools are under increasing pressure to compete with each other. It's been prevalent in the independent sector for a long time and with the advent of UTCs, Free Schools and the ability for FE colleges to recruit 14 year olds, state schools' 'catchment' areas are becoming other schools' 'target' areas.

So is competition healthy?

Well, it depends. If it raises standards, then of course. If, however, schools are told all they need is a bigger and better website, a glossier prospectus, and moody photographs with scrubbed clean pupils to look better than their competitor, then that's not fair or accurate, especially as money gets tighter and could be more usefully spent in the classroom.

It's true to say schools do need a communications strategy that sits with their own development plan, and that from that a tactical/operational point of view this may involve all sorts of promotional things. And at the same time, the more open a school appears to be, even when there are issues such as a disastrous school trip, or a teacher caught up in a scandal, the better they will look in the eyes of their publics. By tackling the event head on, less long-term damage is likely to be caused.

But one of the problems facing schools is knowing and understanding the difference between marketing and promotion, and public relations (PR).

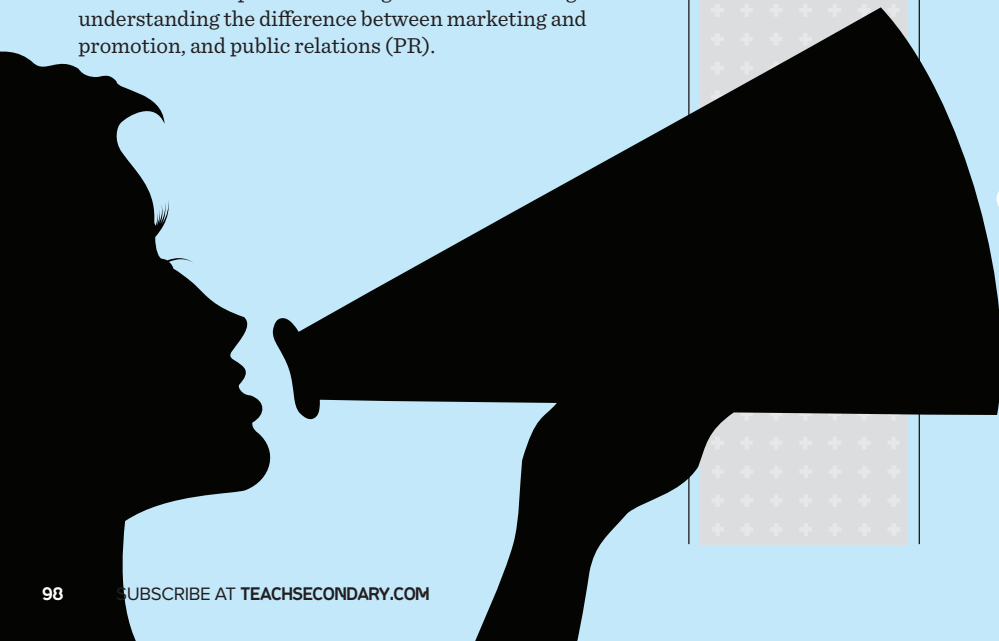


What's the story?

PR can take many forms. It includes television coverage, stories in newspapers, magazines and trade publications, experts talking to industry journalists as well as crisis management and issuing statements when something has gone wrong.

PR is all about managing your reputation and gaining the right exposure. Effective PR helps with reputation management by communicating and cultivating relationships with the school's stakeholders such as current and prospective students, families, the local community and the press. PR can help make schools distinctive and stand apart from others.

However, things that make a real and noticeable difference to recruitment and a school's reputation are hard. They require a great deal of effort – and can't be done overnight.





Make no mistake, every organisation, be it a school or a business, relies on having a good reputation for its success. If a school has been on the receiving end of a lot of negative press, which has not been properly managed, it will find it's harder to recruit new students and that this in turn will drive down even further the school's reputation.

Raising a school's profile and therefore, hopefully, its reputation can start with something as simple as publicising both academic and extracurricular successes. A 'successful' school will always seem a more attractive option to parents and carers when they are considering where to send their children within the local community.

And while many schools are able to obtain local media coverage on students' good results and visits from notable personalities it's important to remember the 'hidden story' that could lead to national coverage.

Here it's fair to say a trained PR professional can make a difference. He or she will have both the contacts in the



national media and the experience to know which stories are likely to get nationwide coverage. Likewise, he/she can prevent schools from wasting time trying to publicise something which, while it may be of great significance to the school, fails to make the grade for a news story.

Remember, whilst it's not necessarily about marketing, it certainly *is* very important to know your market. Although typically done for FE colleges, using postcodes and Local Authority data, as well as speaking to the head teachers at local primary schools, can provide very useful information for state schools. Discovering the areas children travel from to attend school can help campaigns find their targets.

And don't forget your online reputation – social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook are being used more and more because they give people a platform to air their views. Social media can be used positively by schools. Educational institutions can, for instance, voice their opinions on latest government policies. Online PR also has a big part to play



these days because negative 'word of mouth' can greatly influence people's opinions.

PR in action

In short, when it comes to competing for students a good PR strategy can be very effective when implemented alongside a school's marketing strategy. Using print, digital and social media as part of an integrated approach will ensure the same key messages are delivered to different audiences. A school's website in particular needs regular updating, as well as being dynamic and exciting – giving

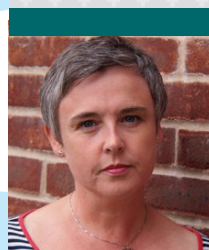


parents one more reason why they should send their offspring to that school.

One example of a school which has fully utilised public relations to its advantage is an academy in the South West of England. Previously a community college, it was a failing establishment, but under the guidance of a new principal, and with EMPRA providing marketing and PR strategies and support, it has been transformed into a very desirable school.

"PR has been absolutely invaluable for us," explains the principal. "We have gone from being a failing institution to a school which has a great atmosphere and which is attracting more and more students. Since our reputation has been raised, it has also increased parents' confidence in the education that we can provide for their children."

In fact, using strategic market research, PR, and marketing, the academy has now created an all-through



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school, with students starting in the nursery and continuing their education into the sixth form.

All of which goes to show it's never too late to turn over a new leaf and make the most of your assets. The key to successful competition is a good reputation, so bear this in mind next time you have a brainstorming session about student numbers. And if you find yourself facing half-empty classrooms this September, remember, the solution is most definitely not a bigger advert.

Rather, it might just be the time understand the difference between marketing and promotion, and PR – and then do something about it.