

Your School's Brand

9 Steps to Creating Messages Right Now That Inspire Commitment and Loyalty

INTRODUCTION

In these uncertain times, reinforcing your value to families has never been more important. Your school's financial stability rests on securing the commitment of families for the 20/21 school year. So we developed this guide to help you create the messages most relevant and impactful for parent communications.

Here are 9 Steps for Creating the Messages to Send Right Now.

1 Ask Yourself, “Who needs to hear from us, and what do they need from us?”

While all of your stakeholder groups are naturally still very important, in this time of crisis a sharper focus is needed to determine which of your audiences in this precise moment you must inspire, reassure, and embolden in order to meet your revenue goals as a school.

The reality is that COVID-19 is prompting many families to scrutinize the value of tuition. While families are grateful for the pivot to distance teaching and learning that most independent schools have made gracefully, they may also be feeling scared about their own financial reality, worried about whether tuition is “worth it” if the experience is purely digital, wondering if homeschooling for a year is a better alternative, or just plain overwhelmed by the idea of committing to next year with so much uncertainty in the world.

So your top priority is reminding parents of the value of your school, and the unmatched benefits their child receives. Your messages must address parent concerns directly. This is not the time for generic communications about your school.

For enrollment stability, your most important audiences are current and prospective and/or admitted families.

2 Identify your School's Values

Even if you haven't written them down, you know what you believe as a school. [Your values](#) show up every day in how you act and what you prioritize as a school. If you have a clean list of values, great. If not, create one. Now. (Note, if your values are not written in the verb form, now's the time to make them active. [Here's how.](#))

For example...

Replace:	With:
Confidence	Exude confidence
Intentionality	Be intentional
Innovation	Invent and reinvent
Diversity	Learn from our differences
Rigorous Academics	Approach education with rigor

3 Narrow Down to Relevant Values

Most schools will find that they end up listing between 4–8 things that they value. Today's reality calls for focusing on the values that are *most relevant* now to families. For example, your value of treating the environment with reverence may not be top of mind for families, whereas your value of focusing on the positive or finding your balance may be just what they need from you now.

Once you've narrowed in on your most relevant values, mention them explicitly—and often—in your messaging. “Because we value x we are doing y.” Read on for more about how to do this.

4 Articulate the Right Brand Value Proposition for Today

Brand Value Proposition is a jargon term that means the exchange of **emotional** value between you and your families. Rather than, “When I pay x tuition amount my child gets a good education” the exchange of value you should be thinking about is how to make parents *feel emotionally connected* (or re-connected) to your school’s core values.

Spend time defining how families need to feel about you in order to choose or recommit to your school. It’s critical here to put yourself in their shoes. We surveyed schools in recent weeks that shared the variety of feelings their parents are having, from being grateful for distance teaching and learning to being worried and stressed about the future.

The role of the value proposition is to help you focus in on how you’re aiming to make parents feel, so you can ensure your messages are written to do so. We know you want your families to feel assured, confident and inspired so we developed this general value proposition to help guide your own school’s messaging:

Example: Value Proposition

*“Right now, we feel assured about our commitment to (your school name.)
Because whatever happens and no matter how long it takes, nothing has changed about the fact that this is the school and this is the education I want for my child.”*

5 Create Messages for the Head and the Heart

It’s always been true that your school’s messages have to strike the right balance between facts and feelings. With too much “head” your messages make it easy for people to say, “Yep, I understand why that school is excellent,” but then walk away without enrolling. Your school can’t rely on the rational argument alone. An emotional appeal is what moves families to action, and that’s just as true today as it ever was. You can read up on our perennial messaging best practices [here](#). Use them and you’ll be a better communicator right away.

And to build on those best practices now’s the time to create relevant messages focused on what families are thinking and feeling. Be real. The COVID-19 crisis has left families uncertain about their investment in independent school education so they may be thinking:

- Distance learning doesn’t come close to approximating the full educational experience. It doesn’t make sense pay +/- \$30K for next academic year for the equivalent of homeschooling.
- If we don’t deposit, and this blows over, will we be able to rejoin the school when classes are back in session?
- If and when school re-opens, we’re not willing to open ourselves up to the risk of infection. Maybe we’ll just take next year off.
- Caring for, and teaching, our children while working from home with less income has put undue strain on our family.

These concerns need to be addressed directly and clearly. There’s a way to respond that taps both the heart and the head and you’ll see how in the steps below.

“The essential difference between emotion and reason is that emotion leads to action while reason leads to conclusions.”

David Calne, Neurologist

6 Use This 3-Part Message Format We Created for Spring/Summer 2020

Part 1:

Articulate your school's deeply held value relevant to today

Part 2:

Remind families the unique and timeless benefit of your school's education for their child

Part 3:

Build and reinforce an emotional connection

To show you how, we took the liberty of updating the [Belief Message](#) of two of our clients.

Example: Army and Navy Academy's Brand Belief Message

At Army and Navy Academy, we believe greatness lies in you. And every day at ANA is designed to help you achieve it.

Around the clock, we listen, challenge, and encourage you to imagine and accomplish your goals.

Today, with your Warrior team behind you, you'll discover a bolder, brighter you.

Example: Written for Today...

At Army and Navy Academy, our value of *focusing on the positive* inspires every Cadet to believe in themselves and their ability to achieve greatness.

Whether you're on campus or learning from a distance, today's unprecedented challenges won't stand in the way of how we listen, challenge, and encourage you to set and accomplish your goals.

Through the lens of this new global reality, discovering a bolder, brighter you as a member of our Warrior team takes on even great importance.

Example: Drew School's Brand Belief Message

Drew School believes in teenagers—their ideas, their dreams, their opinions, and their potential.

That's why we've created a high school community that challenges the traditional definition of success and celebrates achievement one student at a time.

The result is that our students develop into fascinating individuals who are sought after by colleges, and who know themselves well when they step out into the world.

Example: Written for Today...

Drew School's emphatic belief in teenagers—their ideas, dreams, and opinions—is alive in our value of the *vitality of adolescence*.

Times like these highlight the need for a school community that challenges the traditional definition of success and celebrates one student at a time.

No matter how we celebrate our seniors this spring, we know they are emerging as fascinating graduates who know themselves well when they step out into the world.

7 Check Your Messages Against These

Why start from scratch? Below are some message ideas that might be just right for your school right now. Or feel free to take these and tinker with them.

To compel parents to see yours as the education they want for their child, remind them:

- What drove your choice to join [or apply to] your school in the first place is as true today as it ever was.
- It's never been more important to be connected to a like-minded community with shared values and aspirations.
- The value of independent school—independent of government and church—we are flexible and nimble by definition, allowing us to teach in the best way for today.
- Their investment will yield the most exceptional experience possible, no matter what the circumstances.
- Of the importance of continuity for their child's emotional wellbeing.

8 Change the Tone

New realities call for new messaging. Your families have specific, greater concerns about finances, something you might not have addressed so directly in better times.

So we recommend a tonal shift and complete transparency about school finances. As well, we recommend schools unapologetically tap into the goodwill of your families to pay forward what families and parents before them set in motion.

It's time to pay it forward—every school has hardships and this is the time to band together to make sure our school can weather this storm and be here well after this blows over. Emphasizing the importance of taking care of each other will be important.

To compel parents to understand the independent school financial model, remind them:

- Tuition covers +/- 80% of our school's education.
- Your child has and will continue to benefit from families who came before you, who invested in the school. We rely on the goodwill of families for financial sustainability.
- Our fixed costs are constant though children are not on campus. Retaining faculty and staff is one of our highest priorities.
- If your employer has retained your services—despite obvious productivity loss—we hope you'll find a way to pay that goodwill forward by remaining committed to our school.

9 Repeat

Americans are exposed to 3,000 messages per day so no matter what your school's key messages are, you'll have to repeat them diligently. And repeat again.

Families are distracted, anxious and focused on many things besides the emails from your school. Keep that in mind and don't be shy about saying the same things over and over, and across your various communication platforms like email, website, social media, Zoom, and one-on-one conversations. This is especially true for your 3-part message.

If you want help refining your messages for today, creating virtual tours, digital admissions events, a powerful brand strategy, or a compelling admissions campaign please contact us. Or just tell us how you put into practice what you've learned. For more inspiring ideas visit mission-minded.com/schools.

"It's a very noisy world... so we have to be really clear on what we want them to know about us."

Steve Jobs

Learn More

Mission Minded is a branding firm that works exclusively with independent schools and nonprofit organizations.

We believe that a brand that sets you apart is essential to a school's success. Every day we guide our clients to uncover the big, bold idea that will attract more people to their school. Because in today's world, a worthy mission is not enough. You've got to communicate what makes you unique at every opportunity.

To find out how Mission Minded can help your organization, call us today at 415-990-9360.