

MARKETING GUIDE

Marketing Your Independent School

10 Tips to Maximum Effectiveness

INTRODUCTION

The reality: Most independent schools need to compete for students who are a good fit for the school's pedagogical values, its day-to-day personality, and its attitude toward learning styles. Our experience is that while the number of admissions applications may be steady, the challenge for many independent schools is not just to fill open slots, but to attract the families likeliest to find a match for their child's needs, often called "fit" in the independent schools sector.

Most independent schools we have worked with are challenged in one or more of the following ways:

- Having a sense that there are students who would be a terrific fit for their school but who are not even taking a close look or applying.
- Having students who would be a terrific fit for their school, who do apply and are accepted, but who then choose to go elsewhere.
- Feeling that their reputation among independent-school families does not accurately reflect the wonderful experience or education being offered.

Ensure you are known for who and what you really are so that the right families will consider and choose your school. If you have a reputation—what we call brand—that is off-kilter, it will take time to change it. But by incorporating these ideas into how you present your school, you will be on the way to strengthening your reputation so that it is both accurate and appealing to the families you wish to attract.

Mission Minded has ten tips your school can use now. By incorporating these ideas into how you present your school, you will be on the way to strengthening your reputation.

1 Don't try to be all things to all people

Many schools are very similar, and many claim to “have it all” or be “just as good as” another highly regarded school. But really, each school offers something a little different from the others. It's your school's “something” that makes it the right school for certain families and not right for others.

Not every independent-school family is going to value your particular approach. Accepting this reality frees you to stop trying to appeal to all families and to focus on how to attract the best families for your school. Understand that your school isn't for everyone and don't worry about the students or families you just can't attract. There are schools that are right for them, and students and families who are right for you.

Focus your efforts. Reach out to the students and families who are right for your school **based on the values they hold and the way your school supports those values**. For example, if your approach is arts-based because you believe this allows students to learn in new and more meaningful ways than can be demonstrated by grades alone, it is unlikely that your school will appeal to a family who values competition and wants their child on a track to attend an Ivy League institution. Accept this. Don't waste time and resources trying to persuade this type of family to appreciate your educational approach; you won't succeed. Their values and the values of the school are out of alignment. Focus your efforts on families who do value your approach and want what you provide.

2 Break away from the pack

It can be hard for prospective families to understand the sometimes subtle differences between the schools they are considering. Why? Because so many schools tend to use similar language to describe themselves. People want to know the truth about what makes your school special. So tell them. This is not a time for generic language or demure humility. Make clear how your approach is different and **how that approach helps students learn and succeed**. (See Tip 3.)

3 Tackle the four P's

There are four dimensions by which you can distinguish your school from others: price, prestige, pedagogy, and personality. By clearly understanding your school's position in the community in regard to these four P's, it will be easier to choose how to set your school apart from the rest.

Price

Is yours a great school at a great price, or the most expensive and worth every last penny? How much financial aid do you provide? What percentage of your budget goes to financial aid, and what percentage of your students receive it? How you communicate the answers to these questions will set you apart on price.

Prestige

Has your school been around for centuries, graduating political leaders and captains of industry or well-known artists and Pulitzer Prize-winning poets? Or is your school freshly minted and on the cutting edge of the latest theories on education? Do most of your graduates go to Ivy League schools, or to state universities or small colleges? Does your school urge students to accomplish great things even

“This is how we've always felt about the school, and now we can see ourselves in the brand in a way that we never could before.”

Jennifer Gabriel
Director of Strategic Marketing
Brookwood School

while they are still in school, like making an Olympic team, touring with an orchestra, publishing a book, or starting a nonprofit organization? Some students and families are drawn to schools with a prestigious history or competitive atmosphere, while others are put off by that or prefer a less formal atmosphere.

Pedagogy

What kind of education does your school provide, traditional or progressive? Is your school a model for a certain pedagogical approach? Do students learn mostly by listening to professorial teachers lecture, or by guided discovery, working together collaboratively? Each child learns differently, so matching learning styles to the right teaching styles is critical. Parents need to understand how your school would or would not support their child's most successful form of learning.

Personality

If your school were a person, would it be like everyone's favorite, the cool art teacher who took the class out for ice cream? Or would it resemble the structured Latin teacher who emphasized memorization? Take honest stock of your school's personality attributes and base your marketing on those. Personality matters, and can be the most appealing dimension on which a family chooses one school over another.

4 Determine and build your “brand”

- Corporations aren’t the only ones with brands. Brand is really just another word for “reputation.” Your school’s brand is the sum of facts and emotions that come to the minds of your audiences (students, parents, faculty, staff, alumni, and others) when they hear or read about the school.
- Your logo is not your brand, your name is not your brand, and your mission statement is not your brand. Their jobs are to reinforce your brand.
- Brand building—discovering a brand’s essence, determining what factors constitute a compelling brand, and working to create a great brand—is as important for your school as it is for Nike or Coca-Cola. Articulating how you want your school to be perceived will prepare you to create compelling and effective communications that take you there.
- Communicating a clear brand will help your school be understood by and attractive to the right group of students and families, and increase the likelihood that they will choose your school, stay loyal to it, and support it now and over time.



Brand Promise

- A** Your brand architecture should include a Brand Promise that is a summation of four pillars: Brand Personality, Brand Values, Brand Value Proposition, and Brand Positioning Statement.

Brand Values

- B** Brand Values are the essence of your brand. They are the code by which your brand lives—the principles upon which you make your decisions. They are the heart and soul of the school and do not tend to change over time.

Sample Brand Values:

- Exceptional academics
- Passionate teachers committed to individualized education
- Warm, supportive environment
- Inclusive, diverse, welcoming community
- Well-rounded education
- Highly motivated students

Brand Value Proposition

- C** Brand Value Proposition is the unique value your stakeholders receive in exchange for what you ask of them. Not intended as a public message, it is an internal guide for what should be conveyed about the school.

Sample brand value proposition:

Morningside School graduates grow into successful, well-educated, ethical adults with a passion for pursuing excellence in all aspects of their lives.*

Brand Positioning Statement

- D** Brand Positioning describes how your school seeks to position itself relative to other schools. It identifies the key elements that make your school unique and the core ideas for which you seek to be known.

Sample Brand Positioning Statement:

The Morningside School offers an academically exceptional education in a warm, supportive, nurturing community that contrasts with a more hands-off approach found elsewhere.*

*We invented this school name for the purpose of this example.

Brand Personality

- E** Brand Personality presents the distinguishing qualities and characteristics of your school. Brand personality recognizes who you are now and who you aspire to be.

Sample Brand Personality:

- Smart
- Welcoming
- Optimistic
- Supportive
- Nurturing
- Fun

5 Create an “elevator pitch”

- Determine what misperceptions may exist in the community about your school; these need to be overcome ASAP. In order to write effective messages, such as a brief speech (“elevator pitch”), it is critical that you understand your audiences’ biases about your school so you can address them and tell your true story.
- An elevator pitch is a brief, conversational description of your school that is both emotional and factual, and helps build your reputation. It’s what you would say to a curious stranger in the time it takes to ride an elevator.

Sample elevator pitch:

The Morningside School is an extraordinary independent school where the students immerse themselves in high-caliber academics while exploring and pursuing their personal passions. What I love about it is that, though the students work hard, they are not competitive or cut-throat—Morningside has a warm and nurturing culture. Our students receive unusual levels of support from their teachers and each other, which helps create the school’s warm and welcoming community.*

*We invented this school name for the purpose of this example.

- Make your elevator pitch sound natural, so that anyone who represents your school feels comfortable saying it.
- Avoid jargon! The more conversational your elevator pitch, the more likely it will take hold and be repeated—not just by school representatives, but by others when they talk about the school.

- Use simple, descriptive, emotional language that leaves your listener with a clear idea of what is different and special about your school.
- Avoid working through a large committee to draft your elevator pitch. Groups tend to water down good writing.
- The goal of the elevator pitch is to be descriptive and clear—to provide an honest definition of your school and what it offers, not to say everything there is to say about it. A good pitch is both a synopsis and a conversation starter; it should make the listener invite you to say more.

6 Train your ambassadors

- Everyone associated with your school is an ambassador: your faculty, staff, board, students, parents, and alumni.
- Once you have determined your brand and developed your messages, train those who have the most contact with prospective families, such as your administration and admissions staff, in how to use them.
- All faculty and board members should be made aware of your communications effort, encouraged to become familiar with the messages, and recruited to help spread the word.
- Students and parents who represent the school on tours or open houses should also learn the messages and be asked to use them.

7 Assess every communication from the point of view of your audience

- Tell your audiences what they need to hear, not just what you want to say.
- Prospective students want to hear about the day-to-day life and culture of the school. How much homework will they have? Will they have time for a social life and extracurricular activities? What arts and sports are offered and how hard is it to get on a team? Remember to highlight a benefit for every one of these answers. “You can expect about X hours of homework on average each night. We’ve found that this allows students the time they need to master their studies and enjoy life outside of school.”
- Prospective parents want to know whether the students are happy and what their tuition buys them. Are the students generally happy and supported by their teachers, the administration, and other students? What is the experience and education of the teachers? What kinds of kids does the school produce? Where do the graduates go on to high school or college and beyond? Be clear and honest so the right families for your school recognize you as the best fit for them.
- Current parents want reinforcement that they made the right decision for their child, that their tuition and contributions are wisely spent, and that their children are getting the education and experience they were promised. Don’t treat current parents like “insiders” who already “get it.” They need to be frequently reminded about the value your school is offering.

8 Be consistent

- Bring your brand to life. Create messages that sound authentic, natural, and believable, and are easy to say and understand.
- Brainstorm a list of sound bites—short phrases that capture your school’s brand. Use them over and over in written materials and in talking about the school.
- Having a consistent message, repeated over and over again, is the best way to communicate who you really are. Repetition drowns out competing messages.
- Decide on the messages that best represent your school and then stick with them for a long time. Don’t change them when you get bored. Your public hears your messages only a fraction of the number of times you do; in order for the messages to take hold, they need to be repeated. Often.
- Develop a look and feel for all your communications materials and website that reflects your school’s brand and apply it consistently. Your website and printed materials should look that they come from the same place.
- Be true to your brand. Reinforcing the attributes of your brand across language, action, and images keeps you authentic. For example, if your school wants to be known as intimate and nurturing, don’t publish an austere annual report and fill it with photos of your wealthy board members attending your black tie gala. Look for ways to reinforce “intimate” and “nurturing” at every opportunity, and soon you will be known that way.

9 Use personal stories to illustrate the brand of your school

- Tell stories about your teachers, students, and alumni on your website and in your publications.
- Where possible and appropriate, let members of your school community share their stories in their own words, perhaps in short videos posted on your site.

10 A picture beats a thousand words

- The image people have about your school is formed primarily on how you look, not just what you say.
- Make sure the photos, illustrations, and design of your website and printed communications—from posters to websites, brochures, and fundraising materials—all send the right message about you.
- The best photos are close-ups of faces and of groups of students and faculty engaged in school activities. Avoid wide-angle shots of the campus, large groups, and photos taken of someone at a podium.
- Give yourself this test: If you don’t read a single word on the page, what impressions do you get about your school from looking at the viewbook or website? Does it reflect the brand you want to have?

“I remember wondering how we’d know if our project was a success. And when I heard one of our messages repeated back to us by a parent, it was incredibly rewarding. Our work with you has resonated with so many new (and old) families.”

Joel Weiss

Head of School
Crane Country Day School

Learn More

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

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

Our clients successfully raise more money and attract the support they need to achieve their goals. To find out how Mission Minded can help your organization, call us today at 415-990-9360.