

Effectively Integrating Communications and Marketing in School Districts

By Stephanie De Los Santos

Gone are the days for school district communications departments to focus solely on communications. Today, more and more communications personnel are being asked to integrate marketing into standard communication plans/operations. The challenge with this is that many leaders are unaware of a significant difference between the functions of marketing versus the role of communications.

Research and years of experience in the industry indicate that there is a clear distinction between the two areas of expertise. Although both areas have many similarities in how they operate, it is important to understand that they each contribute in a different yet profitable way resulting in success for school districts. A brief explanation of both marketing and communications, as it relates to the education field, will provide clarity in understanding the individual roles of each.

Communications vs. Marketing

Communications revolves around relationships with emphasis on public relations and crisis communications. Communications team members not only handle all media crisis situations within the district, but they also engage the community by sharing important information and telling positive stories about what is happening districtwide.

Marketing, on the other hand, primarily focuses on a call to action with an emphasis on establishing strategies to promote the school district through branding and identity.

The diagram in **Figure 1** demonstrates an overview of how internal and external communications can integrate with marketing in order to effectively meet the designated target

audience(s) of a school district. Also listed in the diagram are tactics that can be used to foster the call to action (CTA), which produces an outcome, as well as promotes relationships, which establishes engagement within the community and with the media.

Although some tactics, like storytelling and press releases, are geared more toward communications, others such as e-blasts and advertising are integral to marketing. However, one important thing to remember is that tactics are interchangeable between

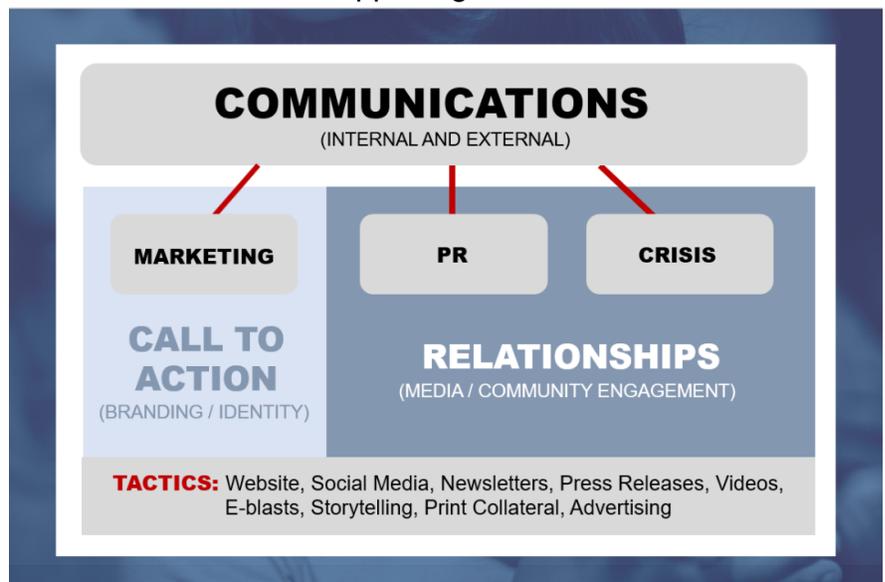


Figure 1

both communications and marketing as they are essential in achieving specific goals. Specific goals are established through a seven-step process that either result in relationships (communications) or outcomes (marketing).

COMMUNICATIONS		MARKETING	
RELATIONSHIPS	1. Gather information/research.	OUTCOMES	1. Gather information/research and analyze.
	2. Tell your story.		2. Develop a call-to-action (CTA).
	3. Write your purpose.		3. Establish your desired outcome.
	4. Identifying your target audience(s).		4. Identifying your target audience(s).
	5. Establish key messages (using narrative and stories).		5. Establish key messages (using action words / verbs).
	6. Implement tactics designed to engage and converse.		6. Implement tactics designed to cause Action and create an outcome.
	7. Evaluate through behavioral change.		7. Evaluate through analytics.

Figure 2

As noted in **Figure 2**, the process in establishing specific goals for communications and marketing are almost identical. Both areas begin with a focus on gathering information and research. However, marketing goes one step further by analyzing the information gathered in order to determine whether or not it will be useful information for the desired outcome.

Steps 2 and 3 differ in that the role of communications is to tell a story with a purpose in mind while the marketing focus is to develop a CTA to establish a desired outcome. Telling a story captivates the audience by tugging at the heartstrings. Every school district has a story to tell and people love to hear those stories. The purpose behind sharing stories is to establish relationships with the community (parents, students, business partners, school staff, local legislators, etc.).

According to an online article by Templar Advisors, *Why Storytelling is Essential to Effective Communication*, the best communicators are the ones who can relate to their target audience(s) on a personal level through storytelling.

“Master this skill, and you will be well on your way to becoming an effective communicator,” the article states.

Rather than focusing on telling a story, a greater emphasis is placed on the CTA when it comes to marketing. This is done in an effort to persuade target audiences to act on the information being conveyed to them. For example, the desired action may be to get people to register for an event, sign up for or buy something. The goal is to always increase the number of people who are reached as well as the number of people who respond.

The following are other examples of CTAs used in advertisements and/or eblasts that are devised to produce a desired outcome:

- Become a Vendor;
- Join Our Reading Club;
- Apply for Credentials Online; and
- Make a Difference and Donate.

Even with the differences between Steps 2 and 3, the integration of marketing and communications is essential in identifying targeted audiences and establishing key messages (Steps 4 and 5). It is important for a school district to know its target audiences, which typically consists of the various members of the community as mentioned above. The key messages are crucial in the success of communications and marketing as they either use a narrative or action words to boost community engagement.

The final two steps focus on the implementation of tactics and evaluation. Tactics, which include various ways (like social media, website, newsletters, etc.) to convey key messages, are designed to either engage and converse or to cause action and create an outcome. In both communications and marketing, tactics are the strategic tools that are used to help in achieving the goals and objectives for the district.

Evaluation is the final step in effectively integrating communications and marketing to cultivate success. Evaluation through communications is evident through behavioral change. When the community is adequately engaged through effective and positive communication, the morale is uplifted. This behavioral change conveys success and indicates that the district fulfilled its purpose in reaching the community through effective communication.

On the other hand, evaluation in marketing is dependent on analytics to demonstrate the successfulness of a school district engaging with its target audiences. Analytics is simply the aggregated data indicating progress in specific key areas of marketing such as:

- traffic on the website;
- the number of followers, likes/dislikes and shares on social media; and
- the open and click through rates of all digital marketing.

The data collected not only shows the validity of marketing efforts, but it is also valuable information that supports the efficacy of communication efforts producing behavioral change within the community.

The most important thing to remember in effectively integrating communications and marketing in school districts is to first have a complete understanding of the difference between the two. Once that clarity is achieved, the integration of communications and marketing organically materializes. The only thing left to do is to combine and

implement the seven-step process to ensure a successful outcome and establish a strong relationship within the school district's community.