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Beyond the Logo: Take a Strategic Approach to Branding Your School District



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Branding might begin with refreshing a logo and tagline, but the work goes well beyond visuals. A brand steeped in strategy can contribute to the long-term success of your school district.

Start with Research

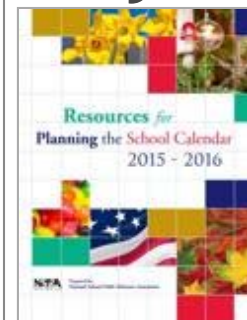
In the [Oconomowoc Area School District \(OASD\)](#), our branding journey began when we developed a new strategic plan. Research, which included a conversation with school board members and a focus group and online survey for parents and community members, revealed the perception that OASD was “good, but not great.”

There was a sense of the “underdog” in the way the school board and community members described the district. School staff and administration identified “pockets of excellence” among the eight schools, but they also talked about a lack of consistency in curriculum delivery. School board leadership and alumni wanted to bring back the “swagger” of a once-great football tradition and community pride in the district.

Our research also included a review of existing data. Test scores lagged behind some of our more competitive neighboring districts. Under our open enrollment process, the district had a net loss of more than 200 students per year, resulting in a \$1.7 million annual outflow. A survey of parents who had left indicated there was little or no brand awareness among families shopping for schools.

Engage Stakeholders

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The superintendent formed a District Leadership Team of more than 30 staff, community people and school board members. For several months in the spring of 2014, the group worked on crafting a three-year strategic plan that included:

- A new mission;
- Vision;
- Core values;
- Commitments to staff, students and parents; and
- Five strategic directions designed to drive continuous improvement work in the district.

This energetic team discussed perceptions, strengths and weaknesses, as well as hopes and dreams for the future. Eventually, the plan was finalized and approved by the school board in June 2014. It was designed to fit on a poster or flyer; it was not a 20-page document that was going to sit on a shelf and collect dust!

Every single employee in the district received a color copy of the strategic plan flyer at the beginning of the 2014–15 school year. Full-color posters were provided for each of the eight school sites to post in high-traffic areas.

The new mission statement — “Empowering a Community of Learners and Leaders” — doubled as our new motto, and we splashed it on the website, on bookmarks, on PowerPoint templates and on a large banner hanging behind the school board meeting table. A fourth-grade teacher surprised us by having his classroom paint a 10-ft poster with the mission statement across it.

We were committed to openness and transparency with staff, and we also had some fun along the way. A favorite among our faculty was a t-shirt for the homecoming parade, with the mission statement on the back, and “I Teach, What’s Your Superpower?” on the front.

Include Professional Support

As the strategic plan was being developed, we brought a graphic designer to the team to help us update the existing district logo, refresh colors and add the new mission statement to function as the tagline. I worked closely with him to design several iterations of the logo, with and without the tagline, and in horizontal, vertical and

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square layouts to fit print, web and social media applications.

Out of this process, we created a detailed *District Brand Guide*, as well as a “how-to” guide for staff called, *What Logo Should I Use?*, with usage guidelines, along with mascots for buildings and high school athletics. All the logos and brand guides were organized on the shared server so that staff could access them. I kept staff informed about the logo and brand guides via the monthly staff email newsletter and all-staff emails.



In addition to updating the logo, we worked with the designer to establish key marketing pieces that had never existed before, such as a district capabilities tri-fold brochure (“Discover OASD”), a teacher recruitment brochure and a high-end booklet to showcase the high school. Simple things like pens, coffee mugs, pocket folders and car clings with the new logo and mission statement were a great way to push the brand message out into each school site. For example, I hand-delivered logo pens to the school secretaries and encouraged them to give them out to visitors and parents.

Hashtags were another way to spread the brand message on social channels. We ramped up social media activity on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#), and later added Instagram into the mix. Hashtag #oconomowoc is used primarily for academic or “celebration” posts, and #oconpride is used primarily for athletic posts.

Make Evaluation and Assessment Ongoing

Evaluation of the re-branding initiative is ongoing. We constantly keep an ear out for anecdotal feedback and track social media comments and shares. In general, word of mouth has been positive, with teachers and parents embracing the district’s brand changes and using the “language” of the mission in their everyday communication.

Informal feedback can be difficult to measure. Our goal for the future is to collect quantitative data with parent and staff surveys, and qualitative data with focus groups and key communicators. For example, we conducted a parent communication survey in May 2015 and will repeat it

Six Takeaways for Effective Brand Implementation

- Start with research. Plan strategy to reach your goals.
- Build a great team of staff and external stakeholders to focus on content, as well as image. Include creative professionals such as a graphic designer, photographer and website provider.
- Keep it simple. Bold-effective branding is easy to spot.

annually. Also, we're in the process of developing a volunteer marketing committee to serve as key communicators in the district to be our eyes and ears on the street.

Since the strategic plan was approved by the school board in June 2014, Facebook likes have grown 86 percent to 1,537, and Twitter followers have increased daily to a total of 1,217. Instagram growth has been steady and now stands at 245.

We plan to continue the ongoing brand management by helping internal departments with tools such as branded Word documents, Google sites, envelopes and brochures, and through regular communication with parents and local news media.

- Be flexible. Adapt to feedback from your key audiences. Change strategy if needed.
- Engage employee hearts and minds. Make it easy for staff to tell your brand story.
- Plan for growth as your brand evolves and deepens into the organization.

'Start from the Inside Out'

Branding has the greatest impact on district success when it's based on research and when key stakeholders are involved. And, it should start from the inside out.

Teachers, support staff, custodians and administrators need to be the champions of the organization first. Then the good vibes diffuse out to students, parents, alumni and outside observers in the community.

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