



# Danger: Black Hole of Branding Ahead

## 11 Costly and time-consuming branding mistakes that most schools make

By Chuck English

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**Just the thought of engaging in a branding project produces anxiety. There are so many ways that it can turn into the black hole of a never-ending initiative or one that never has any meaningful impact. And there are so many questions:**

- **Who will be involved in the process?**
- **How do you get everyone to agree?**
- **Should you use an outside consultant or do it yourself?**
- **How do you ensure that it delivers the results that justify the investment?**

**If you are considering a branding project you owe it to yourself and your school to give it the best possible chance of success. Over the years, we have seen the pitfalls that can doom a branding project to failure. To help you steer your branding project to success here are 11 mistakes to avoid.**

### **1 Confuse branding with taglines or marketing copy**

So often branding projects get side tracked by the search for a pithy tagline. While branding legitimately involves finding the words to describe a school, in early stages those words needn't be polished or market ready. In fact, you are looking for just the opposite – words that are raw and visceral. Branding requires deep collective introspection and its most powerful outputs are the ones that best represent stakeholders' feelings about the school. Your initial expression of your identity may include terms that are only understandable to those within the school community – and that's ok. When you get to the copywriting stage, you can be concerned with prosaic language. Until then, authenticity trumps wordsmithing.

### **2 Don't involve enough stakeholders**

Branding initiatives take a lot of time and to get to the finish line faster, schools sometimes make the mistake of limiting the number of stakeholder groups they consult or the number of people within each group. Ideally you want to have a 360° perspective of the school. That means involving not only current parents but also prospective parents and parents who toured but chose another school. Faculty, donors, suppliers and educators at other schools often have valuable insights. In addition, if too few people within each group are involved, there is the danger that opinions are not representative. The best practice is to convene focus groups of ten to fifteen people. That will prevent skewed views and will also allow participants to benefit from hearing each others' views.

### **3 Allow pre-conceived ideas to dominate the process**

Not asking the right questions or enough questions is a sure-fire recipe for a unsuccessful initiative. The goal of every branding project is authenticity. Getting there requires open-mindedness and the willingness to confront truth. That, in turn, requires asking the right questions. If, from the outset, the process is dominated your pre-determined



perspectives, truth will be elusive. A good way to avoid this is to consider all of your perceptions about other schools, competitors or not. You can also think about the schools your own children go to or have gone to. What are all the thoughts and emotions produced by your experiences with all of those schools? List them and then write the questions that would capture the parallel perceptions at your school.

#### **4 Proceed without an outside-in perspective**

The tyranny of branding is that your brand is the product of how your school is perceived by others – not by you. Your school’s brand exists in the minds and hearts of those who interact with the school – whether in person or online. You may not like what they have to say and you may not agree with their perception. But failing to heed what they are telling you will ensure that your branding initiative is not successful. One way to sensitize yourself is see what people are saying about your school online. Go to Niche or Great Schools for ratings and reviews. You can also tap into local parent Facebook groups for a range of opinions.

#### **5 Underestimate the necessary time and resources**

Branding initiatives are a marathon and require a realistic expectation of the required time and resources required. The success of long distance runners is often determined by how they confront “the wall.” It’s the point in a run where, for a variety of reasons, runners can lose the energy or will to finish. Branding projects are no different. There will be a point where people are asking, “How much longer is this going to take?” or “When are we finally going to see any results from all this activity?” Those leading the project may even see their own commitment flagging. The solution is two-fold. First, manage expectations by creating and sharing an uber-realistic timeline for the project. Build in lots of time for multiple iterations and the meetings required to consider them. In addition, create numerous check-ins that will allow everyone to see how the project is progressing.

#### **6 Reject what stakeholders are saying about the school**

“That can’t possibly be true!” There’s the statement that is certain to lead to the demise of a branding initiative. You may start with all the right intentions. You’re going to non-judgmentally listen to what stakeholders have to say. You’re going to solicit a range of opinions. But then there’s that one comment that you simply can’t accept and leads to someone saying, “How is it possible that people can feel that way when we have spent so much money on enhancing our program? That’s just not possible!” Guess what? Not only is it possible, it’s reality and you have to deal with it. In every branding project, there will be stakeholder opinions that challenge your perception. The best thing you can do is take a deep breath



### **7 Allow the brand to exist only as words on paper**

To be effective, brands need to be brought to life. If the end result of your branding project is an impeccably well-designed, multi-section Powerpoint presentation or fancy, multi-colour, beautifully bound report sitting on your bookshelf, you have failed. Six months later it will be hard for people to remember what the new brand is all about and it will be easy to revert to previous messaging and ways of doing things. Brands live in the classrooms, hallways, learning commons, maker-spaces and assemblies of a school. Your brand must be resonant in all aspects of school life. That requires forethought and intentionality. You will need to think deeply about how the new brand will be incorporated into every interaction within the school.

### **8 View the need for multiple iterations as a failure**

You are not going to get the articulation of your brand right the first time. Whether you use an external firm or you do it yourself, that's an unavoidable reality that you must be prepared for. Brands are difficult to define. They have to authentically represent the school in ways that resonate with a wide range of stakeholders; provide a reason for parents and donors to engage with the school; and ideally be aspirational, inspiring and propelling the school to a brighter future. That's a tall order that is simply not going to happen on the first go-round. An external firm is going to need your school's feedback to refine initial iterations and that's not a bad thing. Even if you do the branding yourself, you would be wise to build a number of rounds of review and refinement into the process.

### **9 Underestimate the importance of brand implementation**

Your branding project is not complete with the introduction of new brand language, messaging, taglines or even a website and other collateral. The true implementation of your brand is when it is resonant in every interaction that students, parents, donors, suppliers, job applicants and any other stakeholder has with your school. Brand implementation requires effectively introducing and communicating the brand to administration, faculty, the business office, front office personnel and every other staff member. It means that the brand should be reflected in every communication emanating from the school – to parents, in the community or on social media. The true success of any branding project hinges on its successful implementation.

### **10 Hesitate to fully involve faculty**

If teachers are not a part of the development and implementation of a new brand, it can't possibly be successful. Teachers are the critical link to success in every school. More to the point, teachers are on the front line of school-parent communication.



They have key insight into parents' attitudes and preference and are the first to know when parents are bothered by something. Teachers can also provide a keen sense of what differentiates the school. When it comes to implementation, you need teachers to be on board. The messaging inherent in their communication (written and verbal) with parents should align with the brand. In addition, don't forget that teachers are influential ambassadors for your school. It would be a huge mistake to present new branding to faculty as a fait accompli. Rather, it's best to solicit feedback as the branding is being developed. Keep teachers informed of progress and be sure to make them true partners in implementation.

### **11 Don't bother with an editorial calendar**

If you don't strategically and intentionally communicate your brand to parents (both current and prospective), donors, teachers and other stakeholders, they will never know what it is. What makes that more difficult is that you can't simply create a Facebook post that says, our brand is ..." Rather, you need to communicate the many elements that make up your brand. Usually, you can divide a brand into a number of planks or pillars. Examples are collaborative community, commitment to innovation or focus on social justice. The key is to schedule communications/posts that reflect each of the brand planks. If you create schedules far enough in advance, you can proactively curate content for each brand area. The resulting editorial calendar will assure your brand is thoughtfully communicated and that all school communication aligns with the brand.

#### **Summary: Don't be afraid**

To be successful, branding projects require thoughtful planning and the collective willingness to confront reality. Like a jetliner, branding initiatives must be nimbly piloted to navigate the unavoidable turbulence that comes with the inclusion of many voices. But it's all worth it. The enrollment and fundraising benefits of branding that is done well are undeniable. Branding enhances the full spectrum of school operations. In fact, there is a virtuous cycle of branding and school excellence. Don't let the potential danger of branding gone wrong prevent you from realizing the tremendously positive impact that branding can bring.

#### **About the Author**

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