

Got Web?

INVESTING IN A District Website

An effective site can help you reach your organizational goals

BY PATRICIA A. SWANN

School technology concerns for the past two decades have rightly focused on the classroom. But since the debut of the World Wide Web in 1989, little serious debate has focused on the purpose of a school's presence in cyberspace.

School and school district websites began to mushroom in the mid-1990s in what looked like a rush to stake a cyberclaim in a new frontier. As a byproduct, these early experiments also seemed like a good place to let parents know what's going on in the local school district.

Today, it is all too easy to find district websites that are little more than electronic bulletin boards presenting information in random, sometimes bizarre fashion. One school district's home page provided prominent links to information about a 3rd grade teacher's state park field trip and the wrestling team's season schedule from last year without any mention of other grade-level news or sports teams.

Even more common than randomness is information overload: school website home pages "on steroids" with hundreds of text links, flashing text and photos.

Now that many district websites are approaching adolescence, it is time to consider or reconsider what an online presence can do — beyond displaying an exciting design and the latest technological bells and whistles. From a public and

community relations perspective, school system leaders should examine how their district might commit limited resources to maintain an effective website to achieve important organizational goals.

Building Reputations

Public relations is more than the sum of its visible parts: district newsletters, brochures on the proposed budget, school calendars, news releases and special events. Public relations is about building and maintaining strategic relationships with key publics on whom the survival of the organization depends. These relationships are based on how an organization's actions are perceived by its key publics and its reputation. Such relationships are often enhanced through effective communication.

School districts are interested in maintaining good relationships with a variety of key publics, including parents, students, school employees, taxpayers, volunteers and government officials. Any of these stakeholders' actions — a teacher strike, student protests or a defeated referendum — can limit and even severely hamper a district's operations. The most common school communication efforts revolve around (1) support for school budgets and (2) reputation-boosting activities in academics and extracurricular ventures.

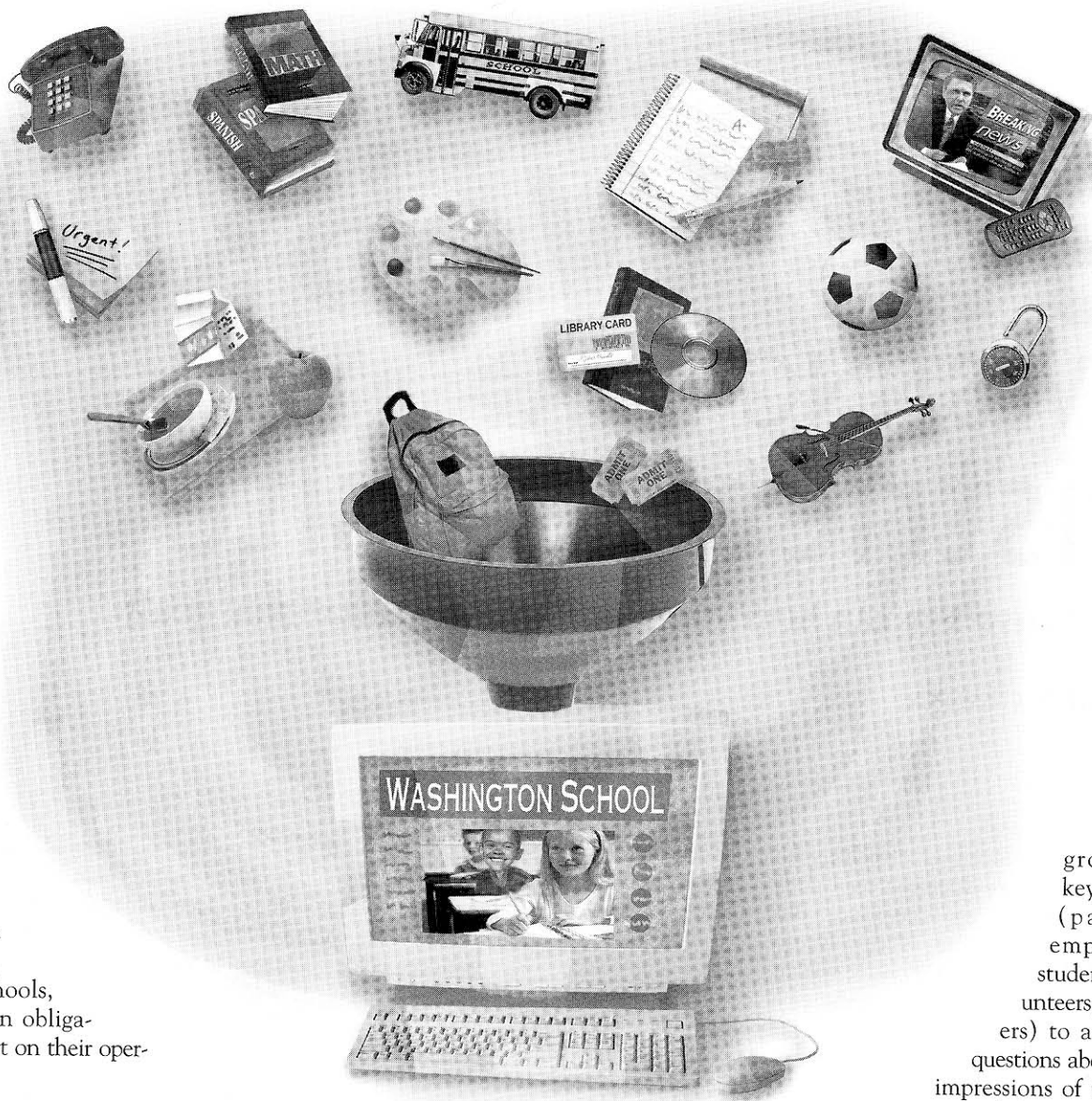
Just like businesses operating on a financial bottom line, schools act deliberately to achieve their bottom lines by producing well-rounded, academically superior graduates. To do so, schools need adequate budgets and progressive programs supported by qualified employees and involved parents who value education. Schools with good reputations can attract both through solid public relations efforts.

Reputations are built based on what a person or organization says and does and how its publics perceive those actions, real or not. Simply put, according to Dennis Wilcox and Glen Cameron in their book *Public Relations: Strategies and Tactics*, "it is the track record of an organization in the public's mind." As such, a reputation is not something that an organization can produce because it's created in the public mind. But it can be managed.

Positive reputations can be strengthened, according to *Public Relations: The Profession and the Practice*, through trust-building activities including:

▶ Openness and honesty. The public will think more positively about an organization that is forthright in providing information accurately about its goals and how it operates.

▶ Consistent actions. Do what you say. Don't say one thing, and do another.



This is particularly true of public institutions, such as schools, that have an obligation to report on their operations.

Managing Reputations

The Internet is now considered a mainstream mass medium, equal in audience reach to newspapers, television and radio. The latest research shows a whopping 72 percent of American adults are online, and they spend an average of 14 hours each month surfing the Web. At least 62 percent of American households have one or more computers, and 63 percent of children ages 3-17 are using the Internet at home.

The Web is increasingly the place where people are going first for information. A study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project found a majority of Americans use the Internet regularly to get information and that at least 80 percent expect to find reliable news, health care and government services information. The Internet is also entwined in our most basic daily interactions, such as shopping. This past holiday season, consumers spent more than

\$30 billion on gifts online.

Another Pew study found that parents with children under 18 were more likely to use the Internet than non-parents, and that parents were "generally more enthusiastic about technology today and less burdened by technological change than non-parents."

With more and more people relying on the Internet, websites are the organization's public face to their communities and the world. As public institutions supported by taxpayer dollars, school districts need to be particularly responsive to the concerns of various groups.

A Strategic Plan

Suggestions for developing a strategic communication approach for school district websites follow.

► Do the research.

The first step toward improving your website is research. Use a survey or focus

groups of key publics (parents, employees, students, volunteers, taxpayers) to ask basic questions about their impressions of the current site and the type of information they would like to see. A customer satisfaction survey on the district's website could capture opinions of current users, while modified focus groups conducted in school computer labs could solicit opinions of users and nonusers.

Also, several software tracking programs can provide user information statistics, such as how many unique users visited the site, the length of the visit, the most commonly visited pages and other user activities. Research about users should be solicited continuously, while gathering nonuser input once a year is sufficient.

► Create a planning committee.

The second step is an administrative or school board-appointed website planning committee whose members come from all key constituencies, including an administrator, board member and the site's webmaster. A wide representation will bring fresh perspectives about informational and navigational needs.

site with other traditional information devices such as the newsletter and calendar; creating and distributing posters; and placing ads in yearbooks and other school publications.

Explain in these promotions how users can make the district home page their startup page and offer incentives for going to the website, such as contests or unique information offerings only available online.

Effective Qualities

Websites offer certain advantages over traditional media, including relatively low production costs, easy content revisions, limitless content space and, perhaps most important, interactivity. Researchers have determined that several factors build and maintain cyber relationships so users keep coming back. Some of those include:

► *Publics served.*

Effective public relations programs seek to build relationships with different key publics. A common assumption

made by many school district websites is that information needs are the same for every unique public. Not so. Senior citizens, for example, have vastly different information needs compared to teenagers. The Internet allows organizations to easily create "neighborhoods," or special sections aimed at particular interests and informational needs.

The Allen, Texas, Independent School District organized its home page by key publics including visitors, parents, staff and students (see related story, page 26). The Oconomowoc Area School District near Milwaukee, Wis., has a parent section with lunch menu information, school supply lists and health information. Because cyberspace is limitless, organizations can customize special areas that appeal to the group's particular needs, which demonstrates an organization's commitment to communication.

Of the 138 New York state school district websites analyzed by the author, only one acknowledged journalists as a district public. Yet the website is often

the first place a reporter turns to for research on an organization.

However, reporters commonly complain that information is hard to find on district sites and that much of the information is unusable because it lacks contact names, phone numbers (including after-business-hours phone numbers because most reporters work at night), dates and source attribution. Some district websites, such as the one maintained in Virginia Beach, Va., have developed news sections that include what is known as online newsrooms with public relations contact information, archived and categorized news releases, backgrounders and downloadable graphics.

► *Content variety and freshness.*

Most people go to websites for information or entertainment. Schools have a lot of information of interest to particular groups. Parents, for example, want to know more about academic offerings, academic achievements, extracurricular activities and important day-to-day infor-

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mation, such as bus transportation schedules, emergency closings, lunch menus and health requirements for students. Employees, on the other hand, are interested in benefit options, training opportunities and job support information.

Overlapping information for several key publics can be easily duplicated for the group's section. Organizations need to update information regularly, which requires a commitment of time. Users consider sites with old information (such as last year's academic calendar or last month's sports schedules) unreliable and will go elsewhere for information. Also, to encourage frequent return visits, front pages should contain a "what's new" link that helps demonstrate the site's vitality and currency.

► *Navigational features.*

User expectations for the Web are growing in direct proportion to users' lack of patience, particularly when it comes to finding information. Sites should be easy to use, which means information should be where users think it should be and page links are viable. Research and site monitoring should be conducted to determine information placement. The same information can easily reside in more than one location, particularly if key public neighborhoods are created.

The two most important navigational features are (1) a "home" button located consistently on each page so users who get lost can easily return to the home page, and (2) an internal search engine for the convenience of users who want to use a keyword search to find specific information on the site.

Other helpful navigational features include a site map, which graphically displays the site's infrastructure at a glance, and limits to how much information appears on every page so a user can see it without scrolling down. (The use of hyperlinks can take users to additional information pages or sites.)

► *Interactivity.*

The capacity of websites to interact with the user through e-mail, weblogs ("blogs"), electronic bulletin boards, chat rooms and instant messaging is the greatest advantage the web offers over the more traditional mass media.

Superintendent blogs are just now starting to make their appearance on

school district websites. Pam Hedgpeth, superintendent of Republic School District in Republic, Mo., started a blog at the end of 2005. Clayton Wilcox, superintendent of Pinellas County Schools in Largo, Fla., blogs for the *St. Petersburg Times*, instead of his district's website, but he discusses Pinellas happenings with text links to the district.

Organizations have the ability to engage in two-way communication, a major component of effective communication and relationship building. Parents

and other community members who work during the day can be frustrated by a busy signal when they try to call a school with questions during normal business hours. A website offering e-mail addresses and other means of interactivity is a logical solution.

My research shows school districts are hesitant to use such features because of concerns about site security, privacy and adequate staffing to respond to online communication. Yet ignoring the interactive possibilities can make a website's

communication potential no better than a district newsletter's.

A Higher Priority

School administrators have many good reasons for putting their websites on the back burner: budget shortfalls, lack of time and staff to create and update information, and low audience participation. Most superintendents also feel secure knowing that little or no competition exists.

At the same time, schools striving for excellence in the classroom know they need to attract the best quality teachers and engage families in a learning partnership. Their website could be an important asset to meet those goals. In addition, several recent trends should build the case for increased attention to a school's or a district's website.

► *Crisis communication.*

Too few school districts use their websites to communicate during a crisis, such as a campus shooting, natural disasters or news media coverage of alleged illegal activities by school employees. Most rely on the local news media to tell their story, which can limit the amount, quality and slant of information delivered to concerned residents.

In fact, a major disconnect develops when school district websites remain unchanged during a crisis. Anyone interested in the shooting tragedy in the Red

Lake, Minn., district in March 2005 would not have found the school's website useful throughout the ordeal — even though at least one local news organization created a link to the site. A Red Lake School student killed nine people including five students, a teacher and a guard.

Viewers might wonder how organized and in control of the situation a school district really is if it fails to recognize the crisis on its own website. Education organizations should take the lead from the business world and consider their website an essential component of their crisis planning. School districts should provide important factual information quickly and consistently, including background materials about the school.

Schools with no public relations staff should consider getting outside help. Web hosting companies offer crisis communication modules that can be remotely activated and updated by phone or computer. The result is a properly resourced online crisis response that acts and looks like it is part of the school's own website.

► *Decline of traditional news media.*

It's no secret that fewer young people are reading a newspaper or watching a TV network news show. Instead, the younger generation is relying more on the Internet for news. This will have potentially serious consequences, especially in crisis communication situations when schools traditionally rely on the local

news media to explain what's happening.

► *The rise of participatory journalism.*

Journalists are no longer the only ones reporting the news. One of the biggest debates in journalism today is defining who is a journalist. With the rise of Internet technology and, in particular, blogs, everyone is a reporter. More and more people are gathering and disseminating news and opinions via a website than ever before. While most of these sites lack the credibility of mainstream media, their influence is growing.

► *Demand for information customization.*

Not only do people want information at their fingertips 24/7 today, but they want that information customized to their needs. While students are loading their Apple iPods with music, adults are selecting podcasts of all sorts of editorial content for future listening. They also are seeking information that was prepared for their needs, in the style that they enjoy, and when they want to have it.

► *Demand for transparency.*

The business scandals that exploded onto the front pages of news in 2001 have led to stakeholders' demand for more accountability and transparency of publicly held businesses. Schools are also under greater scrutiny, as in the case of the Roslyn School District on Long Island, which resulted in the theft of more than \$11 million in public school funds by employees — the largest school business scandal on record.

► *Activism.*

The Internet has the ability to grow issues rapidly from anyone with access to the Internet. Schools are probably familiar with rogue student sites that annoy schools with their rants against teachers and principals. However, organized interest groups or even individuals on a mission will increasingly undermine the credibility of and trust in school districts with websites and other Internet-based strategies. Schools should take proactive measures to address their concerns and communicate with strategic publics (including activists) frequently and effectively. ■

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