The School District Marketing Plan
Why you may want to consider one

SPOTLIGHT STORY
How one district streamlined its hiring process

THE FUTURE OF ONBOARDING
HELPING NEW EMPLOYEES NAVIGATE UNCHARTED WATERS
If you were to sum up the culture of your district with just one word, what word would you use?

Here at Skyward, we’ve always viewed our culture as one of our most important attributes. On more than one occasion, people have told me they can feel the positive energy when they step inside our headquarters and meet our employees.

When it comes to ensuring your long-term success, there’s nothing more important than your culture. The leaders at Clovis Municipal School District in New Mexico couldn’t agree more. Like most districts, Clovis is competing with other local districts for top talent and they believe in the adage that you never get a second chance to make a first impression. Be sure to check out their story, starting on page 8.

The articles in this issue are just the tip of the iceberg of what you’ll find at our website. When you have a couple minutes, I hope you’ll take a visit — and while you’re there, be sure to sign up for our blog.

Enjoy.

Cliff King, Skyward CEO

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ABOUT SKYWARD
Skyward has been helping school districts and municipalities improve outcomes, reduce costs, and achieve success since 1980. Skyward’s SIS and ERP solutions are used by more than 1,800 public sector organizations worldwide, from small entities to statewide implementations supporting millions of stakeholders. Through a unique approach that blends thought leadership, best practices, and advanced technology, Skyward is redefining what it means to be a strategic partner in the world of enterprise solutions. To learn more, visit skyward.com.
Our Schools Need More Marketing.

Whether I’m standing in front of a roomful of K-12 leaders at one of our user groups, or reviewing internal metrics in my rarely used office, this is the common theme that keeps echoing in my head.

Many of the issues that get brought up most often in conversation with administrators – budget challenges, competition, and community relations – are the same topics I have to consider when looking over our annual marketing plan. Given how aligned our goals and pain points are, shouldn’t we be able to learn something from each other?

Let’s imagine what a school district marketing plan might include, and why you might want to consider it.

THE SCHOOL DISTRICT MARKETING PLAN

By Ray Ackerlund

Public Relations

PR is one of those things that you tend not to think about until it all goes south. I remember when staying out of the newspaper was a public relations coup, but those days are coming to an end. Now, it’s not enough for school districts to mitigate bad press. Many are actively seeking out opportunities for positive placements and reach.

It’s rare to find a district anymore that does not employ a communications administrator of some kind. As the responsibilities and the position continue to evolve, I expect to see an even heavier emphasis on PR skills and experience. I do think it is important to mention that the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) offers some valuable resources for districts of all shapes and sizes.

1. BUZZ MONITORING

A big part of PR is knowing what people are saying about you at any given time and being able to relay that information to those who might benefit from it. There are all kinds of inexpensive (and even free) tools out there to help you curate mentions of the district. Getting a firm handle on public sentiment can go a long way toward helping you keep that sentiment positive.

2. MEDIA PLACEMENT

When we analyze our PR efforts, we typically look at the number, type and reach of placements, broken down by content type. This can be a helpful exercise as you start to get more proactive about pitching your success stories to local media outlets and major publications.

3. CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

When building our marketing plan, we make it a point to revisit our crisis communication strategy on an ongoing basis. If this is not already a part of your PR mix, we can’t stress enough how important it is to not only develop a detailed plan, but also assign a responsible party to maintain it through even the smallest organizational changes.
Digital Media

The fastest growing arm of marketing also happens to be the next frontier for most school districts. Digital media is where your audience lives. Websites, videos, podcasts, social media, blogs… These should all be a key part of your engagement and awareness strategy going forward.

Even as districts are filling the communications-public relations gap with new talent, the demand for digital media skills is on the rise. This is an exciting development. Any district that invests in digital media specialists can expect to see a positive impact in such critical areas as parent engagement, student achievement, and internal culture.

3 KEY AREAS TO FOCUS ON

1. YOUR WEBSITE

To the outside world, you are what your website says you are. The website is where those who are considering a move to your community will go to see what you have to offer their children. It’s where those highly qualified teachers, leaders, and office professionals will research your culture and look for job openings. Parents, students, and your larger community will rely on the site for resources and updates. Your website should provide a clear path for all three of these personas.

Want to get a snapshot of where you stand with video? Head out to YouTube and do a search for your district. This is still an emerging area of focus in K-12, but it’s one of the most important. From internal professional development to community engagement, video can be a huge boost to many of your top priorities.

If your social infrastructure is still in its infancy, start by developing a strategy for the four or five networks you want to target. Your audience will be different on each, so your message will have to be, too. If you have already built up a following, set engagement goals and challenge your team to try at least one new approach for each platform in the coming year.

2. VIDEOS

3. SOCIAL MEDIA

Branding

Strange as it might sound, your district needs a brand identity every bit as much as a for-profit corporation does. With 29 percent of homebuyers citing school quality as a major factor in their decision (according to Realtor.org), it’s clear that “school choice” isn’t just a public vs. private school debate.

Your brand is not just important in the quest for higher enrollment numbers. It’s also a key component of your internal culture. High-performers make all the difference between a run-of-the-mill organization and one that stands out from the crowd. In your case, there’s no less at stake than student outcomes. A defined, visible, and influential brand can help you attract and retain the very best talent for years to come.

3 KEY AREAS TO FOCUS ON

1. MISSION

Nearly every school and district has a mission statement. The biggest difference from one district to another lies in the application of this important message. Ideally, your mission statement should provide the guidepost for your future, the cornerstone of your decision-making, and the rallying cry for your team.

What is it that makes you different from the next district over or the charter school down the road? There will likely be crossover between your value proposition and your mission statement, but the trick to differentiating your district is to let that value pervade your communications to the point where the association between your brand and your differentiators solidify in the mind of your audience. Your ultimate goal is to create an association between your district’s name and the cornerstones upon which your educational experience is built.

2. DIFFERENTIATION

3. CONSISTENCY

Your branding efforts are not a one-time proposition. This is something that will require both commitment and persistence. Every communication, every resource, and every event should be on-brand, with your mission and every resource, and every event should be on-brand, with your mission and your objectives at the heart of it all. You won’t develop a strong brand overnight. You can only do that by building a strong track record of consistency and repetition.

GETTING STARTED

Whether your first order of business is public relations, digital media, or branding and awareness, the first step is to assemble a team of skilled, passionate people around you. This can be as simple as centralizing some of the scattered talent you already have, or adding a couple new positions when drawing up next year’s budget.

The second thing to keep in mind is that good marketing can and should be measured. You’ll need some baseline metrics in place for all of these objectives before introducing the plan to your staff. If you can’t tell which of your activities are moving the needle and what your ROI is over time, you won’t be nearly as effective.

The fact of the matter is that marketing is no longer a “corporate” endeavor. It’s one that education institutions around the world are already starting to embrace. Even if you’re not feeling the pinch of competition, you will need to find new and innovative ways to attract, develop, and retain the most talented teachers, administrators, and specialists.

These are the people who will have a direct impact on your students for years to come. There’s never been a better time to put your brand to work.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ray Ackerlund, Chief Marketing Officer

To read more from Ray, visit www.skyward.com/blogs.
Imagine this: You’re an educator applying for a new job at a school district across the state. Instead of a simple online process, you have to sift through and fill out a multi-page paper application. Then, to complete the process, you have to physically turn in your paper application at the district office two hours away. And then, after waiting four-plus weeks from the date you turned in your application, you are finally notified (via snail mail) that you’ve been offered the position and will begin orientation soon. So you accept the job offer, but the new-hire paperwork is yet another long, arduous process – it’s enough to make you wonder why you applied here in the first place…

Now ask yourself: How likely is it that a new staff member in any school district will make it to the following fall – or even through the first semester – after this first impression of his or her new workplace?

Thankfully for applicants and future staff members at Clovis Municipal School District, located in eastern New Mexico, an outdated onboarding experience does not exist. Dr. Kerry Parker, assistant superintendent of human resources at Clovis Schools, and Renee Mestas, director of human resources, explained how the district uses Skyward’s FastTrack application to hire and onboard new employees, leaving candidates with a positive first impression.
The applicant tracking feature, a part of Skyward’s School Business Suite, is a solution that streamlines the hiring and onboarding process for new district employees and HR staff. The paperless steps make hiring faster and more accurate, while allowing administrators at Clovis to easily transition the best candidates into new employees of the district.

“I know of other districts that I’ve been in that don’t have an onboarding system or even a paperless system,” Parker explained. “As a principal back in the day, they didn’t, and applicants had to go to the central office, pick up an application… it was quite a process.”

“Nowadays, we can put screeners in the system, applicants can see the steps, and it expedites the process greatly – gets people to work faster,” Parker added. “It’s nice for applicants to be able to apply directly through Skyward, and it makes our process in the HR office a lot more accurate as well.”

Parker explained that for herself, Mestas and the HR team at Clovis Schools, the risk for making administrative errors during the hiring process has been greatly reduced due to Skyward’s FastTrack. “It’s because we’re not transferring information from onboarding system or even a paperless system,” Parker explained. “As a principal back in the day, they didn’t, and applicants had to go to the central office, pick up an application… it was quite a process.”

“Another feature of FastTrack administrators appreciate, is the user-friendly interface prospective employees experience. “Once applicants have entered their information, the ease for them to apply to other positions is also a plus,” Mestas said.

As a military community, Clovis Schools requires an intuitive online application in order to reach an applicant pool outside of the local area.

“We have a lot of movement of staff, so oftentimes our candidates are not here but are able to apply, and we can arrange interviews with the electronic application process,” Mestas explained. “If we didn’t have that our pool would be even more limited, so FastTrack allows us to get to know the candidate ‘on paper’ and reach out to them before they’re necessarily on site.”

Parker described how the online application itself is used as a form of screening for individuals who apply. “For example, if we have a secretarial position and have 80 applicants, I look at their ability to complete the online process accurately and upload documents – that sort of thing – because, truly, can they use technology? That’s a pretty basic requirement,” she said.

The HR team at Clovis Schools also appreciates the ease of posting new job openings within FastTrack, which saves staff members time.

“It’s just a few clicks when we have a new position that we need to post,” Parker said. “It’s not rebuilding the whole world – I just need to clone this or attach this job description – as opposed to rebuilding a whole entire process for every new opening, I think that’s pretty efficient and accurate because we use a lot of the same data that has already been checked and double-checked.”

“We don’t have time to waste,” added Mestas. “So I think it’s critically important to have this streamlined process.” Parker and Mestas encourage districts looking at Skyward’s ERP solution and FastTrack application to do so with certainty. “If they’re considering it, they need to do it with full confidence because it’s been extremely beneficial and accurate,” Parker attested. “The data pulls in well, everything we need is there, and it streamlines the onboarding very well.”

“Don’t be afraid to reach out to Skyward and ask, ‘How can you help us and make our process more efficient?’” she added.

Administrators at Clovis Schools are pleased with the integration FastTrack delivers and plan to continue the district’s partnership with Skyward.

“I appreciate how well FastTrack works with the Skyward system as a whole, and I love some of the features that we have in place,” Parker said. “Different vendors try to sell their programs to us, but we have no reason to change. Skyward has addressed all of our needs, and I believe they have been very receptive when we’ve made requests.”

“We absolutely would recommend it to others,” she added. “It’s a part of who we are and how we function as a district.”

“I APPRECIATE HOW WELL FASTTRACK WORKS WITH THE SKYWARD SYSTEM AS A WHOLE…”

– Dr. Kerry Parker, Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources
In my first month with Skyward, I had all of the typical worries of a new employee entering an unfamiliar workplace. Will I get the help I need? How will I know if I’m succeeding? Will I sink or will I swim?

As I go through the onboarding process, I can’t help but compare the experience to my first weeks as a high school English teacher right out of college. It took an “all hands on deck” approach to ensure that my fellow newcomers and I had the resources and supports we needed to be ready for the first bell – and for every bell after that.

Research by the Aberdeen Group shows that organizations with the best onboarding practices enjoy a 91 percent employee retention rate. As turnover continues to climb in K-12, this is a statistic that schools need to be familiar with. So what makes for good onboarding? Let’s dive in and find out.

**MAKE USE OF TECHNOLOGY**

*Make connections:* Help new employees sustain the excitement they felt after landing the job by connecting them to key coworkers right away. Encourage veteran employees to reach out on LinkedIn, Twitter, and email to offer a warm welcome, even before your newcomers arrive.

*Simplify paperwork:* New hire paperwork can be an anchor during those first few days. What forms do I need to fill out, and where do I send them to? Do I hand-deliver them, or is there an interoffice process I need to know about? Did I miss a checkbox or a signature somewhere? You can take these worries off of your new hires’ plates by moving the forms online. Now, all they have to do is press the submit button and move on to what’s next.

*Try video:* Just as video is the new standard for PD, it can also be a life raft during onboarding. Work with your technology department to make sure employees are equipped with all the tools and support they need to be successful from day one. Do you have a library of video tutorials built up to walk your new office admin through your attendance processes? A brief overview of SMART boards and grade books for your teachers? ERP training for the new payroll specialist? Your new employees shouldn’t see technology as a burden, but as a welcome medium for getting up to speed faster.

At Skyward, I was in the loop before day one, thanks to online communication with HR staff, managers, and my new coworkers. My team made it easy for me to contribute right away by granting access to frequently used tech tools before my arrival, along with providing tutorials and videos to keep me learning.

**IMPART THE ESSENTIALS**

*Know the goals:* The aforementioned Aberdeen study also reveals that a characteristic of “best in class” organizations is the alignment of onboarding with overall organizational objectives. Whether you’re taking PBIS to the next level or striving to raise test scores, let new employees know your goals early so they will be better able to help you achieve them.

*Clarify expectations:* Should staff expect scheduled observations or random drop-ins? How frequently should they check email? Is it OK to wear jeans? When employees know what to expect, they waste no energy worrying and will also make fewer mistakes.
Make a help guide: Ask a new employee’s department head or colleague to take a few minutes to make a list of “need to know” information for the first weeks and months, like computer login details, supply locations, and the names of go-to people. Equipped with a help guide, your new team member will be better prepared to face everything from a staple shortage to a computer crash.

Onboarding is overwhelming. Your current staff is your best resource for showing newcomers how to make a day go well. My Skyward team prepared a help guide for me on Trello, and I referred to it often for basics like locating the office supplies and submitting my first IT service call. With the basics covered, I was able to focus on getting to know my colleagues and absorbing myself in the culture.

Looking back at my own teaching experience, I can think of more than a few practical applications for Trello in that environment, especially during my first few weeks. Plus, it’s free!

COMMUNITY AND CULTURE

Take a tour: A community tour is time well spent because it can help employees who are new to the area understand where their students come from, and it might even inspire new ideas for community involvement in the classroom. On a smaller scale, a simple building tour helps employees become comfortable in their new workplace, ready to respond to any situation.

Celebrate early and often: Help newcomers picture their futures not as a daily grind, but as a daily adventure. Find reasons to celebrate early and often. It’s your employee’s first day?

Celebrate! Someone has a birthday? Celebrate! It’s Thursday? Celebrate! There’s always a good reason to have treats in the faculty lounge.

Assign a mentor: Mentors are the cornerstone of a finely built onboarding program. The advantages are hard to ignore: increased job satisfaction, improved student achievement, and growth in both the mentor and mentee. From Good to Great, a study from the Center on Great Teachers and Leaders, identified access to a mentor as one of the most important early experiences of eventual National and State Teachers of the Year.

It’s not just teachers who need a mentor – all onboarding employees are in transition. Mentor relationships are the best way to extend onboarding beyond the first few weeks and make sure every newcomer benefits from the guidance of a veteran.

Now partway through my onboarding process, I am confident that Skyward won’t throw me in the deep end without a life preserver. I have the tools, information, and support I need to do my work or to find help when I need it. Above all else, I feel welcomed and wanted – what’s more motivating than that?

No employee should be left to navigate the waters of a new job alone. Take good care of your new talent during this critical time, and you’ll benefit from improved job satisfaction, greater employee retention, and a more positive culture in your school community.

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