



## The importance of building your school's brand and reputation

In an increasingly competitive world, how can you ensure that your school stands out from the rest?

As part of the TES Independent School Awards, SIMS Independent invited a panel of experts to share their experiences of building a school's brand and how it can successfully impact on both the reputation of a school and parental interest in students attending the school.

We have put together the panel's top tips from the debate.

### Panel members:

**Ann Mroz**, Editor and Digital Publishing Director of TES - Chair

**Mo Bosch**, Head of Communications, The Girls' Day School Trust (GDST)

**Julie Booth**, Director, SIMS Independent

**Cath Lane**, Director, Catherine Lane PR

# 1. Know your school's strengths

**The most significant lesson from the day was that a brand must be distinctive and should focus on what a school does best.**

"Look at the higher education sector as an example," stated Ann Mroz from the TES, "Institutions must compete on a truly global platform and so must work hard to develop a brand."

She pointed out that the universities which were most successful were those which knew their own strengths,

and used these to gain competitive leverage. "The University of Sheffield positioned itself as an integral part of the city of steel heritage which helped the university to build a strong reputation in the engineering sector."

Independent schools need to define what makes them unique and promote this aspect – perhaps it is the ethos, history or set of values. Schools should understand these and build them into their branding and communication.

# 2. Get your stakeholders on board

**Your school has many powerful ambassadors – use them in your messaging.**

"A school's best advocates might not always be the most obvious ones," suggested Julie Booth from SIMS Independent. "The catering staff, maintenance team and gardeners are an important part of the school's culture and may be the first people a parent encounters on an open day."

Mo Bosch from the GDST agreed that it is important to involve a school's non-teaching staff, and to consult them on what they consider to be a school's core values and reputation. "By talking to everyone from the governors to staff, parents and alumni, a school will have a more rounded view of its own identity, and will gain the vital buy-in from the school's community."

# 3. Show that you are different

**Once you have defined what makes you special make sure you 'live' the brand in everything you do.**

"It is not enough to say on your website that your school delivers excellent teaching, or makes its pupils feel valued, because all schools say this," said Cath Lane from Catherine Lane PR.

To stand out, schools need to take a different approach and a couple of examples were quoted:

- One school uses images of individual pupils on its website doing what they enjoy – judo or painting – rather than the standard group shots of pupils in uniforms. Any parent visiting the site would see something unique and different about the school immediately.
- Another school wrote an article encouraging parents to put their child at the centre of the process when selecting an independent school. "By doing this they showed that they are living their values by paying individual attention to each child," said Cath. "This article puts that message across more strongly than any school's website copy could."

## 4. Boost your credibility

**Likewise, your school's positive image will be more believable if it is endorsed by a third party.**

Any school can say that it is doing a wonderful job, but it is much more powerful when someone else says the school is doing a wonderful job.

By using PR effectively, and getting others to tell their story, schools gain validation for their message. News stories in magazines, interviews on television, radio and online forums all lend credibility to a school's brand.

Parents spend a lot of time on parenting forums, blogs and social media, so your brand needs coverage in all these areas.

Julie Booth from SIMS Independent explained that schools need to identify opportunities for their success to be acknowledged by others. "Only a handful of the schools which were nominated for ISA Awards had communicated this fact on their website or via social media. As a parent, I would definitely like to know that my child's school had been recognised and was shortlisted for a prestigious award."

## 5. Live and breathe your brand

**The schools with the strongest brands make them part of their identity.**

Two very different examples of schools which embed their brand into every aspect of school life were offered:

- One school which has a green logo and uses this colour throughout the school from the Christmas tree baubles to the ribbons in the girls' hair.
- Another school with an ethos of shared responsibility, which adheres to this by allowing students to be involved in important decisions about the school, including jointly deciding on the length of the school day.

There is a lot more to building a brand than re-designing your logo.

Mo from GDST considered the connection between brand and reputation by drawing attention to two quotes. Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon said, "A brand for a company is like a reputation for a person. You earn reputation by trying to do hard things well."

While according to Socrates, "The way to gain good reputation is to endeavour to be what you desire to appear." That is, reputation does not come from a brochure or a renewed focus on your marketing activities – you have to work hard to achieve a good reputation.

## 6. Harness the power of social media

**By actively engaging in social media, your school can reach out to its audiences.**

There are huge opportunities for schools to strengthen their brands with an effective social media strategy, and while someone in the school should take ownership, there is merit in encouraging everyone to be involved.

"More and more schools are seeing the value of using

Twitter as an effective way to engage parents," said Mo from GDST.

"There are also opportunities to connect with alumni through a Facebook page, and by sharing content on platforms such as Instagram and LinkedIn, as long as the branding is consistent." A short video on YouTube was another example used, as a good way to tell a story and allow schools to appeal to positive emotions in just a few minutes.

## 7. Keep what is good, change what is not

### Does your school need a complete re-brand or simply a tweak?

One of the delegates asked how long a school's brand lasts in an ever-changing world. If all the schools around you seem to be gaining in strength, while your school's brand feels tired, it might be time for a change. "But any sweeping changes need to be managed carefully," suggested Mo Bosch. "Parents consider the history and heritage of a school to be very important, so schools should think twice before leaving behind a school's traditional messages entirely."

Alumni are also notoriously conservative when it comes to changes in brand, as they like to think of their school remaining as it was when they left. So always take their views into consideration – but do not let this hold you back.

The panel advised talking to current parents and finding out what the school represents to them, as these are the values that are most likely to appeal to prospective families too and the ones that should be kept in any rebranding.

## 8. Make your headteacher visible

### Your headteacher could be your school's best advertisement.

One of the first things parents look for on a school's website is a message from the headteacher. However, a lot of websites either do not feature headteacher images or the head is 'hidden' behind a long, bland statement about the school.

An engaging message about a school's ethos coming directly from the head will reach out to a prospective parent.

### ISA Awards Winner Overall Independent School of the Year: St Joseph's College

Winner of Independent School of the Year and Financial/Commercial Initiative of the Year, St Joseph's College in Reading has undergone a dramatic turnaround.

By taking the bold commercial decision to cut fees and increase its capital expenditure, St Joseph's has seen its first trading surplus in nearly a decade, and achieved a significant and sustained rise in pupil numbers.

Re-branding was part of the initiative to build the whole school identity, supported by a campaign to communicate the progress being made under the banner of "Things are happening at St Joseph's." Consistency of branding now runs through all the school's communications from emails and letters to their social media presence.

Renewed interest in the school has led to a growth in pupil numbers – the school roll grew from 358 in September 2012 to 475 in September 2015, with applications for entry continuing to rise.



To find out more and enter the TES Independent School Awards visit [www.isawards.co.uk](http://www.isawards.co.uk)

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