Strategic Communication Tactics of School District Websites in New York State

Executive Summary

This research study examined a sample of 135 New York State school district websites in September 2013 from a strategic communication and public relations perspective to see how districts used websites to inform, engage and build understanding about school districts' educational mission.

A similar study conducted in 2003 by the researcher found school districts were just beginning to understand the power of this technology (Swann, 2006). The 2003 study found that rural New York school districts were significantly less likely than suburban and urban districts to provide certain types of information on their websites. Districts overall didn't update their websites frequently, segment content for different publics or provide general or specific staff email contact information. About 6 percent didn't even have a website.

Now, more than a decade later, school districts' use of websites has advanced considerably in content variety and other features. The disparity between rural districts and suburban/urban districts in terms of content variety and other factors identified in 2003 has vanished. But many districts are not using websites to provide financial information, particularly budget information. School districts for the most part do not provide district-specific information or context on current educational topics, such as assessment. Also lacking were leadership voices. Very few superintendents and high school principals provided context or explanations about various issues affecting the districts. Finally, social media, if used at all by districts, is relegated mostly to the use of Facebook.

While school district websites in this study were effective as information archival systems, providing useful information to key publics such as parents, there is room for improvement in terms of segmenting and creating information for key publics, increasing financial transparency and helping constituents better understand complex educational issues.

Some of the 2014 study's highlights include:

Website Search Engine Optimization – All school districts websites in this study were found on the first page of a Google search when using the district's name.

Navigational Features – Most districts had navigational features to find information. Eighty-one percent of districts had internal search engines, and 45 percent of districts had site maps. Ninety-five percent of districts featured home navigational buttons on interior pages. District home pages conformed to industry design standards for organizing information with 95 percent offering a homepage navigational bar with pull-down menus. Eighty-seven percent of districts had building/grade links from their homepage. Finally, 68 percent of district homepages did not require excessive scrolling to view page items.

Homepage Segmentation of Publics -- School districts still are not likely to segment information for key publics (parents, students, employees, prospective employees, community, alumni and journalists) on their main homepage navigation bar.. The rate in

which districts segmented information for these publics: parents (48%) followed by staff/teachers (47%), community (44%), students (34%), alumni (12%), and prospective employees (6%); school districts in the sample did not provide a main menu navigation bar tab for journalists.

Contact Information -- Ninety percent of districts had a mailing address available on their homepage. Ninety percent of districts provided a main telephone number on their homepage. Districts that provided staff directories (with either telephone or e-mail addresses) were counted. Overall, 83% of districts provided staff directories. Fifty-nine percent of districts provided a central administration directory of contact information.

Content Variety – There were 75 items audited on this study's school district websites from lunch menus to concussion management information. Content variety included 75 items. Scores ranged from 19 to 55 with an average content variety score of 38.13. At the low end, seven school districts reported scores of just 20-25 content items. The majority of schools scored between 30 and 50, with the mean score 38.13; median 39; and the mode 40. The wealth or the size of the district did not provide any additional advantage for basic content variety.

General District Information & Information Freshness – Forty-four percent of districts had a section that included general information about the districts, sometimes called a "district profile" or "about us." Sixty-one percent of districts included their mission and/or vision statements. This study looked for current calendars of events and found that 100% were available on district websites. Nearly all districts (98%) had news announcements on their homepages. High needs rural districts (91%) were slightly less likely to have this information. Sixty-one percent of districts had a recent newsletter (back to school budget, etc.) on their websites.

Content: Current Educational Topics – School were less likely to offer district-specific information on key educational topics that are widely covered in the news media.

- Fifty-four percent of school districts had information or links to information about the NYS Education Department's Report Cards.
- Sixty-one percent of school districts carried information about the new Common Core standards that was created by another source while 16 percent of district provided their own information on Common Core.
- Sixty-seven percent of school districts carried general information about the Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR) for rating the effectiveness of teachers and principals in New York State. Twenty-two percent of school districts carried parent-specific information about the Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR) for rating the effectiveness of teachers and principals in New York State.
- Fifty-two percent of school districts carried information about the Dignity for All Students Act (DASA). Fifty percent of school districts had content that was specific to the school district. Thirty percent of school districts carried information about the school safety issues, such as school safety plans or general tips on how to keep students safe, including Internet safety.
- Forty-five percent carried information about the New York State guidelines or provided other information such as a computer model called ImPACT (https://www.impacttest.com/) for post-concussion assessment. Twenty-eight percent carried district-specific information about the New York State guidelines or provided other information such as the district's policy.

Parent Information – This study examined a variety of types of information likely to interest parents of school-age children. For the most part, districts are providing useful information to this key public. Some examples include: 17 percent of districts featured bus routes, 94 percent featured school lunch menus, and 92 percent featured information about sports/athletics; 58 percent carried information about clubs /extracurricular activities. Ninety percent of districts provided guidance information. Forty-six percent of districts had information specifically tailored for getting ready for the start of a new school year. Ninety percent of districts had school policies or student handbooks. Sixty-eight percent of school districts provided information on parent or booster organizations such as Parent Teacher Associations (PTA) and athletic support groups.

School District Leadership Communication – Surprisingly, school district leaders did not offer much in the way of interesting messages that took a stand on an educational topic or provided context to a complex issue. Generally, district superintendent and high school principal messages were generally of the "welcome back" kind. Hot topics such as the latest school report card data, Common Core, or teacher evaluation plans were hardly mentioned.

Board of Education Information – School districts were doing a good job of providing basic information such as board names (99%), meeting dates (95%) and minutes (90%).

Financial Information – It was difficult to find budget information on district websites. Only 52% of all school districts had two or more items related to the school budget. Just 25% of all districts had information relating to the STAR school tax exemption program.

Employment Information – Districts were providing employment information with 83% offering job listings and application information.

Alumni Information – Alumni information in the form of alumni announcements was present on 57% of the websites followed by alumni directories (32%) and alumni newsletters (14%).

Public Information (publicity) – Districts were unlikely to provide information that was packaged for journalists. Just 22% of school districts had a news release archive, and 4% of districts had an online newsroom.

Social Media – Forty-four percent of districts had some kind of social media linked to their home page. The most popular form of social media was Facebook, a networking site, with 35 districts (26%) followed by Twitter, a microblogging site, 21 districts (16%); leadership blogs, 10 districts (7%); YouTube, a video sharing site, 7 districts (5%); and one district had Instagram, a photo/video sharing site. Pinterest, a photo and video archival site, and Flickr, a photo sharing site did not appear on any school district websites.

References

Swann, Patricia (2006). Got Web? Investing in a District Website, *The School Administrator*, May 2006, pp 24-27; 29-30.