

# What principals need to know about the *principles* ~~principals~~ of school marketing

If you've learned marketing by working in schools,  
it's time for a reboot

by Denis Masseni  
The sponsor-ed Group



# Introduction

If you've learned your marketing by working in schools, then stand by for a contemporary marketing education right-sized for you.

If you can't reach into your drawer and put your hand on your marketing plan, if you've started on your branding guide before your strategy, or if you don't have the luxury of a full time Director of Marketing then your plan is contained in these pages.

This is not a puff piece. These strategies have been implemented across many schools.

The concepts and strategies presented recognise that you do not have a formal marketing background, are time poor and strapped for resources both in terms of labour and capital. You are an education expert, not a marketing expert.

**Explained is where to spend your time and where not to.** And the principles remain the same whether you're trying to arrest an enrolment slide, harbour growth ambitions or are simply more interested in managing perceptions of your school,

So, grab your highlighter and let's go. In an hour's time, you'll become a better marketer and your school will benefit.

## About the author

### Denis Masseni

After eighteen years in the corporate world, working across sales, marketing, product development and management, in 2000 I stumbled into academia. I became a sessional lecturer at Monash University, teaching marketing to design students. I loved it so much I left my corporate career and for around six years, was appointed the Program Manager of the inaugural Masters of Multimedia/Design degree.

In 2007, I started dabbling with a few digital business ideas until I founded The sponsored Group; a web design company having now built hundreds of websites for schools across Australia.

I returned to Monash teaching from 2008, again around marketing with an emphasis on digital and also taught public relations at RMIT University,

From 2008 I served on the school board of CBC St Kilda, ultimately becoming Chairman.

In 2014 I was appointed to the Victorian Executive of the Australian Council for Educational Leaders (ACEL) serving for six years. winning a President's Award in 2016 and was recently inducted as an ACEL Fellow.

In 2010 I wrote a paper titled *Why Schools are Spooked by Social Media*, that set about demystify the growing world of social. I hope this paper will do the same for school marketing.

I've spoken at education conferences around the country and developed a series of PD's on 'Facebook for Schools', 'PR for Principals: managing the vibe' and 'School Marketing'.

My links to education started way before the journey described above. I married a teacher, well, now Deputy Principal.

I'm very happy to be in your world.

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# 1

## The Data

Every plan commences with a data collection phase designed to inform the strategy, sometimes called the discovery. You will collect two types of data; **quantitative** and **qualitative**.

There are many useful sources of quantitative data such as [findmyschool.vic.gov.au](http://findmyschool.vic.gov.au) for zoning, [myschool.edu.au](http://myschool.edu.au) for NAPLAN and enrolments and [abs.gov.au](http://abs.gov.au) for population trends.

# Quantitative data

If you're in an enrolment slide, the aim of the data is to identify where the problem lies. Is it that you're in a population bubble and no school around you is growing, or are you moving backwards against the trend? If you're a secondary school, an analysis of your feeder school's enrolments is useful.

Below is an example of a 'feeder school' analysis.

In the case of (the fictitious) Allentown SC, enrolments have grown over 6 years (except for 2018). Whilst there's been a 25% increase in the total feeder school enrolments, there has only been an 11% increase in Allentown SC's over the period.

There's a problem.

## QUANTITATIVE DATA

- Population trends
- Enrolment trends
- Cross-sector analysis
- NAPLAN

Enrolments	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Allentown Secondary College	910	915	952	1002	998	1010
Allentown South Primary School	317	328	358	373	382	426
Allentown Primary School	555	582	600	615	635	606
Catmore Primary School	297	346	399	432	491	521
Bingdale Primary School	710	704	723	759	775	805
<b>Total Feeder</b>	1879	1960	2080	2179	2283	2358

# Qualitative data

As you'll see from the list (right), the hunt for qualitative data resides with you. Don't discount 'your gut' as a good source of market intelligence. Let's face it, you won't have the benefit of engaging an expensive research firm, so just gather as much data as you can, socialise the issues widely with your stakeholders and then, when no new information is forthcoming, stop and start building your marketing plan.

The qualitative data will inform one of the most important pillars of the marketing plan; 'The Messaging'. You will be gathering information about people's perceptions of the school, its programs, staff and community. There are many mechanisms available to you to gather this data, such as surveys, interviews, school-yard chats and focus groups.

Don't worry about conforming to any statistical rigour here, instead look for some consistent descriptions/language. **Remember, this is about understanding perceptions** and may have no basis in fact. I was privy to a school's formal review and noted that the school was marked down for its range of extracurricular activities, where in fact, its offerings were extensive. The issue was that when it promoted its extracurricular activities, the title of 'extracurricular' was not used. Perceptions hey?

You may not be surprised by any of the results of the qualitative analysis, but don't miss the point, look for language, words people use. The greatest qualitative data you can collect is that of the experiences of your most recent recruits; Foundation (prep) and Year 7 parents. And if you can, speaking with those that may have enquired, even completed an enrolment form, but chose another school, would be very enlightening. Learning about their decision-making process, perceptions of competing schools and, ultimately, why they chose you.

## QUALITATIVE DATA

- Prep interviews
- School reviews
- Parent feedback
- Your gut



*Learn about their decision-making process, perceptions of competing schools and, ultimately, why they chose you.*





# 2

## The Messages

Marketing is simply getting your target audience to react to your message.

You will manage two types of messages; 'public relations' and 'call to action'.

**Public Relations** messaging is the slow burner, percolating in the community over time, seeking to form positive perceptions of the school.

If you need a definition of PR, here's one from the PR Institute of Australia:

*"Public relations is the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics".*

**Call to Action** messaging is simply 'now' orientated. Book a school tour, attend a webinar etc.

A few years ago, I conducted school newsletter research, looking for evidence of a methodology. I pulled apart 200 newsletters (yes, you heard right!) across various sectors and regions and determined that writing was random; informed mainly by current school activities rather than strategy.

No strategy, just administrative convenience. Here's an example of what I mean.

I recently audited a school's communications output and observed that around 30% of the newsletter was dedicated to the art program. Now art is important, as are all subjects, but at 30% it was overrepresented. Why? Well, it was because the art teacher was an enthusiastic content contributor, and it made the publisher's job so much easier to fill the newsletter's page quota.

No strategy, just administrative convenience.

The school newsletter is a public relations exercise and as such should conform to the principles of good PR; staying on message with repetition for reinforcement. Write four articles about your STEM program over four weeks and you'll be perceived as a STEM school.


The research determined that in fact, 85% of a school's newsletter is PR, the rest is what I call logistics (things you want parents\* to do, such as note a date, return a form etc.)

The '6 Key Message' PR concept (developed by yours truly) came from the research and was designed to manage perceptions. This is part of the public relations strategy; it's the slow burner designed to manage perceptions over time.

Every time you write, you should be informed by the key messages so perceptions can be managed and reinforced.

You should seek to use consistent phrasing, so this language can be used by others when describing your school.

I recently saw a wonderful quote regarding branding (another marketing term – there's no shortage of them), which is largely what the 6 Key Message concept is about.



**BRAND IS WHAT  
PEOPLE ACTUALLY SAY  
WHEN YOU'RE NOT  
AROUND**

*Ray Brown  
Archibiz Co-Founder & Chief Mentor*

# 6 Key Messages

The 6 key messages shown below are real, they're part of a past consulting assignment. There's not a lot detail there, but you get the gist.

1

## Position the Principal as the Education Leader

Demonstrates expertise, speaks of broader educational issues, is seen to be involved...

2

## Position the Teachers as the Learning Leaders

Promote qualifications, PD's, teaching successes, passions

3

## Parent Stories (just like me)

Prospective parents will want to feel that there's parents 'like them' at Allentown SC. Also feature high achieving parents, professional community, parent helpers etc.

4

## Academic Student Outcomes

Feature curriculum, academic successes

5

## External Advocates

Alumni stories. Also feature non-white collar achievements for balance, feeder schools etc

6

## Resources/Infrastructure

Allentown SC has outstanding buildings – feature them and other resources not widely known.

To keep you on track, you could create a publishing timeline that would see you balance your writing of the 6 key messages over the course of a term.

Message	wk1	wk2	wk3	wk4	wk5	wk6	wk7	wk8	wk9	wk10
1 Principal			✓			✓			✓	
2 Teachers	✓			✓			✓			
3 Parents		✓			✓			✓		
4 Students				✓			✓			✓
5 External	✓		✓		✓			✓		
6 Resources		✓				✓				✓

# The Principal and Teachers

While I suggest that you create 6 key messages, I will insist that the first two are mandatory, the other four you can craft.

**Positioning the principal as the education leader is critical.** Research tells us that one of the key determining factors for parents choosing a school, is their confidence in the leadership. So, when you write, remember you're the expert, avoid writing about admin/logistics issues. That's the business manager's role.

Write about broad educational issues, help parents make sense of the media narrative around education. Tell them about a book you've read, conference attended, paper written, exemplar school your researching, share with them a recent newspaper article.

Now the teachers; the actual delivers of your product. The pointy end. The one's whose credentials are kept invisible from the world. Wait? What?

Humility is a noble thing but with the talent pool at your disposal, a little reveal of the extent of the teacher's professional development and capabilities, would help the positioning of the school.

So, we'll position the **teachers as the learning leaders.**

I was at a school a few years ago setting up for some web training. There were four teachers in attendance. and they were buzzing, not because of my training, but about a PD they'd recently attended. They'd implemented some of the PD's suggestions to amazing affect. I asked them if they intended telling the parents about their learnings, results and excitement. Deer in headlights. Do what?

Now I will excuse them; teachers are not normally on the lookout for PR pieces. This experience piqued my interest, so I went looking for examples of teacher's qualifications being displayed or, heaven forbid, promoted on school websites and newsletters. Zip. Null. Nothin'.

There's marketing gold in those credentials. I did a back-of-the-envelope calculation using my wife's primary school of sub-300 students and found that over 10,000 hours of combined PD time had been undertaken.

But wait, there's more; over 140 years of teaching experience, across six countries with three staff having completed master's qualifications and one along the way. This is a serious learning machine; one of thousands scattered across the country.

**Hey people, you're very good at what you do.**

*Time to tell your story.*

# Call to action

Call to action messages require little strategy other than **they should be clear about what 'action' you want the audience to take** and make it easy for them to take it. Your 'book a school tour' promotion is classic call to action messaging. How easy is it really to book a tour?

Call to action messages tend to be orientated around either an event, or some kind of form filling/registration process.

The pandemic has presented us with many challenges, and a smattering of opportunities too; remote learning being one. People's comfort now with Zoom style webinars is one such opportunity. I've heard that Zooms are considered the 21st century's séance... "hello, is there anyone there?"

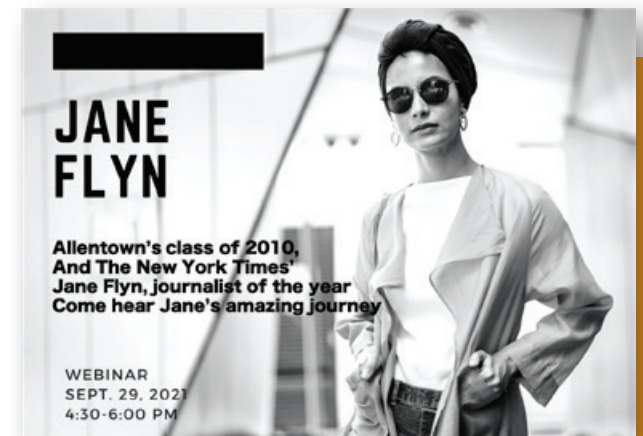
In any marketing activity, you want your audience to touch your brand as often as possible. This serves as a primer for an enquiry. How about organising a webinar once per term?

Consider your audience as parents and also students. Promote the event to your installed community and more broadly, pick up on prospective parents/students. Webinars make it easy for attendees – no travel – and more comfortable for many speakers.

For parents there's the classic parenting seminars but think more broadly and look at webinars on careers or have your local Uni talk about tertiary life. How about calling on a successful alumnus? You're better at working this out than I am.

Don't forget prospective students (more for secondary school). There may be local musicians (ok rappers if you must) and invite them to run a session. I'm hearing that students have a voice in their future school selection. Consider being the cool school.

Consider adding some fame to your brand (leveraging another person/entity's brand can rub off on yours) by hosting, say, an 'Apple careers in tech webinar' (or Google, Microsoft, Atlassian etc.). The point here is use webinars to allow prospects to engage with your brand. This very soft sell will build a comfort level and prime a prospect to begin a dialogue with your school.



Before we leave this section on messaging, if you've studied marketing, you may be thinking, where's the section on differentiation? The bit where we point out our unique strengths over our competitors.

**From an outsider's perspective, all schools look the same**, at least within a sector. Boom. There I said it. I mean no disrespect, but my mission here is to make you a better marketer. Tough love.

Now there are differences, but they are unmarketable. A few times a year, *The Age Good Weekend* runs an education supplement. A number of schools participate and, well, they all look the same. They are all wellbeing schools, all concerned with presenting students with opportunities to grow etc, etc, and etc. The imagery is so similar, as are the stories used to describe the schools. Am I being harsh?

In late December last year, when the ATAR scores were released, there was a flurry of schools promoting their successes with their overall score, publicising the number of students above a 90 and of course those with the perfect 99.95. This is defensible, absolute, differentiation. In some parent's minds, the ATAR school with a 36 is likely better than the school with a 30. By the way I don't think this way – I'm on your side.

So, what do you do if you haven't got the big ATAR?  
All is not lost; far from it.



*The Age, Good Weekend*  
October 24, 2020

# Distinctiveness

*How Brands Grow: what  
marketers don't know*  
Byron Sharp, Oxford University  
Press, 2010

I was conducting a discovery session with a school, gathering data to inform the build of their marketing plan. They said one of their differences was how well they performed with the flip to remote learning.

A very contemporary skill and one earned on the fly. Kudos.

Parents praised their speed of implementation and the care given to the students. They felt that they did it best and they had heard of some fails at their competing school. Ok then, how do you market that? How do you say 'best' with believability?

In his book *How Brands Grow*, author Byron Sharp suggests that marketing to differentiation is old school (sorry) thinking because, in almost every market there are like products.

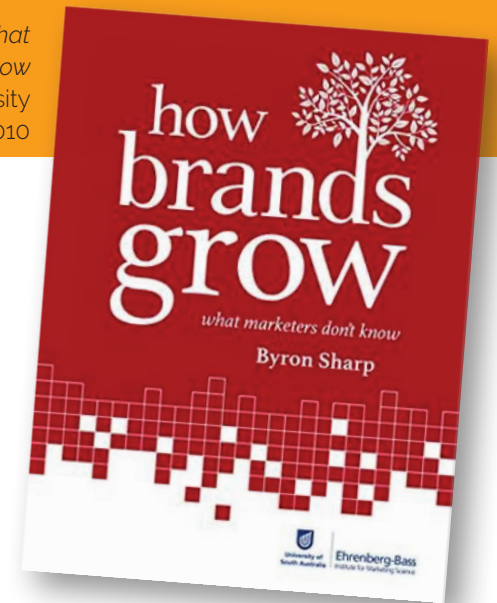
"Brands, even though they are usually slightly differentiated, mainly compete as if they are near lookalikes, though they vary in popularity". said Sharp. Sounds like the education market.

Finally, there's an answer.

"Therefore, marketers need to improve the branding of their product (i.e. It needs to look like them and only them)."

Sharp offers us the answer, and it's **replace the marketing mission of differentiation with that of distinctiveness**. It's not semantics. Distinctiveness gives all schools struggling for enrolments hope. It says, ignore the competition, just be you.

If you believe that school marketing does not sell an enrolment but can only sell an enquiry, this too gives us hope. It means that even if the prospective parent isn't convinced about your school, they can be convinced to take a tour, even if it's tokenism. If you can get them inside the gate, then hopefully you can build confidence that your school's right for their child.



“

*Ignore the competition, just be you.*

”



# Visuals

The best form of conveying distinctiveness is in visuals. I worked with Kananook Primary and to my surprise, learned that they have a bus – have had for some 20 years. Well, this presented a great opportunity to put the distinctiveness theory into action. We had the bus wrapped in a big yellow vinyl sticker. All other external signage they now produce will be predominantly yellow. They will own yellow in town. They will be distinctive.

Using a tertiary example, Victoria University knows that it does not have the pulling power of a Melbourne or a Monash University; I don't mean to offend. VU does not try to market its difference, it markets its distinctiveness, through visuals.

The blue box is highly associated with VU, and as Sharp says, “it looks like them and only them”.

“

*It looks like them and only them*

”





Continuing with my fascination of colours, what about a past campaign from Wesley College, circa 2005? The tag line was, "Success has a purple lining." And they owned purple. Everything they did, had a heavy dose of purple. Were they targeting parents with a love purple? They were marketing to stand-out. They wanted to be distinctive. They wanted that enquiry.

It's interesting to note the tag lines of other 'like' schools of that era. You could swap the tag lines from any of the schools with another to no great affect, but you could not do it with Wesley. they own purple. Purple, as Byron Sharp describes, "is them and only them".

Speaking of purple. Cadbury got itself in a pickle (I know pickles are green) when they tried to trademark purple, such was their desire to stand out on supermarket shelves. They lost the case by the way.

The tag lines perhaps serve as an internal beacon for strategy development and decision making and of course that's fine, but as a marketing tool, they are generally, very difficult to convey.

There is more to distinctiveness over differentiation beyond visuals, but it's the easiest to explain and will segue nicely into the chapter on Mediums and in particular, 'local community', showing how your brand can jump the fence.



Wesley College *"Success has a purple lining."*

St Catherine's School *"The difference is in the detail."*

St Kevin's College *"Valuing learning, family and fullness of life."*

St Michael's Grammar School *"Diversity opens minds."*

Melbourne Girls Grammar *"Moving with the times."*

The Hamilton & Alexandra College *"Shaping the future."*

Source: <https://www.theage.com.au/national/the-hard-sell-20050922-geowwj.html>

# 3

## The Mediums

We've covered 'messaging' but how are the messages conveyed to the target audience? It's through a range of mediums, some are digital, and others are, well, not.

Don't think it's all about digital. Many of your more traditional mediums are still very relevant, I'm going to show you how to use them all more effectively.

# The Marketing Plan

It's time to introduce your new marketing plan framework.

Here is a simple diagram to help you make sense of your marketing activities. You have two message types that will pass through a range of mediums.

The best messaging strategy can be wasted, if each medium, through which the message passes, is not thoroughly understood and optimised.

A Facebook post sent at the wrong time, can either find no audience, or a distracted one. Each medium has its own dynamic. Do you know that your most powerful medium is not digital; as many marketing agencies will have you believe.

No, I'm not going to tell you now, you'll have to read on a bit further. Allow me some click-bait please.

Let's now explore all your messaging mediums., but first, some theory you can truly work with.

“*Your most powerful medium is not digital*”

## Marketing Plan Framework

### Data Analysis

Discovery: quantitative, qualitative

### Messages

Public Relations & Call to Action

### Mediums

Digital, Local Community, Parents, The School Tour, External Advocates and Representation

### Audience

### Data Analysis

Conversion data & Post tour reviews

# Messaging context

The advent of digital has had a profound effect on communications. Obvious I know, but many tend to focus on the devices themselves such as smart phones, as the game changers.

However, there has been a seismic shift in the way our brains engage with content too. These days we need it in small bite-sized chunks, only a few articles at a time, mobile friendly, with an image to attract our eye, skimmable with 'read mores' to keep things light weight and "tailored for me". Certainly, doesn't sound like a traditional PDF school newsletter.

You can thank Facebook for most of this shift.

At this early stage in our analysis of mediums, I'd like to introduce you to one of my most profound communication's learnings, the concept of **context**.

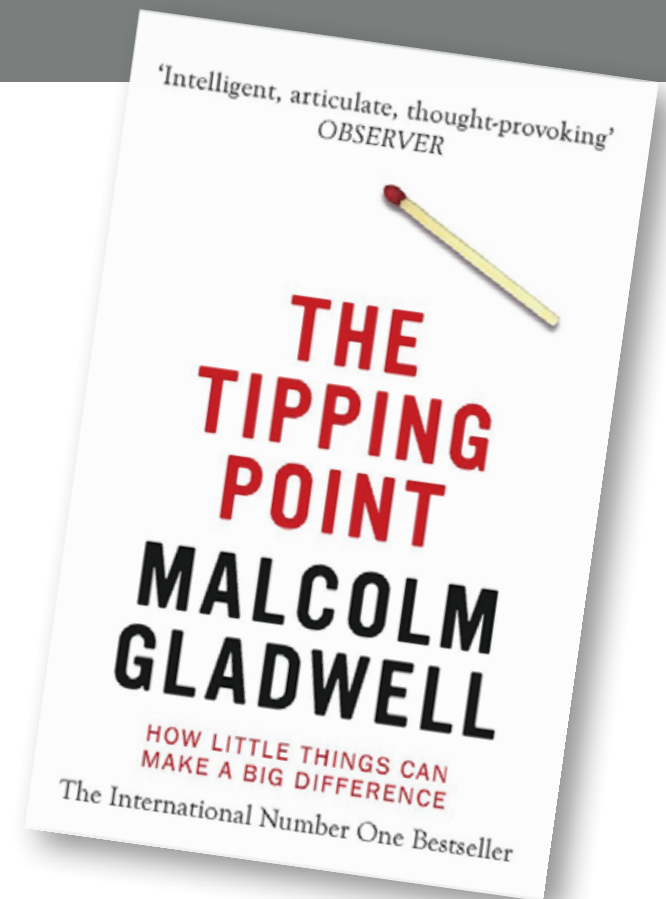
The book *The Tipping Point* by Malcolm Gladwell, mapped the marketing phenomenon of 'word of mouth' marketing to epidemiology. Don't think the irony is not lost on me here. Thanks to COVID, we've all become experts in the spread of viruses, so I'm anticipating you will truly understand Gladwell's theory.

The spread of viruses is contextual. You need a sticky virus, a fertile environment, an able carrier and an accepting receiver.

If at any point of the virus continuum, one of the components fails to do its bit, the virus is no longer transmissible. Gladwell suggested replacing the word 'virus' with the word 'message'.

“

*there's been a seismic shift in the way  
our brains engage with content*



*The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* by Malcolm Gladwell, first published by Little, Brown in 2000

”

Firstly, the message needs to be sticky. Sticky is not a universal measure, what's sticky for you is not necessarily sticky for me. My dishwasher broke down last week and from that day onwards, any whitegoods advertisement jumped out at me. Very sticky. One of the stickiest elements is relevance.

For schools, the stickiest content of them all is 'my child'. A photo, a video, a story concerning my child will have me sit up and pay attention. The message now needs a fertile environment, which I would suggest is culture; a culture that specifically affects message engagement. If the culture of school communications is one where parents don't read the newsletter, or where the belief is that the school writes too much, or there's never anything of any value, then, the environment is not doing its bit to propagate the message.

Expand this to a prospective parent and the theory still holds up. If the perception of the

school is in any way negative, the message will just not get a hearing.

Now the finding of an able carrier. Well, that's easy. The accessibility of smart phones, the short form messaging of Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and apps all make messaging irresistible, or some say, addictive. It's been well documented that these platforms/devices do give us a smack of dopamine. The happy juice.

Technology has presented us with powerful carriers, but the most powerful message carrier of all, for your school, is your school's parents. But not all of them. Gladwell's main tenant is 'the law of few'. Remember he started out trying to deconstruct 'word of mouth' marketing. The discovery was that only a few people can truly propel word of mouth. More on this later in the paper.

The last part is the receptibility of the intended audience. And the most significant

impediment to engagement is timing; both in the form of day of the week and time of day. There's been many studies regarding the optimum time to deliver a message and it varies depending on many factors such as the content category (retail, travel, services etc), content type (marketing, news etc), the delivery platform (email, twitter etc) . Gets a bit complicated this messaging stuff.

Several years ago, I was lecturing at RMIT University in a PR program, one of my students was from Vic Health. They found message engagement was best at lunchtime – between 12pm and 2pm on Twitter. Think about it. I'm taking a break, sandwich in one hand, mobile in the other. I'm receptive. Same tweet at 10am and it will simply vanish from view.

**Same message, different context, different engagement.**



“What's undisputed is that time and day has a dramatic affect on engagement.”

I've seen research suggesting that an email sent pre 8am has a 3 times better engagement than the same email sent at 4pm. And I've seen research that's said the opposite.

On the right are examples of social media posting research.

For Instagram you can see how optimum engagement by industry type varies by time of day. For Twitter and education content, the extensive heat map tells us that Saturday's best.

Most of the research on engagement involves marketing type communications which isn't quite the same as a school newsletter.

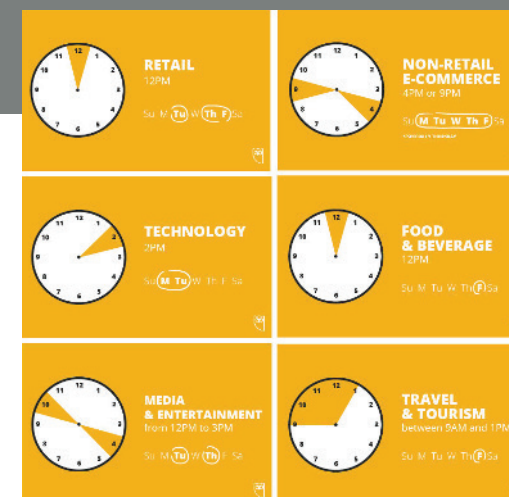
In my own experience, I've been advocating that schools send their newsletters on the weekend; a time when parents are less rushed. The theory has proven to be correct with at least a 30% plus lift in open rates.

Generally, a school will send its newsletter on a particular day of the week (or fortnight) but the time of day will vary depending on when the administrator finds the time to press send.

Note too, that if email is your carrier, then you have 24 hours before the message disappears from view under the weight of an ever expanding inbox. It's actually hours at best.

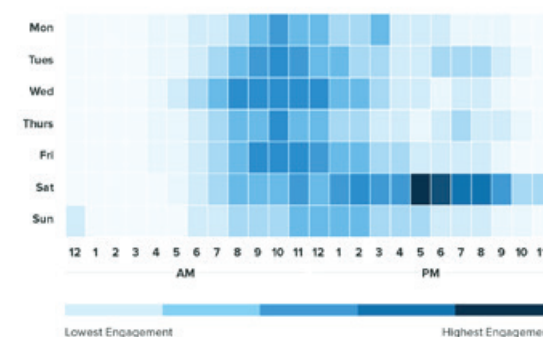
What's undisputed is that time and day has a dramatic affect on engagement. Find your sweet spot by using analytics and by experimenting.

## Best times to post on Instagram



[adespresso.com/blog/best-times-to-post-on-instagram/](https://adespresso.com/blog/best-times-to-post-on-instagram/)

## Best times to post on Twitter



- Best times: **Saturday, 5–6 p.m.**
- Best day: **Saturday**
- Worst day: **Sunday**

[sproutsocial.com/insights/best-times-to-post-on-social-media/](https://sproutsocial.com/insights/best-times-to-post-on-social-media/)

In the early days of digital communications, the mantra was *content is king*. It made sense. The challenge was to create the stickiest articles. You'd look at the engagement stats and if you had a spike, you'd try to replicate it. As we learned more about engagement analytics, it became apparent that day of the week and time of day were the greater influencers. as too was length of article, delivery platform, and so on.

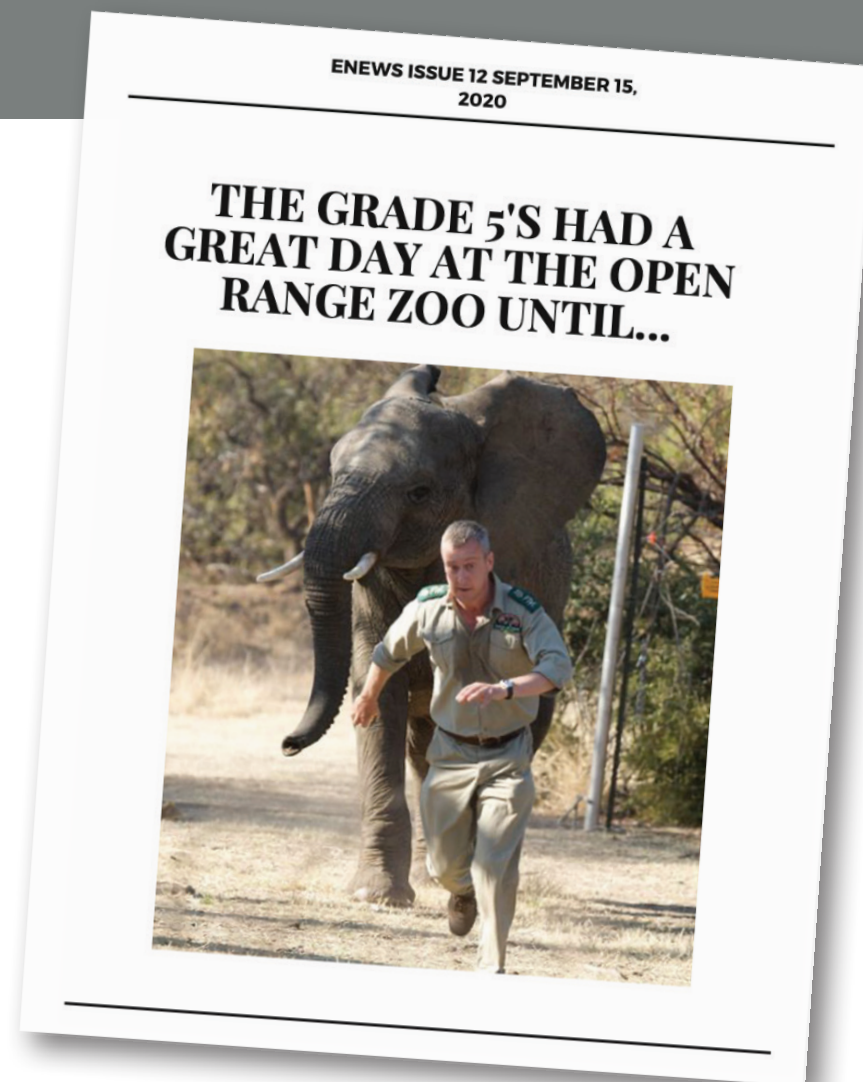
### **Content is nothing without context.**

Let's not forget the power of a headline. There's nothing stopping you having a little fun with click bait. How often do you see an article headed 'Principal's Message', every week, every year. Doesn't draw you in does it?

A little subtext would give it a lift such as, 'Principal's Message: 5 tips on remote learning', or 'Principal's Message: would I have become a teacher?'.

Headlines are part of the context theory, anything is that goes to adorn a message. I wonder what the engagement would be like if the story on the right appeared in the next edition of your newsletter. I do amuse myself sometimes.

Enough about Malcolm Gladwell and context, let's now explore the range of mediums.



# 4

## Your website

Your website, your marketing front door.

Every prospective parent will visit your site at least once throughout their enquiry process.

I would hope by now, your website is mobile friendly. **Over 70% of all traffic to the school sites we manage comes from mobiles.** It was less than 20% 3 years ago.

As I hope your website is mobile friendly, I too hope that it has an SSL certificate loaded and is secure. The best way to stop dead a visitor perusing your site is to greet them with the 'Not Secure' message in the address bar.



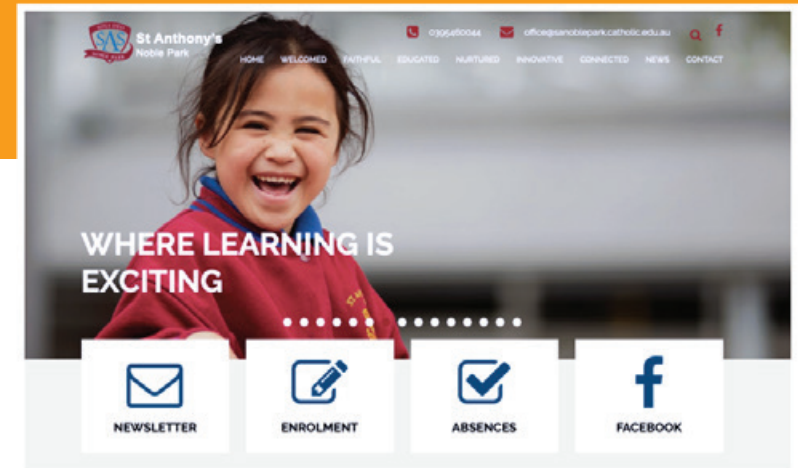
You know that beautiful 23-inch screen you have in your office, the one you use to edit your website? Well, your website doesn't look like that on a mobile.

A website is simply this: a frame on which you can present your content in the form of text and images. (video too). On a desktop, you can get the full effect of some tricky design techniques, but on a mobile, the frame essentially disappears and what you're left with is the text and images.

So, going back to distinctiveness, your effort in presenting visuals in a more impactful way, will not be lost on mobiles, just don't get too hung up about overly creative websites.

Images on a mobile still punch through, it's only the web frame that's compromised.

My first job was working for Kodak, so I have respect for photography. All of us now have incredibly sophisticated cameras in the palm of our hands in the form of smart phones. The latest versions produce professional quality photos with one of the most impactful features being 'portrait' mode; the ability to get in close to the subject and blur the background (see example on right). The technique is called depth of field.



*See more examples of the depth of field technique  
at [sanoblepark.catholic.edu.au](http://sanoblepark.catholic.edu.au)*

Sure, get a professional photographer to take photos for some of your publications, but your website can be sustained with smart phone photography. **Your website should be a nimble space reflecting your latest activities which can be captured easily with your own phone.**

I've built hundreds of websites for schools over thirteen years and have evolved with you. I've concluded that a website needs to look contemporary and be well organised; they're more tonal and practical, rather than a space for entertainment.

More importantly, the site needs to be easy to use, because a motivated publisher can significantly move along your marketing effort by simply wanting to publish..

Search Engine Optimisation (SEO), for the suburban Public/Catholic school is not anywhere near as important as it is for a commercial organisation. SEO means being found on a Google search (or Bing and others) against a particular keyword/s. By now I'm sure you've been spammed by company's offering their SEO services.

SEO is highly valuable if you're selling, for example, bicycles targeting Melbourne's northern suburbs. A target audience of perhaps hundreds of thousands in a highly competitive space with buyers willing to travel to find the best deal. You need page 1 visibility on a Google search to be in the game.

Take a suburban school. Your community know that you exist. They're unlikely to Google 'high schools near me'. At least I hope not.

Most of your SEO improvement will come from content marketing which is largely the essence of this paper. Writing original content, reasonably often, using key phrases/words.

SEO is important, for example, if you run an International Baccalaureate Program, given that it's a niche offering, it may not be widely known by your community.

And of course, if you are targeting international students (although COVID has parked this for the time being), then being found on a Google search is critical.

## Website Tips

- Align content to your 6 key messages – homepage at least – and present with lead sentences and 'read more' click to the full story.
- Photographic Tips; get in close to your subjects and have the sun behind you (make sure your subjects aren't squinting)
- Story tell with some text supporting your images
- Have a clear and prominent school tour booking and enquiry process. Critical.
- Measure your web traffic and at least each term, review content.
- Make most hit pages easily and quickly accessible
- Recognise that some of your traffic will come from prospective parents and make the content they're seeking, easily and quickly accessible

# 5

## Social media

The strategy behind your social media posts, is based on your 6 key messages, writing with purpose.

The advent of social media has turned inorganic content organic. Outside of social media, a message delivered by an organisation, always remains in its original form. With social, the message changes shape as likes, shares and comments are added.

Social media has become a game of pass-the-parcel but in reverse. Instead of layers being peeled off as the parcel passes around the group, layers are now added onto the original message.

How do you react to a message when you see a post pop up with 300 likes? Makes you stop and look.

When a friend shares a post, again you're more likely to pay attention. Why? It becomes a form of endorsement. Value has been added to content in a way a school newsletter cannot. Social media is not a replacement for your school newsletter, just another part of the media mix with its own contextual dynamics.

I had an amazing experience recently where a parent, on a community Facebook page, asked "I'm thinking about sending my kids to ...". You can see (right) how the simple question become a wonderful endorsement platform for Kananook Primary. There were around 80 positive messages.

**Of all social media, Facebook will work best for you.** It has the biggest audience and its demographics lines up with your parent population. Love it or hate it, it just works. If your school's not on social media, Facebook is the place to start. If you need a hand, check out our Facebook PDs at [sponsor-ed.com.au/page/186/Facebook-for-Schools-](https://sponsor-ed.com.au/page/186/Facebook-for-Schools-)

Twitter doesn't really work as a parent connector; however, for teacher to teacher sharing of information it's powerful.

I've not seen many schools participate in Instagram, but those that have are mainly secondary. And YouTube, as a dedicated channel, is quite niche. It's an obvious choice for your media class, but if you do shoot a lot of video that has broad appeal, then 'push' it out through Facebook.

## Social Media Tips

- Write informed by 6 key messages: 2 to 3 per week
- Keep it short; image, one sentence, two at most
- Ensure one 'book a tour' post per week in peak enrolment season
- Post to a schedule and experiment with times/days
- Measure engagement and adjust posting accordingly

**Kristy** .....  
I am a parent at Kananook and currently have 1 student at the school and another one who finished 2 years ago. It is everything as it seems plus more. It has such a community feel, the programs they offer go far beyond the classroom experience and the ... **See more**

**Bridgette** .....  
My daughter is in grade 6 at Kananook, and we are sad to be leaving at the end of the year. It's a fantastic school, and worth looking into!  
It has a lovely inclusive culture, and amazing staff!!

Like · Reply · 3 d



**Nicol** .....  
Had two girls there and always found all the staff approachable kind and committed. Size provides the most incredible community experience. Culture is creative positive and current. Definitely do a tour and if you can do a couple of drive byes during... **See more**

Like · Reply · 3 d



# 6

## Digital advertising

Facebook is an incredibly powerful digital marketing tool. Schools generally don't go much beyond using Facebook for simple posts.

**It's time to grow your digital marketing literacy.**



Facebook's advertising power is that it's highly targeted and affordable.



If you're in an enrolment battle, then you just must come to grips with the immense targeting power of Facebook advertising. Don't be scared, I can map a journey for you.

About 10 years ago, I wrote a paper titled, *Why Schools are Spooked by Social Media*.

[sponsor-ed.com.au/page/186/Facebook-for-Schools-](https://sponsor-ed.com.au/page/186/Facebook-for-Schools-)

At that point in time, the corporate sector and the Private schools were onboard. They'd rationalised their risk exposure, in terms of people's ability to comment in a public forum (good and bad) and the move to social from traditional media. They needed to follow the eyeballs. Public and Catholic schools were just starting to dabble, but there was fear. Why would they want to participate in a medium that was one of the main culprits of cyber bullying?

The main purpose of the paper, *Why Schools are Spooked by Social Media*, was to demystify the medium and show how to move forward, safely. I feel it's now time to show you a path forward with digital advertising.

Facebook marketing tools are directed primarily to small business. and it's here I find a parallel with Public/Catholic schools. Time poor, mid-tech skills, stretched resources in both labour and capital.

Facebook's advertising power is that it's highly targeted and affordable. You can run campaigns from \$5.00 per day. And you can set a budget and let the Facebook system manage to it.

Facebook advertising setup and management can be taught, there's no end of YouTube tutes. But perhaps the best way forward is to ride with an expert for a period, and then fly solo once you're comfortable.

With advertising, especially if you've never played with digital, it's all about experimentation, seeking to discover the content mix that will achieve the best engagement. The analytics you get with any digital media is incredibly forensic giving you every opportunity to find the sweet spot.

David Ogilvy, the head of the famous Ogilvy & Mather advertising agency, wrote in his 1963 book, *Confessions of an Advertising Man*, that a client of his once commented that "Half the money I spend on advertising is wasted, and the trouble is I don't know which half." Well, you do these days.

I'll take you through three Facebook advertising variants:

- Boost
- Ads
- Pixel

With any form of advertising, there's a target audience and a message.

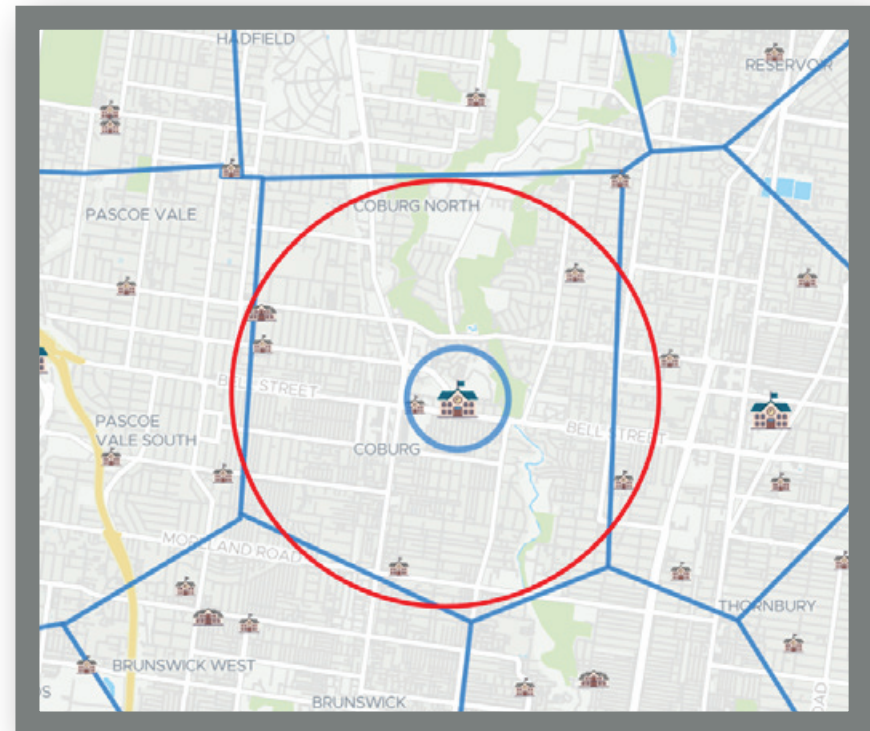
**Facebook allows you to direct your ad by location, demographics, interests and behaviours.** This is extremely powerful because traditional advertising's targeting was nominal at best, especially location wise. Even your local newspaper advertising was delivered to a catchment beyond your own and to an audience much larger than your intended target. There was considerable leakage.

For schools, I would suggest targeting in a radius around your address.

In the example opposite, a 3km radius was set for location targeting, and for illustrative purposes, overlaid onto the findmyschool.vic.gov.au zone maps.

The next step is to choose your target audience. This is easy, unlike in the northern suburb bike shop example I gave earlier. For a bike shop, your demographics may be broad, say male/female 18 to 70 years of age. You're looking for people interested in bike riding, who like the outdoors, drive an SUV, have a middle to upper income and more.

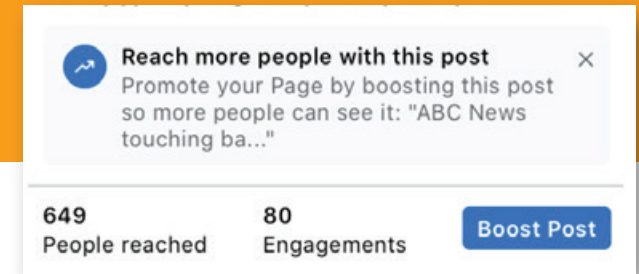
With schools, it's much simpler.



*(location was chosen randomly for illustrative purposes only)*



# Facebook Boost



In the Facebook Ad Manager console, target parents by selecting **Demographics> Parents> Parents (all)**.

You can also add the age range of parent's children and age range of parents.

One of the downsides with the use of Facebook advertising and the local Public/Catholic school is that the target may be too small. I mentioned that advertising is about experimentation. I would start by just targeting parents and adjust over time.

When you first open the Facebook Ad Manager, it can look like the cock pit of a 747; so many controls. For the sophisticated marketer, they'll use many of the levers, but for schools, there are very few you need.

**Location: target by radius (km's)**

**Gender/Age**

**Demographic/Interests/Behaviours: Parents**

That's your controls done.

## Next step. Your ads.

There are two paid ad types; a Facebook Boost and Facebook Ads.

If your school's already onboard with Facebook, you will have seen the boost button appear if you're the page's administrator. The boost option simply takes one of your existing posts and pushes it beyond your band of followers. FB will send it to your target audience. That's it.

So why would you want to boost a post? Sometimes you'll create a post that will have a promotable story, perhaps something unique. Something you think may resonate with a prospective parent. Generally, an ad has a call to action; you want someone to do something, such as book a tour, attend open day etc.

However, the messaging strategy discussed in this paper tells us that there are two forms of messaging (see page 9): **PR** (a story told over time through 6 key messages) and **Call to action**.

In summary: a boost post started life as just a post. It's only after the initial publishing to your followers that the post was pushed to your target audience.



# Facebook ads

Facebook Ads is content that has been specifically created as an ad to hit your target audience, unlike a boost that started life as a regular post.

Facebook advertising would be high on call to action. You can see the BOOK NOW call to action button in the ad (right). You would use the same targeting setup as a boost; location by radius and then aimed at parents. That's it.

I haven't mentioned the use of Google Ads. Worldwide Google's ad revenue is twice that of Facebook's, so why no mention?

Further back in this paper I talked about website SEO and being found on Google. Same approach to ads. You generally won't have a 'search' issue, your community know you exist., unless you offer niche or internationally targeted education, then Google Ads is appropriate.

**Note:** Please don't use the setup information presented here as a user manual. This information is indicative only. As mentioned, if you're a Facebook ad newbie, it's best to ride with an expert at least initially. There's also the fact that social media controls, especially ad management are constantly changing. None of this should preclude you at some stage of your marketing journey from 'having a go'.



The image shows a Facebook advertisement for Bentleigh Secondary College. At the top, the college's logo and name are displayed, followed by 'Sponsored' and a globe icon. The main text of the ad reads: 'Weekend Tours are now available. Due to overwhelming demand new College Tour times and days have been ...see more'. Below this is a large photograph of students in school uniforms sitting on a green lawn under a black canopy. The text 'Bentleigh Secondary College WEEKEND TOURS OPEN' is overlaid on the top of the photo. At the bottom of the ad, the website 'TRYBOOKING.COM' is listed, followed by 'Bookings Now Open!' and a partial sentence 'If you're considering sending your c...'. A 'BOOK NOW' button is located to the right of this text. At the very bottom, there are icons for 'Like', 'Comment', and 'Share'.

**Bentleigh Secondary College**  
Sponsored · 🌐

Weekend Tours are now available.  
Due to overwhelming demand new College  
Tour times and days have been ...see more

**Bentleigh Secondary College**  
**WEEKEND TOURS OPEN**

TRYBOOKING.COM  
**Bookings Now Open!**  
If you're considering sending your c...

Like Comment Share

# Facebook Pixel

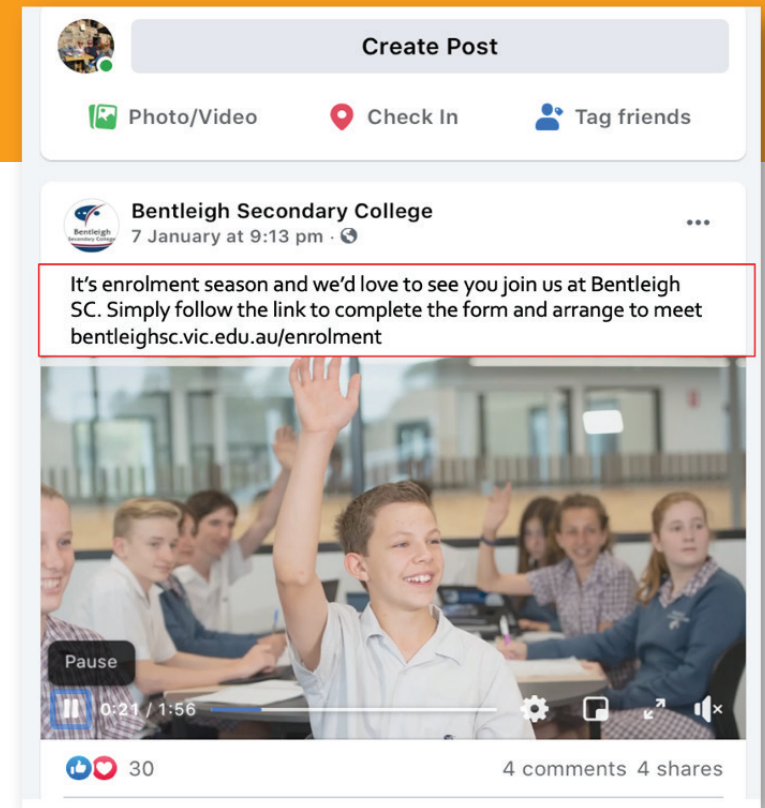
Ok, be prepared to be a little freaked out. You know when you're planning a new kitchen reno and you do a little Googling for suppliers, visiting their websites? And you know how thereafter, whenever you're back reading your online newspaper or playing with your social media feed, ads for kitchen companies pop up. No, they weren't listening to you, but they did use Facebook pixel.

The Facebook pixel is code that you place in your website. It collects visitor data that helps you track conversions from Facebook ads, remarket to people who have already visited your website but have not completed an action (eg; completed an enquiry form) that has identified them. Freaky hey?

The pixel code is generated inside your Facebook Ad Manager, which you would then pass to your web developer to load into the website..

The example I gave is called remarketing, and this is how it would play out for schools.

Add Facebook Pixel code to your website's enrolment, book a tour and contact us pages. Facebook will know who visited (you won't, the data is anonymous) and you will then push out an ad, reminding the visitor of the forthcoming tour, or a link to the enrolment form etc. You have been presented with an opportunity to connect with a website visitor and give them a little reminder nudge. Gold.



Mock remarketing ad

“ You have an opportunity to connect with a website visitor and give them a little reminder ”

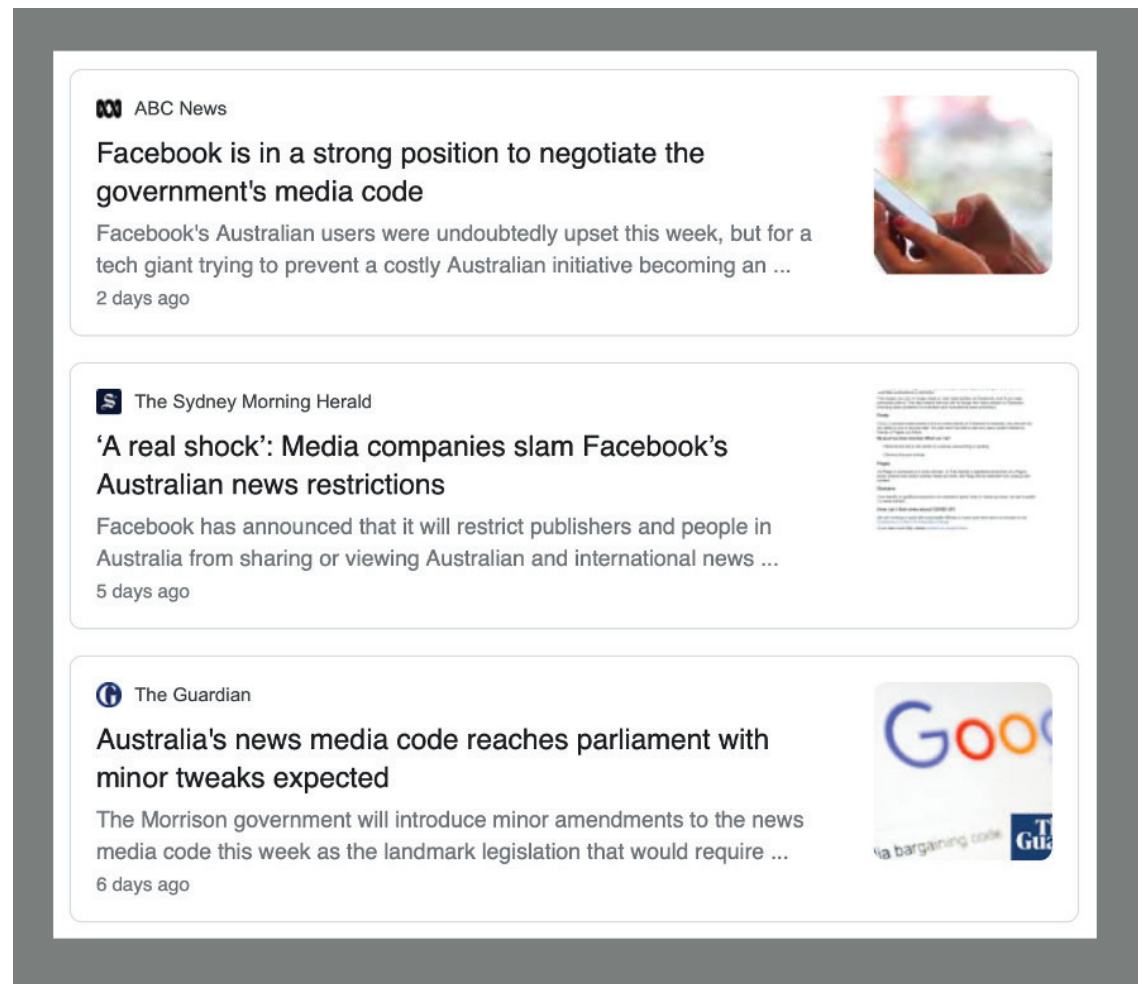
During the compilation of this paper, a storm has erupted over the government's Media Bargaining Code, primarily aimed at Google and Facebook. In a nutshell, the government wants the 'tech titans' to pay media outlets for the use of news in their feeds. Google has essentially struck a deal whereas Facebook is digging in.

For schools using Facebook, this may all come across as quite unsavoury and not a place where you'd want to play.

I respect your opinion.

I certainly can't predict the future but would say that there are 17 million Australians connected to Facebook. If indeed news does disappear from Facebook's feed (which they claim amounts to only 4% of all content), the social media component, the bit that hooked us in the first place, will remain.

Be prepared for more regulatory changes – I'd say for the better.



# 7

## Your Newsletter

You may wonder, what has a school newsletter go to do with marketing. Now that you have Gladwell's theory under control, you'll know that **your school's parents are your best message carriers.**

Inspire them with confidence (remember about promoting the principal and teachers), equip them with the right words and they'll carry forth your story into every coffee shop, sporting field and dinner party in your community.

If you're still using a PDF style newsletter, it really is time to send it to the school communication's graveyard, alongside the Roneo Spirit Duplicator. For those that know these machines, about now you'll be able to recall the headspinning aroma of methanol. If this doesn't make any sense to you, look it up, you'll get a fine lesson in the evolution of school communications.

Well, the PDF, whilst not smelly, has become a bit on the nose. Its origins were from a print legacy we left some time ago as we moved to digital. To show how beholden many schools are to the print legacy, note the schools that deliver their PDF newsletter to an app. You've essentially delivered an A4 document to a viewing device one-third its width.. 12 point font becomes 4 point.

What did I say about carriers and context? Unreadable.



Imagine if Facebook was a fortnightly PDF newsletter. Exactly the same stories from your 'friends', picture, bit of text about their dog Sammy, that new coat purchase. Even a photo of their dinner – oops, that's Insta (is it impossible to digest food these days without photographing it first?).

So, what has Facebook done? Same content, same volume, delivered in a trickle of little bite sized chunks, viewed over a mobile (predominantly) has seen over 2 billion people on the planet engage with Facebook.

If Zuckerberg loved PDFs as much as some, he'd still be stacking shelves at Walmart.

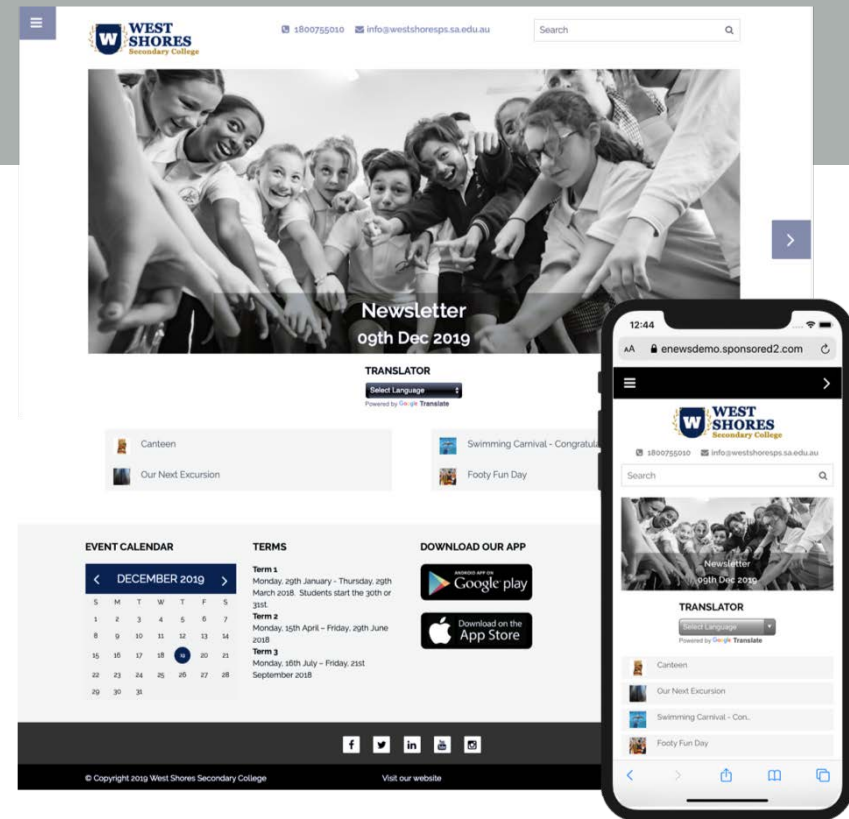
That's context.



I started working in digital communications a little over 20 years ago. It's no longer 'new' (I'm no longer young!). There is no other sector that uses a PDF document to connect with its community. Hey, the local tennis club doesn't count

### Newsletter Tips

- Move away from PDF to mobile friendly, deliver by email and app
- Write informed by 6 key messages
- Write less. Eight articles, tops.
- Include key dates
- Post on weekends; measure engagement and adjust
- Change images, especially the cover image to avoid turning into unremarkable wallpaper. Rock their eyes.
- Send to prospects, feeder schools etc.
- Add a little click bait to the Principal's Message (and other articles too) to draw in the reader



You can view eNews examples here: <https://www.sponsor-ed.com.au/page/334/New-eNews---your-new-Newsletter-for-2021>

# 8

## Local Community

As we leave digital mediums, we now enter the more traditional but equally important analogue world.

Many of these activities you will be familiar with; I'm sure there will be some new learnings and a little tightening of current activities.

# 'Jumping the Fence'

I title this section, 'Jumping the Fence'. **Your brand needs to be visible in the community.** If it's not, then you're not giving yourself a chance to prime or warm up prospective parents. Where is your brand currently visible?

Where has your brand jumped the fence?

Here's a few ideas.

Produce a cut down version of your enrolment board and scatter them through your local community, namely in parent's front yards. Don't think that all parents will want to do this but do remember that Gladwell spoke of the 'law of few'.



That small band of advocates that will be your message carriers. In a school of 600, could you find 10 willing parents? I think so. That would make an enormous difference to your community visibility.

And the cost? The signs needn't be heavy framed real estate style, but if you can get them for free, why not. You could find some parents that may wish to sponsor the signs and promote their business (real estate style again). A school I'm working with has found a supplier of lightweight corflute signs, similar to those used in local council elections for under \$300 per sign. What's an extra enrolment worth to you?

*The above image is a mock up for illustrative purposes only.*



# Coffee!

Coffee is one way of raising your community profile and creating some buzz.

Strike a deal with a local café and during your Open Day season, give away coffees to those you think may be in your target group. I believe the term for this is 'pay forward'.

Create a free coffee offer with a link to tour the school. QR codes work very well in this application because rather than commit key dates to a print run, the data can be changed on your website and linked back to a QR code on the voucher. It'll be forever fresh, just like the coffee.

For primary schools, you could do this with kindergartens and for secondary schools, perhaps target junior sporting clubs.

Many communities run 'clean up' days. Get a posse of parents together, equip them with a t-shirt and add a message, something like, 'Allentown SC is cleaning up'.

Great PR, shows a community spirit and has your brand 'jumping the fence'.



This coffee is free.  
courtesy of  
Allentown SC

Scan the QR code to  
book a school tour

Facemasks (sadly!)

Yes, these may well be part of our lives for some time. At the height of the pandemic, we saw an opportunity to brand Kananook Primary on facemasks. A competition was organised asking parents to upload a photo to the school's Facebook page of themselves wearing the mask around town. A smash hit.

We even had the local member get in on the fun (if fun is a facemask).



**Note:** we moved very quickly when the idea landed to brand the facemasks. This tactic preceded the vinyl wrapped bus. In future the masks will be yellow. Kananook PS owns yellow in town. Distinctiveness.



# 9

## Parents

**Your school's parent community is your number one marketing tool.** As much as I'm a fan of digital marketing, parents trump digital.

At some stage, a prospective parent will seek-out a parent from your school for their views. It's here where the 6 key messages, the repetition and phrasing consistency is so important. You hope that your parents accurately and supportively convey the school's essence.

Parents are seen as much more authentic than crafted promotional messaging.

However, not all your parents will be reliable or effective advocates. You need to find your best message carriers; you know by now the theory as the 'law of few'.



*Parents are much more authentic than crafted promotional messaging*



The obvious group of advocates are your P&F/C, school council, parent class reps etc. You may even build a group of school ambassadors. Make your intentions clear with these people: you want them to help fill school tours, increase enquiries, provide on-the-ground intelligence. Sort of like a cold war sleeper cell but without the evil.

Expose the groups to your 6 key message strategy and ask them to seek to use these in conversations with their networks. Ask too that they share via social media, your posts regarding school tours and anything else they think the broader community may appreciate knowing.

Twenty parents **sharing your content via their social media networks will give you wide local coverage over your prospective audience.**

And remember, their mission (should they choose to accept it... I know, knock it off with the spy movie metaphors), is to sell a tour seat or generate an enquiry. Not to sell an enrolment. I wrote earlier that for some parents their choice of school was decided quite a while back, so flipping them is difficult.

However, you may be able to convince them of taking a tour. Even, if the tour doesn't turn into an enrolment, the exposure will not be wasted; assuming of course your school tour was well executed.

That's coming up next.



# 10

## The School Tour

Marketing can only deliver an enquiry, it cannot deliver an enrolment. Enrolments are signed by the school.

**Marketing is about getting prospects to have a conversation with you.** Even those not convinced about your school, can be convinced to book a tour.

In the spirit of economy, I'll use the word tour to also mean open days and individual interviews. While there are differences in the logistics of these variants, in all cases, the thing you're seeking is to create a visit.



I must confess that I have attended few school tours and open days outside of those concerning my own children. I did serve for a period, as a board member at CBC St Kilda and attended a few more. I'm no expert but do understand that the greatest marketing effort can be lost if the school tour does not meet the parent's expectations.

I was curious about tours and the way they're managed, so I started asking questions, I found gaps.

## Meeting Parents Needs

**The success of a tour must be measured through a parent's eyes.**

Did it meet their expectations? One of the easiest ways of achieving this is by asking them what they want to see or learn during the tour. Just add a text box to the tour booking registration process. Not all parents will ask questions in a group environment, so asking them in advance, gives you every chance of hitting the mark.

Even if your tour is a one-on-one session, having a heads up on what's important to the parent will give you time to prepare.

## The Tour and Difficult Questions

I was surprised to hear from a principal that there's always a question that stumps him during a tour. I didn't ask what the question was, partly because I too was stumped as to how a difficult question asked many times over, is not put away like an Ash Barty smash.

Schools aren't perfect places we know. So, if your ATAR is not quite what you'd hoped, or that five-year-old bullying issue just won't go away, or perhaps you've had your 15 minutes of awkward fame in the media spotlight, just practice your response.

Please don't think I'm talking spin. The thing I enjoy about working in education is the honesty. Go with honesty first and last and practice your response with your colleagues.

Stop the fumble and stop the surprised look, like the one when you found out that Macaulay Culkin wasn't in Home Alone 3,

“*practice your response with  
your colleagues*”

## The Post Tour Review

Why are you doing tours? Let me preface that by saying, why are you marketing?

The number one aim of your marketing effort is to create an enquiry. The aim of an enquiry is to convert it to a tour. And the goal of the tour is to gain an enrolment.

This is called the 'sales funnel', and numbers associated with the funnel are often referred to as conversion data.

I've asked many schools what their conversion data is with few being able to answer. That's a worry.

In chapter 1 we covered data and its two types, quantitative and qualitative. The post tour review can follow the same format.

It would be very useful if past enquiry and tour data was available, if not, then start collecting now.

There are two broad analyses to conduct:

**Quantitative:** Conversion data measuring the number of enquiries to tours and tours to enrolments.

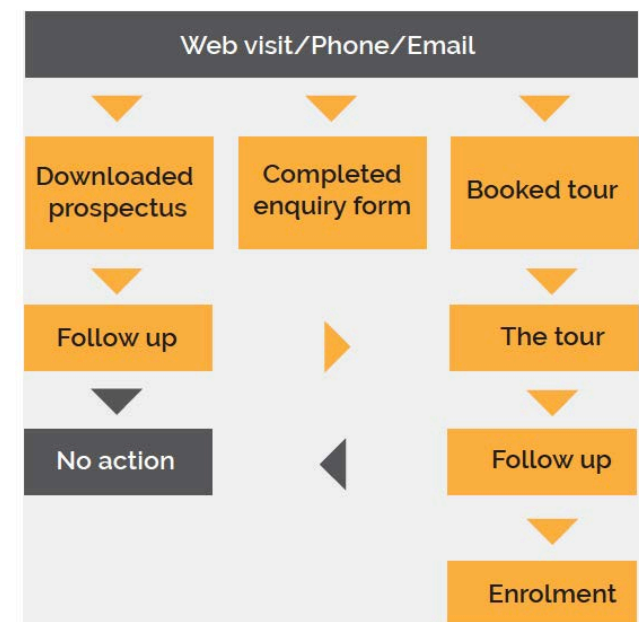
**Qualitative:** Conduct a post tour review with attending staff, with particular emphasis on logging key questions asked. Assess how difficult questions were handled and most importantly, send parents a short survey asking for their assessment.

See the school tour as part of a continuum. It starts with an enquiry and should end with a post-tour follow up with the prospective parents.

The diagram opposite shows the various touch-points throughout the enquiry to enrolment process. The aim then is to ensure every single touch point has been optimised.

Think creatively about what you can do more impactfully with the tour.

Perhaps you assign a school ambassador to do the follow up. If you've been doing tours in the same way for years, it may be time for a rethink.



The diagram is a simple thought starter. You should seek to create your own enquiry process chart..

# 11

## Conversion Data

### A little on conversion data.

There are some magic numbers you need to follow regularly, especially during enrolment season.

They are:

- The number of enquiries
- The total number of tour attendees
- The total number of enrolments
- The conversion rates



Here's an example.

You can choose your measurement period, but whatever you choose should be consistent year on year. You also need to be consistent in what you're counting. Here's a way forward by using a prospective student as the unit of measure.

**Enquiry:** an enquiry equals the number of students represented by the enquirer. Generally, 1 (ok 2 if they're twins)

**Tours:** again, certainly count total attendees, but we are focussing on the prospective student. So, mum, dad, sister and prospective student attend, then that's a 1.

**Conversion rate:** you will need to pick a point in time when the enrolments have settled. Then, you can calculate your conversion rate expressed as a percentage.

The conversion data (opposite), shows that in 2020, our Enquiries to Tour conversion rate of 66% has not recovered from the slump in 2019, off the strong 87% performance of 2018. Why? Perhaps the person that was managing the enquiries has left and the incumbent doesn't do the follow ups.

You could also conclude that the marketing effort is holding up over the years at around the 300 mark. Other than the aberration that was 2019, your Tour to Enrolment conversion rate is strong. If only you could convert more enquiries to tours.

A general question; what's better?

- 100 enquiries with 70 enrolments, or
- 200 enquiries with 100 enrolments

In one instance there's a marketing problem, in the other there's a conversion problem. I'm not going to tell you which, I'm a good teacher, it's for you to figure out. Tough love!

	Enquiries	Tours	Enrolments	Enquiries to Tour	Tour to Enrolments
2020	300	200	160	66%	80%
2019	270	195	190	72%	97%
2018	300	260	190	87%	73%

# 12

## External Advocates and Representation

These mediums will be left with you to develop.

Advocates mainly refers to developing a vibrant alumni and community partnerships. Representation refers to feeder school management.

These activities are not in my area of expertise but needed to be mentioned because they are part of the marketing mix and important, they are more about relationships rather than content marketing.

# 13

## Conclusion

You've spent an hour with me, thank you, I hope the paper has advanced your marketing education. I wanted to focus your activities to where you'd get the greatest return and provide a plan that would help organise your marketing, as well as introduce a few new concepts.

As educators, I trust you saw value in underpinning much of the paper on solid communication's theories as expressed through Gladwell's *Tipping Point* (a good read by the way) and Byron Sharp's power of distinctiveness, as well as providing evidence of these theories in action.

### Key take outs:

- The Marketing Plan Framework
- 6 Key Message concept
- Content is nothing without context
- Parents are your best message carriers
- Digital marketing is worth trialing
- Conversion data

And the number one point is, '**school marketing can only deliver enquiries, you deliver enrolments**'.

I wish you well in your endeavours and always appreciate feedback on my work and an opportunity to learn more from you. Now you do know what principals need to know about the principles of school marketing.

