

Strategic Plan—Executive Summary

Several years ago, representatives of the Coca-Cola Company engaged a marketing firm to conduct a somewhat unusual survey. Consumers from five different continents were given a series of adjectives and asked to list five that most applied to Coca-Cola. The results were astonishing. Not only did respondents from North and South America, Europe, Asia and Africa, select the same five descriptive attributes but they listed those attributes in the same order of importance. The exercise and Coca-Cola's public relations campaign became the stuff of brand-building legend.

Many more years before that, Marshall McLuhan revolutionized communications theory with a best seller that contended that the way in which a message was delivered was more important than the message itself. His "The Medium is the Message" philosophy foreshadowed the all-enveloping influence of electronic media that soon followed.

McLuhan's point was that the more personal the contact is the more motivational will be the message. Nearly 50 years later, this principle even more strongly applies. In McLuhan's day, the device of choice was television; today it is a much broader visual spectrum.

Trendlines

The most recent communications practices of Albemarle County Schools reflect this evolution. In 2012, we had 259 external communications outreach activities that promoted the achievements of our teachers and students. This averaged out to 1.43 activities for each day school was in session. A total of 119 of these activities (46 percent) were on-air television reports. Another 11 percent were on-air radio broadcasts. Many of the TV and radio reports were featured on the division's home page. By contrast, less than one-third of our communications activities were in the form of a news release and even many of those led to electronic coverage.

The infamous bank robber, Willie Sutton said he robbed banks "because that's where the money is." Likewise, an effective strategic communications plan must be one that reaches stakeholders where they are. Today, most often, they are on the internet. That clearly is borne out in our surveys of advisory groups and stakeholders. More respondents, by a wide margin, cited social media, including Facebook and Twitter, as the most important communications challenge and opportunity before the division. The importance of personal connectivity explains why the next two most frequently mentioned challenges were language diversity and the Compass, the division's employee newsletter.

Those who responded to our communications SWOT analyses were reflecting the sweeping change that is taking place on the Internet. Recently-published research by the International Data Corporation has found that within two years, more people in the United States will access the Internet with a mobile device than through a desktop computer. It predicts sales of all wireless devices in the U.S. will continue to grow at better than a 15 percent rate. Today, most smartphone and tablet users are using mobile apps to access the Internet.

We need look no further than the school division's Facebook page for confirmation. Since January of this year, the division has doubled the number of followers on our Facebook page. We now have followers in 20 different countries including the Ivory Coast, Serbia and Jordan. A total of 65 percent of our new followers, some 1,300, linked to our division's Facebook page through a mobile device.

Since the launch of our redesigned web site last August, our home page has been the subject of two million page views by nearly 800,000 visitors. That equates to more than 8,000 page views by more than 3,000 visitors every single day. Nearly 40 percent of those visiting our web site do so through the Safari web browser, which is the browser of choice for mobile devices.

In moving forward, if we are to succeed in our mission of creating a community of learners and learning and remain true to our values of community, the school division must refine and keep current its online capability for connecting with residents. It must meet our constituents where they are and where they will continue to be in even greater numbers.

We stand at an important inflection point for the division's communications capabilities. Social media opens significant opportunities to broaden the participation and support of external partners for school division interests, to support 21st century workforce skills among teachers and students and to more actively engage employees. It also offers the most efficient and powerful way to achieve Board priority 4.2—expanding two-way communication with and outreach to our stakeholders.

Just as the division's focus is on modernizing classroom technological resources, the division's relationship with its stakeholders should reflect an identical commitment. Currently, we do not have a professional on staff who can produce quality videos for distribution on social media, who can enhance the video and media design and production skills of teachers and students or who can connect teachers and students with the partnership opportunities offered by the region's rapidly developing film and video industry.

As an example of the potential benefits offered by adding this capability to the division's community outreach, it should be noted that the whimsical video, "Call Me Maybe Josh Davis" has elicited over 34,000 hits on YouTube in a little over two months. A short video promoting one of our high school musicals yielded 800 hits in two days.

Internally, best practice videos on division programs, initiatives and techniques can help to improve the interest and usefulness of Compass for all employees.

At the same time, the division must continue to deepen its commitment to reach all members of all of our communities, including those families who do not speak English as their primary language. At three of our elementary schools, Agnor-Hurt, Cale and Greer, English language learners are more than 20 percent of the student body. Throughout the division, the number of students in this category now exceeds 1,000 but the percentage of English language learners is twice as high among kindergartners as among the student body as a whole.

Even more significant, it is safe to estimate that the number of Albemarle County families for whom English is not the primary language is much higher than indicated by percentage of students. This is because once students become fluent in English, they no longer are counted in our totals even though their family members may still not be fluent in English.

This year, we have begun to address this communications challenge through the activation of a Spanish language option on our Blackboard Connect messages, the purchase of a limited number of headphones that can be used at public meetings to translate English into Spanish and other languages, and the inauguration of new Spanish-language public access TV programming on division programs.

Demographic data indicate that being fully able to connect with diverse communities will continue to become more vital, and in fact, will determine if the division is to fully realize its mission and values.

Brand Value

The division's ability to realize its mission and remain true to its values will continue to depend upon how well it builds competencies among the most fundamental of all levels—the nearly 2,400 full and part time employees who represent the division as individual communicators every single day. To return to the Coca-Cola example, employees are the most powerful agents within an organization for shaping its brand or reputation for the broad and diverse audiences whose support or lack thereof affect the resources necessary to accomplish division goals.

Brand is the equity a person or organization has among its various stakeholders and at its highest point; it delivers the competitive edge that makes a person or organization a leader. It answers such important questions as why would I want to teach in that division? Why would I want to support its budget? Why would I want to partner with that organization? Why would I want to send my child to its schools? Why would I want to volunteer for its programs or activities?

Several significant communications activities this year have suggested answers to those questions—a major story in the *Washington Post* on the World Peace Games—an opinion column by the Superintendent in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*—support for the successful application by M-Cubed for the Magna Award—the designation of the Health and Medical Sciences Academy as a Governor's Regional Academy—a cover story in *Education's Week* digital magazine—scheduled visits to the division by the vice president of one major out-of-state corporation and an upcoming visit by a former Chairman of the Board of a FORTUNE 50 company.

Opinions about the school division are shaped by the interaction that audiences have with the division—whether through the media, or more importantly, through personal experience. Alignment of interests throughout the division is crucial to communicating clear, motivational and credible messages about the division's brand—its mission and purpose and what it values. This alignment is what delivered the consistency of message for Coca-Cola.

According to our most current analysis, less than 15 percent of division employees now access Compass on a regular basis. Separately, the 2011 report from the U.S. Senate Productivity and Quality Award noted that it was unclear if staff understood their role in meeting the division's mission and goals. It

recommended a plan to better align employees with the strategic plan and to increase their engagement in its implementation.

On the question of brand or organizational identity, employees who are disinterested or disaffected, often deliver disconnected messages and may not completely understand where they should concentrate their efforts in the workplace. Under these conditions, Coca-Cola could not have achieved its reputational excellence.

Several recent actions have been helpful in more fully and enthusiastically engaging employees in the division's mission. These include the monthly Spotlight on Education at School Board meetings; the external media outreach activities that frequently profile employee achievements and public service campaigns in the community that feature students and teachers rather than professional announcers.

The strategic plan now under review offers another valuable opportunity for employee engagement and inclusion, particularly in the construct of its internal messaging, content and transmittal. A recent radio campaign featured teachers, students, parents and other community members talking about why the strategic planning review process was important to them. Similar campaigns using various media platforms will more strongly connecting employees to the organization's mission and goals.

Brand will be crucial to the strengthening of initiatives that enhance our school division's reputation for educational excellence and improves our ability to generate outside revenue. This past year, for example, donations to the Health and Medical Sciences Academy totaled more than twice the amount of new money budgeted by the division for the academy in 2012-13.

The potential for generating additional financial support for division programs is considerable and timely, given, for example, the recent reorganization of the Public Education Fund. Conducting comprehensive research of grant opportunities, building the necessary personal and organizational relationships and writing effective proposals are core strategic communications competencies.

These same competencies are crucial to the success of the division's efforts to market its best practices to outside organizations as a source of revenue and reputational excellence.

Operating Philosophy and Principles

The strategic plan itself sets the purpose of the strategic communications plan. All communications strategies, programs and activities should represent and promote the division's values, while raising community awareness and support of its mission and its strategic and operational goals.

One measure of how well the plan fulfills this responsibility is the extent to which communications activities originate within the division rather than in response to questions from outside sources. In 2012, more than 90 percent of the division's communications outreach was proactive, meaning the division established the purpose and timing of the contact and was able to position that purpose consistent with one of more of the five strategic goals.

This strategic communications plan recommends as its operational philosophy, the belief that the decisions that best serve the division, its students, their families and the county's communities, are those that involve the highest degree of informed and comprehensive public participation.

In fulfilling this philosophy, this strategic communications plan recommends a set of operating principles that emphasize communications as a management process and not a task-driven function. These principles include:

- the thoughtful planning and alignment of communications activities with the division's mission, values and goals;
- the delivery of accurate, timely and relevant information to the public and employees on significant issues facing the division and in prompt response to queries;
- an increase in the participation of employees and students in communications opportunities;
- the building and development of partnerships that provide new financial and human capital resources from outside organizations to the division;
- the design and implementation of communications activities that support the division's entrepreneurial interests and
- an increase among the Board of Supervisors and state officials in awareness of and participation in division activities.

Recommendations

In meeting these requirements, this plan proposes that work commence immediately on the following actions:

- The addition of text messaging to our Blackboard Connect e-mail and phone notification system;
- As the division transforms more of its communications vehicles from paper to electronic, the division should reinvest the savings in the purchase of up-to-date design and publishing software to improve the quality and impact of its electronic communications;

- Changes in the communications stipend policy available to schools that include making it more affordable (only one school has paid a stipend over the past three years); and expansion in those eligible to receive the stipend to include parents and students as well as staff; a sliding scale in the stipend for elementary, middle and high schools and a consideration that the stipend be paid by central office;
- Reformatting Compass to focus on employees achievements similar to the Spotlight on Education agenda item at School Board meetings; the addition of more professional development opportunities such as access to external presentations including Ted Talks and personal blogs on best practices by teachers, administrators and staff and a conversation feature that would encourage employees to interact with one another on featured topics;
- Addition of a communications component to the orientation program for new employees;
- Development of a presentation on the revised strategic plan tailored by school, department and advisory group, to be shared with employees and members at staff meetings.
- Centralization of all major grant opportunities within the Strategic Communications Office with an expansion in the duties of a new Legislative and Community Analyst to include grant development and writing responsibilities;
- Redesign of the School Board web page to include more personalized information on Board Member educational priorities and interests;
- Provide support for individual Board members to conduct at least one 30-minute live stream town hall meeting per year;
- Consider live-streaming specific work sessions and public hearings on high-interest topics such as redistricting, budget, policy changes, student assessment models;
- A subscription to Profnet (\$1200), a global online service used by journalists and education writers seeking information and comments from educational leaders on significant K-12 academic issues of the day;
- Using September's visit of Presidential Advisor Norman Augustine to the division, the convening of a regional Conference on the 21st Century Classroom to include legislative officials, business and academic leaders, state and federal Department of Education officials and outside experts;
- The development of a funding plan(approximately \$75,000) to add an Albemarle County Public Schools mobile application to provide easier and more visually appealing access to division information and the capability for instantaneous public feedback via surveys;

- The addition of a videographer to increase the use and quality of videos for YouTube and Compass; to assist school-based media programs; to share best practices in such program areas as Design 2015 in support of the division's effort to establish a revenue-producing business model; to enhance the video production knowledge and skills of teachers and to develop internship and guest speaker opportunities with the regional film and video production industry;
- Expansion of the division's current external media placement program and an increase in its public service advertising budget by \$7500 to accommodate visibility in diverse language media platforms.

The division rightly has staked out a leadership position on the concept of the 21st century classroom and has made substantial financial investments through such programs as Design 2015 and the elimination of the county's broadband digital divide. Similarly, its relationships outside of the classroom should reflect the same commitments to innovation, inclusiveness, best practices and operational excellence. This strategic communications plan sets out a pathway for achieving these commitments and for supporting such vital initiatives as the high school of the future, the continued development of new centers of excellence, participation in STEMx, new student assessment methods, maker spaces, the multigenerational community center in Esmont and expanded partnerships with the private sector.

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