# From *Communicating and Connecting with Social Media*

Researchers studying school identify communication and community relations as 1 of the 9 most important skills for leaders to master. Communication should be the most important thing that you do every day.

Branding, a term synonymous with marketing and business, is beginning to find its niche in education. Brands promise value—essential for maintaining support in difficult economic conditions—to specific audiences or stakeholder groups. Brands are designed to stand out, to influence consumers, and to build confidence in products. Sustaining a sense of trust is an integral component of a brand's ability to promise value. Successful brands open themselves up to scrutiny, respond to criticism, and make every effort to own up to their mistakes, and work to improve based on consumer feedback.
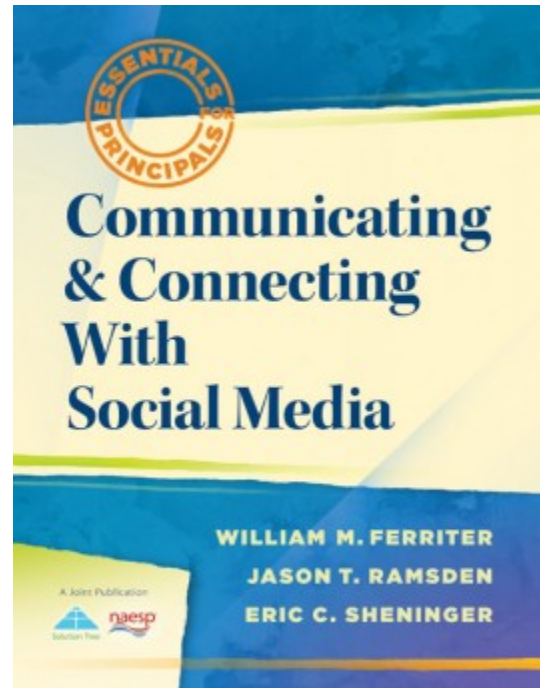
In education, schools are considered a brand, promising their communities the academic preparation necessary to succeed. Many families choose to live in townships with schools that have proven track records. Stakeholders become convinced that their schools prepare students well and provide a quality return on their investment of time, energy and resources. Schools can leverage this brand presence for additional community investment in teacher quality, curriculum, facilities, and professional development initiatives. The bottom line is that schools actively building their brand are supported by their communities, and that support translates into continued improvement and success.

Using traditional media for branding and communication does little to encourage give-and-take between schools and the communities they serve. While traditional media can deliver messages, receiving and responding to feedback is almost impossible. This lack of responsiveness can make school seem aloof and uncaring. Worse yet, traditional means for branding and communication are inherently slow. By the time messages are crafted and delivered, they are also outdated and unimportant. This lag in message delivery runs contrary to the immediacy that defines communication in today's digital age.

The consumption preferences of our audiences are changing. Businesses are meeting their potential customers on whatever channel makes their customers happy, whether that's a Facebook page, a website, emailed updates, text messages, or all of the above. Should parents and students actually expect any less of the schools for which their tax and/or tuition dollars pay?

Today, you can't expect everyone to come where you are. We have to go to them.

Developing positive relationships with important stakeholders in the new digital space requires authenticity, bravery, and consistency.

Sadly, parents and students often see schools as the same kinds of impersonal places. Once easily recognizable neighborhood icons, principals are often too busy to fully interact with their communities; high rates of transience in teacher and student populations make it unlikely that parents will have long-term relationships with faculty members; and standardized testing has created a culture that turns students into nothing more than numbers. The result of impersonality is a general sense of distrust between individuals and the organizations that serve them. Breaking through distrust requires frequent, open interactions between stakeholders—behaviors that social medial tools enable and amplify.

Relationships between consumers and the businesses they support are changing. New tools have enabled progressive companies to interact directly and informally with customers in ways that were once impossible. They have also enabled businesses to craft interesting and exciting messages that entertain and capture attention. As a result, education's stakeholders are beginning to expect the same kinds of innovative messages from their schools. The static communication patterns that we have come to rely on are seen as standoffish and distant. Not only do these one-way messaging patters fall short of the expectations of parents, students, younger staff members, and community leaders, they are likely to be lost in the digital noise that our communities are swimming in.

Being heard, then, requires bravery. We have to be willing to open ourselves to criticism and to interact directly with important stakeholders in order to be taken seriously. While doing so is definitely risky in a field as staid as education, it carries tangible rewards in the form of stronger and more meaningful relationships with the communities we serve.

Incorporating social media tools into your school's communication patterns require changing the way you see interactions with important stakeholders. It is impossible to convince your stakeholders you are sincere about your desire to connect in social media spaces if you are rarely there! While consistently participating in social media spaces will require an additional investment of time and energy into your building's public relations efforts, the goodwill generated from two-way interactions in social media forums is exponential, spreading beyond just the individuals you are interacting with. That's because in a social media world, each resolution is played out in front of an audience. Every message has the potential to answer questions that others haven't asked. What's more, every message is a tangible demonstration—a mini-commercial, so to speak—of your commitment to service.

We worry about parents and students using social media tools to complain about our decisions, our programs, or our performance. More importantly, we worry about those complaints being made in a public forum that anyone can view. Used to doing damage control anytime negative messages about our buildings surface, specifically creating forums that enable the easy sharing of negative message runs contrary to our instincts. Avoiding social media tools, however, is far riskier because they have been widely embraced beyond your buildings, fundamentally changing the nature of communication in today's world. Your important stakeholders—teachers, parents, students, and community leaders— "might not know it yet, and perhaps neither do you, but in just a few years if you haven't adopted social

media in a signification way you risk shutting out the best and most powerful communications channel we've ever known, a channel that values authentic interactions…at its core."

Parents and teachers who have grown to expect open channels, instant responses, and customized opportunities to participate—and who, increasingly, will have grown up in social media spaces—will lose faith in building that refuse to adapt. Instead of hiding from this new media ecology, tomorrow's best [leaders] will embrace transparency and portability that tools like Twitter and Facebook enable, creating and managing multiple streams of communication at once.

The process will be messy, though. Innovators will push boundaries, finding new applications of social media tools in education that will make many of us uncomfortable. We will be forced to rethink everything we know about schools in order to stay relevant in a world where connected learning in online spaces makes it possible for anyone to learn efficiently without us. We will also have to find a comfortable middle ground between the seemingly radical ideas of those on the cutting edge and the resistance of those committed to traditions.

Younger workers are rarely satisfied with accepting the status quo. They almost always expect the kinds of tools that they have embraced for personal communication, collaboration, and learning to be incorporated into their professional lives. They are constantly looking for conversations and frustrated by the dissonance between the instant, collaborative world that they occupy off the clock and the stagnant workplaces they have inherited. Working in a typical company can really sap one's energy because things happen so slowly. There's a big culture clash in the workplace with [the younger] generation and the bosses, who can often be much older.

More importantly, though, social media tools are redefining the way your students are interacting with one another. In fact, 3 out of every 4 online teens are already using services like Facebook and Twitter to stay connected with one another. Isn't it time that we worked to respect, rather than ridicule and ban, the spaces that our students are creating? Wouldn't responsible teaching involve showing students how the social tools they have already embraced can be leveraged for learning—and couldn't experimenting with new spaces for communication and professional development leave you better prepared to find ways to responsibly integrate social media into your building's instructional practices?