A Comprehensive Communications Plan for Aledo Independent School District

A presentation to the Board of Trustees

December 14, 2015

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Communications Audit (overview)

- Basis for a strategic communications plan

- Late summer, early fall 2015

- Comprehensive (covered newsletters, brochures, advertisements, news releases, published news accounts, formal inquiries about School District services/activities and the District's response, and other materials)

- Measurable, consistent assessment of Aledo ISD's complete communications function

- Identified strengths, opportunities, and deficiencies

Goal: To use the communications audit as the foundation for a strategic communications plan that is effective, useful, and attainable

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Communications Audit Findings

- The findings affirm the intense commitment on the part of Aledo ISD's administration to fulfill the District's mission and to keep its vision foremost in its outreach to and collaboration with employees, students, parents and the greater community.

- The Superintendent's leadership and goals are commendable, and the staff members to whom he looks to perform communication tasks are enthusiastic.

Communications Audit Findings (cont.)

- **Branding** – Aledo ISD's vision and core values are clear; there is no strategic communications plan at this time

- **Key messages** – the foundation of Aledo ISD's communications plan must be key messages that articulate the District's vision and mission, yet these were not identifiable during the analysis

- **Website** – the communications audit confirmed what administration has been experiencing firsthand; School Fusion is a detriment to communications proficiencies; website is disorganized and outdated

- **Social Media** – successfully embraced; must be better planned with key messages woven in

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Communications Audit Findings (cont.)

- **Media Relations** – the District should refine its use of news releases; need a manageable course for working with local media; establish District leaders as education experts

- **Crisis/Situational Management** – the emergency communications letter is a good start; must develop communications strategies before the emergency happens or a situation is moving out-of-control

- **Public Engagement** – materials distributed at public engagement activities are not uniformly branded

- **Assets and Resources** – continue to budget for communications efforts; look for communications goals that are attainable given budget restraints

Transparency

- Aledo ISD must be open and transparent in terms of communications

- Transparency results in the community's respect, confidence, collaboration and overall support

Integrated Communications

Communications Plan Overview

- Comprehensive, based on research and assessment from Communications Audit

- Emphasizes strong points and strengthens weaknesses

- Aledo ISD's brand is uniquely positioned to grow

- A communications plan will take Aledo ISD to the next level through organization and planning

- The "brand" and all communications must be consistent

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Situation Analysis - Strengths

- Strong performance (both academic, athletic, and the arts) history; (Ranked among America's best high schools by *U.S. News and World Report* in 2014)

- High rate of community approval (citizen involvement, surveys, and the 2015 bond election)

- Among the top performing schools in North Central Texas; positioned to transform from a small, "rural" school district into a large, destination school district

Situation Analysis - Challenges

- Fast growth (projected increase of 1,800 students in the next five years)

- Digital communications

- Outdated website(s)

- Increased communications expectations

Best Practices

Primary components of success for all brands (public and private):

1. Engaging employees, who, in turn, communicate with the greater community
2. Selling a set of ideologies and a lifestyle
3. Building strong emotional connections
4. Ensuring relevance among pop culture and the digital age
5. Using social media smartly
6. Emphasizing visual assets such as photos and videos
7. Taking a strategic and holistic approach to providing exceptional service

Aledo ISD Communications Plan Goal (broad aim of the plan)

The goal of the Aledo ISD strategic communications plan is to actively engage parents, students, and the community in the education of Aledo ISD students.

- Incorporate the talents and resources of the community

- Prepare students to become successful, contributing members of society

- Support the Aledo ISD's foundational statement—schools can, in fact, make a difference in the lives of students

Strategies (steps to reach goal)

- **Educating** and **informing** target audiences about Aledo ISD's brand position as a top-performing school district that provides, "all students with an educational program developing them intellectually, physically, and socially to be responsible citizens and contributing members of society"

- **Reaffirming** the commitment to students shared by everyone involved with Aledo ISD and the community at large

- **Engaging** community partners to share the excitement and enthusiasm for Aledo ISD's brand by using a myriad of communications tools

- **Leveraging** statewide and national education-related relationships to spotlight Aledo ISD

- **Maximizing** the overall communications campaign by re-enforcing key messages through proactive public relations and community relations

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Strategies (cont.)

- **Broadening** the use of media tools (both social media and traditional media) to increase the positive conversations about Aledo ISD and the excitement that surrounds it

- **Exploring** new relationships with persons of influence such as community leaders. Proactively inviting community leaders to engage with Aledo ISD, thereby contributing to its overall success

- **Looking** to the diversity of Aledo ISD's stakeholders, especially students, and using this diversity to enhance the Aledo ISD brand

- **Encouraging** local, regional, and statewide media to write stories, profiles, and in-depth articles about the state of today's public education and Aledo ISD's rise to preeminence

- **Positioning** highly-acclaimed education expert and Aledo ISD superintendent as the key spokesperson for Aledo ISD

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Audience

- Defined as the reading, viewing, or listening public

- Audience of the communications plan are not just students, parents, employees, but "stakeholders"

- Internal (administration, educators, operations staff)

- Internal/External (Aledo ISD School Board, students, parents)

- External (media, taxpayers, local governments, adjacent communities)

ALL COMMUNCIATIONS SHOULD TAILORED TO THE AUDIENCE. The brand and key messages should stay consistent among audiences

Key Messages

- Describes how you communicate, who you are, and why you exist as an organization

- Works to explain governmental actions such as budgets and policy development

- Encourages action and involvement

- Should contain phrases and words that Aledo ISD wants to associate with the brand

- The takeaway, master narrative, elevator pitch—the essence of what you want to communicate

- Absolutely necessary to successfully engage audiences on a regular basis

- Should be developed in the strategic planning process

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Tactics

- The tools that should be used to pursue the goal

- The actions that should be taken to achieve objectives and strategies

Media Relations

- Develop a brand template for all news releases that provides for consistency. Utilize the logo and motto

- Develop a paragraph about the District which incorporates key facts and values for the bottom of all news releases

- Always refer to the website for additional information about the District

- Develop and maintain a media database that includes all contact information; keep this up to date and grow it as opportunities present themselves

- Organize news release topically

Media Relations (cont.)

- Seek to establish the superintendent and other school professionals as leaders in their fields and offer interviews to media for their "expert" opinions on current happenings and trends

- Be organized and selective; target news outlets with news releases of interest to their readers

- Keep the most important information in the top of the news release

- Use fact sheets with additional data or information should the reporter want to delve deeper into the subject matter

Situation Management

- Crisis – a situation that has reached a critical phase

- Lack of information or presence of inaccurate information results in confusion (or fear) among stakeholders

- Communications team should create a written plan that establishes a protocol for addressing all audiences

- Break out audiences and organize them to also include the communications tools which are most used by these groups

- Make certain that all news statements and social media postings contain accurate information (DO NOT HYPOTHESIZE)

- Assure that all communications are timely

- Weave the brand into these communications

- Never avoid the media

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Social Media

- Recognize that social media is important to engage Millennials and Gen Xers

- Also important to maintain a presence in traditional outlets (newspapers, television, radio)

- Social media = conversation; not a one-way transfer of information

- Cost-effective way to share and engage community members

- Develop and maintain a policy that addresses responsibility, transparency, accuracy, and integrity

- Shareholders can spread the word about experiences to many audiences through social media much faster than with traditional media

Websites

Key considerations when designing a website include:

- **Design** – What does the website look like? Do the colors make sense? Is it an appealing use of visuals and photographs?

- **Innovation** – Does the website look like a template? Is it imaginative? Does it tell the organization's unique story in a compelling manner? Does it enhance the individuality of the brand?

- **Content** – Is the content appropriate, timely, interesting, and useful?

- **Technology** – Does the website "work"? Does it incorporate a logical number of technological advancements? Is the use of technology appropriate to the audience?

- **Interactivity** – Does the website call the user to action? Does it engage the user?

- **Navigability** – Is the website easy to use?

Printed Materials Benefits

- Tangibility
- Credibility
- Branding
- Target marketing
- More engaging
- Fewer print ads (competition)

Recommendations

- Identify and prioritize opportunities
- Create a budget
- Develop a list of brand standards for print advertisements

Public/Community Engagement

- Continue to distribute newsletters both printed and online, as budget permits

- Keep newsletters current

- Develop communications standards that contain all boiler plate information as well as a protocol for the overall brand

Organizational Structure

- Aledo ISD is at a turning point

- Positioned to move from a small, suburban school district on the outside of a major metropolitan area to a top-performing, destination school district serving thousands of students

- Communications team should understand the watershed moment and stand ready to carry Aledo ISD forward

Questions?

Linda Pavlik

pavlik@pavlikandassociates.com

817-332-2972