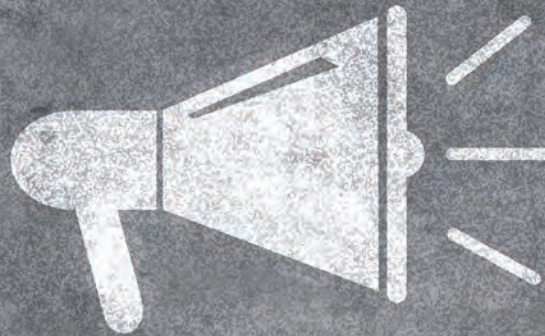




# MARKETING YOUR SCHOOL'S USP



A unique selling proposition or USP is almost certainly a phrase most of us are familiar with but usually associate with a commercial service or product. However, the harsh reality is that most schools are in competition with one another, vying to attract the very best staff and ensuring they have a full pupil roll for the next academic year. Justin Smith, Managing Director of Chameleon Consultancy and Training Ltd, outlines how to develop a USP for your school.



Justin Smith

The number of pupils in state-funded primary schools in England in September 2020 fell for the first time since 2010, down 0.3 per cent year-on-year, a combination of falling birth rates and the UK's decision to leave the EU. In May this year, the Financial Times reported an annual decline of 6.7 per cent for applications to London primary schools for this new academic year, and declines of 9.5 per cent and 6.8 per cent in Birmingham and Bristol, respectively. Birmingham City Council said the drop in applications was "primarily because of reduced net migration to the city."<sup>1</sup>

Beyond the national picture, there will be a number of different factors that influence a decision to send a child to your school or attract a potential new recruit. Spending time focusing on those things that differentiate you from others, your USP, will be time well spent.

## 1. Who are you?

I realise this may be a bizarre question to ask, but have you really got to grips with what you represent, namely your vision and purpose? I'm not referring to a bland mission statement but an articulation of your core values. Many of you may be familiar with Simon Sinek and the principle of 'the golden circle'<sup>2</sup>, where inspired leaders define their beliefs and purpose before promoting their product or service specifically.

Developing a set of values that really mean something can be cathartic and invigorating, and involving your pupils and staff in the process ensures the outcomes are grounded in reality and more likely to be respected and valued by your external stakeholders. Remember, too, that clarity around values and messages can help establish highly beneficial relationships with potential sponsors and donors; >



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**82 PER CENT**



of all internet  
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from online video

commercial sponsors will certainly know their own USPs and will want to align with like-minded organisations.

When setting your values, it is best to keep it simple, so ask small focus groups (students and staff) to jot down their gut feelings/immediate reaction about your school based around four themes:

- their relationships with one another (staff, pupils and wider stakeholder groups) (**relationships**)
- the infrastructure of the school/the facilities available (**functional**)
- their instinctive feelings towards school (**emotional**), and
- the key cultural drivers of the school/the ethos (**belief**).

The next step is to select the common words, phrases or themes that keep cropping up, which will form the basis of your core values. You can then develop these individual words/phrases further so they become sentences or statements. You may agree on four or five core values, and these can then be introduced throughout your marketing literature, on your website, social media feeds and in school (perhaps as signs on walls).

## 2. Your key features

These can be the more tangible aspects of school life, typically your facilities, extracurricular programmes, academic outcomes, or your creative approach to pedagogy, for example. Your school may be fortunate enough to have a Multi Use Games Area (MUGA) or a swimming pool, two facilities that, perhaps, differentiate you from other local schools, or your forest school programme and your partnership links with the FE College or local business will provide experiences that are unrivalled locally.

These opportunities will add value to your proposition so don't take them for granted. For a prospective parent, this is also important, so you need to ensure they are highlighted and marketed effectively. A simple and cost-effective way of doing this is to design a two-sided A4 Key Facts sheet that highlights your core values, Ofsted quotes, academic data, and fantastic facilities – all the things you're most proud of and that you think may just give you the edge. Hard copies of this simple sheet can be made available in reception and downloadable from your website.

## 3. Parent power

When considering a school, many parents will take a look at school websites first, probably comparing two or three schools at the same time. So, how does yours stand out?

How do you push your USPs front and centre? Asking some parents to leave Google reviews about the school is simple but effective, as are testimonials, especially if they are in a short video format. A mum talking about the impact the school has had on her son will be far more inspiring and engaging than a large block of text.

The same is true with short welcome or introductory video clips from pupils and staff. It's believed that by 2022, 82 per cent of all internet traffic will come from online video, with video generating 1,200 per cent more shares than text and static images combined.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, you shouldn't underestimate the impact that videos can have on your school website. Just out of interest, take a look at other schools near yours. Are they embracing video marketing yet?

## 4. Recruitment reboot

Reports in Schools Week<sup>4</sup> and SecEd<sup>5</sup> suggest that spending on staff training and professional development has fallen again, down by 12 per cent in secondary schools across England. Increasing pressures on budgets and financial insecurity are discouraging investment in so-called 'non-essential' areas. However, these reports also recognise an increase in collaborative attempts to share in-house expertise and the development of bespoke programmes within schools or multi-academy trusts.

Highlighting your school staff development plans is, therefore, another way of differentiating yourself from the competition. Do you have a specific vacancy page on your website, and is it easy to find? Can you offer a 'talent bank' where prospective candidates are able to register their interest in your school? You could also consider a series of short 'talking heads'-style informal videos featuring a number of your staff, such as a newly qualified teacher reflecting on their first year and an experienced head of department talking about progression through the school. Finally, there may be a number of opportunities available to your staff that become an attractive proposition to a potential new recruit, so ensure you are packaging that offering and promoting it effectively. Tuned-in parents looking for a suitable school for their child will also be encouraged by this investment in your people.

Education is full of abbreviations, so we could well do without adding USP to our ever-growing list. However, in an increasingly competitive and pressured industry, there is no doubting the value of articulating those things that just may help make us stand out from the rest. ■

For further information about marketing your school, visit <https://isbl.org.uk/Training/Training-courses/Marketing-workshop.aspx>

**There are other organisations in the market providing marketing services, so ISBL recommends you research the market thoroughly before committing to any advice/solutions.**



1 [www.ft.com/content/b557a784-e1e1-4625-a237-14d435723200](http://www.ft.com/content/b557a784-e1e1-4625-a237-14d435723200)

2 [www.startwithwhy.com](http://www.startwithwhy.com)

3 <https://biteable.com/blog/video-marketing-statistics>

4 <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/school-cpd-spending-plummets-by-23m-as-funding-pressure-bite>

5 [www.sec-ed.co.uk/news/cpd-spending-slashed-as-school-budget-deficits-continue-to-rise](http://www.sec-ed.co.uk/news/cpd-spending-slashed-as-school-budget-deficits-continue-to-rise)