The Complete Guide to Inbound Marketing for Private Schools

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INTRODUCTION

A visually appealing website is a core component of a family's journey in selecting your school. The site is often the initial interaction a family has with your brand, and that first impression is an important one. But as a school, users of your website have a more diverse range of goals than consumers researching a more typical product.

Prospective families are evaluating the merits of your programs; current families are seeking updates on their children's experience; current students and teachers need resources available online; and alumni or parents of alumni may wonder how the school they love so dearly is evolving over time. Some users—like prospective families—may focus the majority of their time browsing your main site, while others—like current families, students, and faculty—may live behind the password in your school's portal. And some groups—like alumni—may consume your school's content exclusively through social media.

A visually appealing website is important. Just as important as the appearance is the strategy behind it—how the site functions as an effective communication tool. That strategy should include:

✓ *Understanding your website audiences*

✓ *How well does our current fundraising software meet our needs?*

✓ *How easy is our current fundraising software to use?*

✓ *Would another software solution offer more powerful capabilities that would help us raise more money?*

✓ *How long has it been since you evaluated software available in the market place? (Every 3 years is the average time to undergo an evaluation!)*

This eBook will help you audit your site to make sure it is a highly functional inbound marketing engine.

PART

01

Inbound Marketing

BY SCOTT ALLENBY

Understanding Your School's Online Experience

Whether you know it or not, your school is creating an online experience for each of your constituents. Whether a visitor is browsing your website, following you on social media, or stumbling upon one of your blog posts online, you are responsible for making that experience consistent. Understanding the current experience your school offers each visitor online is a critical first step.

Identifying Your Website Audience

Each of your school's constituents interact with your website differently depending on his or her relationship with your school. Understanding who your website serves is a key component of designing an effective site.

When Proctor Academy underwent a website redesign in 2014, the school made a conscious decision to unabashedly answer this question: Proctor's website is a marketing tool for prospective families. Hopefully, your school already had, or is in the process of having, this same conversation.

While your online strategy can serve multiple purposes, being intentional in how each component of your website and social media presence interacts with each constituency will allow you to be far more effective communicating your school's brand.

Creating a Cohesive Online Experience

Regardless of how constituents are engaging with you online, it is essential that they have a consistent brand experience. Yes, the goals of social media posts differ significantly from the behind-the-password information on a class page within your school's portal, but the core of the experience should not. Chuck English's eBook Understanding the Parent Journey provides tremendous insight into how parents interact with schools online as they move from parents of prospective students to parents of current students to parents of alumni. Ensuring a consistent experience throughout this journey is critical to communicating your school's brand.

Understanding Your Personas

As you map your constituent journey, use data to understand where your various audiences are consuming information online. Your first step in this process is having internal conversations about who your constituents actually are. Who are your different customers? What do their lives look like? How do they consume information digitally? In what ways do they interact with your school? To learn more about how to have these internal conversations, read this blog from HubSpot®.

Once you have identified your personas, you must understand where these types of people go online. Numerous studies have been done to help in that regard, including a Pew study on social media use and a Sprout social media study on online demographics. When you combine these resources with your own web analytics, you can start to understand how your audiences are interacting with you online.

Understanding Your Audience—School-Specific Trends

Your school should also consider informally asking different constituents how they are using your website, your log-in portal experience, and your social media accounts. Without an understanding of both market-wide trends and market-specific usage trends, you are unable to tailor each component of your online portfolio to the specific audiences using those sites.

Understanding Your Constituents' Interactions

PROSPECTIVE FAMILIES	*Initial Contact* Your first impression for most families is your homepage. First, contact families will browse your admissions site, perhaps check out a few program specific pages, and hopefully hit "Inquire" to learn more about your school. That first impression is powerful; do not underestimate it!
	Personal Contact In preparation for a visit to your campus, families will start to dig deeper into your website, including blog posts and videos that tell your story. Following their visit, more follow-up research will take place, so make sure your sub-pages have robust content on them as well.
	Applied By the time a family applies to your school, one or more family members will have started to follow you on social media, know your website in and out, and have subscribed to updates from your blog or news page.
NEWLY ENROLLED FAMILIES	After a family sends in the initial deposit, the level of digital communication from your school needs to remain top-notch. At this point, families follow you on social media, check in frequently for updated information on the enrollment process, and begin to migrate from the public website to the password-protected portal. Ask yourself: what resources are there for them at each of these places online?
ENROLLED FAMILIES	Your current families cannot get enough information on their children's experience at your school. They are actively engaged on social media and behind the password. Information needs to be easily accessible, dynamic, and up to date, and it needs to link parents back to front-end blog posts and content that may feature their students—all while reiterating the value of your school.

FACULTY AND STAFF	While teachers and staff members work most closely with day-to-day operations at your school and are key to creating the behind-the-password content that enrolled families thrive on, they are often removed from your school's external digital presence. It is important to routinely remind your internal constituents of the stories you are telling to your external audiences.
ALUMNI	While your current families live behind the password, your alumni rarely login to the online portal. They are largely engaged with your school on social media and occasionally visit your front-end website to see what is happening. Think about how you engage your alumni on your website. What resources are available to them? Alumni stories? Networking opportunities? Connections? Reliving the good ol' days? Don't forget the power of keeping this group engaged with one another and connected to your school.

Why an Inbound Strategy Is Essential to Your Brand Experience

The term "inbound marketing" is relatively new, however, the concept of content marketing has been around for quite some time. HubSpot—a leading inbound marketing company—explains inbound marketing like this: "It's great content. It's providing value for your audience. It's captivating stories told and brought to life with images and video. It's using data to glean insights from web analytics. It's strategically choosing words that optimize your content for search. It's engaging prospects on social media and leveraging digital advertising to reach your target audiences."

Inbound marketing is not just one thing; it is a comprehensive marketing strategy that reinforces your school's brand internally and externally. As you consider your school's online presence and digital brand, developing an inbound marketing strategy has the potential to do far more than simply augment your admissions pool; it solidifies your brand, ensuring that your school stands out from the competition.

Identifying Your True Differentiators

As you work to figure out your school's market position in relation to other independent schools, you are most likely focusing time and energy determining what makes your school unique. This is an important internal exercise, but you must be sure your market niche is truly a niche and not reiterating the same value propositions of other schools in your market.

Differentiator or Commonality

Understanding the "what" and "how" of your school's brand is fairly straightforward. You have classes, athletics, and arts programs. You have educators who care deeply about each individual learner. Your campus is picturesque. You have the finest housing facilities, and your students are always smiling.

You thought all these differentiators were unique to your school? Think again. Too often schools focus energy marketing the same commonalities as every other school.

Wordle of 25 school mission statements with the words *the*, *a*, and *student* removed.

Each of these aspects of your school is an important piece of what makes your school unique, but they do not define you. Your website must reach deeper than these commonalities to truly communicate the unique experience that only your school can offer. When this occurs, your website will become an incredibly effective marketing tool.

Communicating Why Your School Matters

In order to develop a website that generates leads and converts visitors into customers, you need to know why your school is different, and most importantly, you need to be able to articulate why your school matters.

Shifting your branding approach to focus on why your school matters can be challenging, but it is an essential foundation on which every website must be built. In a recent Fast Company article, Sebastian Buck wrote, "Taking this approach works on a number of levels: It builds deep emotional connection with people who share the brand's values, and it's clear now that for most people, a choice of a brand is an investment in meaning, not just features—and a brand's meaning can endure long after the features are out of date."

Families will not choose your school just because of the "features" you offer but rather because of how well you communicate why those features matter. What types of students do you graduate? What transformation takes place for students while they are at your school? How does your school approach education differently than everyone else? Why does that matter?

Establishing Yourself as a Thought Leader

As you think about your school's brand and focus on your differentiators, you have an opportunity to become a thought leader in your market space.

Walking the Talk

If you do what you claim you do as well as you claim to do it, tell people about it! Every school has areas of expertise. Taglines, photos, and video clips populate your website with claims of how your school does it best. Why not tell others about this as well?

If you have unique differentiators as a school, leverage the faculty and students responsible for driving those differentiators to develop inbound content. Maybe your school has a unique approach to residential life. Why not become an expert on developing a residential life curriculum for boarding schools? Or maybe your academic model utilizes cutting edge cognitive research. Why not become a thought leader on learning and the brain? Your strengths as a school can help inform others while at the same time strengthen your brand.

Case Studies in Inbound Marketing

The following inbound marketing efforts by independent schools show how different approaches can have a positive impact on marketing efforts. Schools do not need to follow a strict inbound formula but rather need to find opportunities to turn their differentiators into powerful inbound content.

The schools in the case studies to follow have made a conscious decision to become a thought leader in their respective markets, although each has taken a different approach to achieving that end goal.

SEWICKLEY: Understanding Financial Aid and the Independent School Admission Process

Under the leadership of Brendan Schneider, Sewickley Academy, an independent day school in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, has fully embraced inbound marketing efforts by consistently providing useful information to families looking at independent schools. This blog post, which lays out the difference between a Merit Scholarship and Need Based Financial Aid, provides useful information to any family looking at private schools and further establishes Sewickley as a thought leader in the

admissions world of independent schools and in turn, increases brand name recognition within its target market.

CHESHIRE ACADEMY: Boarding School Blog

Cheshire Academy has taken a slightly more targeted approach to its inbound efforts by developing the Boarding School Blog. This unique approach anticipates the pain points of families looking into boarding schools and provides informative posts addressing those points. Cheshire sees this inbound content as a perfect opportunity to increase the size of its admissions funnel by writing and publishing content that is universally useful for families looking at boarding schools. Not only does the school establish itself as a thought leader in the boarding school sector, but the Boarding School Blog has made a considerable impact on SEO for Cheshire Academy.

PROCTOR ACADEMY: Off-Campus Study Abroad Programs and Academic Support

Proctor Academy has focused more on its brand as the inbound content. Central to Proctor Academy's academic model are five term-long, school-run study abroad programs ranging from studying art history in Aix-en-Provence, France to sailing aboard a 130-foot tall ship from Gloucester, Massachusetts to Puerto Rico. With more than 70% of students taking part in one of these five programs during their time at Proctor, the school has leveraged its expertise in this space by creating a downloadable eBook, 5 Benefits to Studying Abroad in High School. This book has helped Proctor expand its market by explaining the benefits of its unique model to a broader audience rather than talking exclusively to people already interested in the school.

Also central to Proctor's academic model is a fully integrated academic support program called Learning Skills. An inbound video project asked current students about the importance of understanding their own learning style. While Proctor's Learning Skills program is foundational for the video content, the real focus is on the student experience. It is far from an overt promotional

piece for the school, but by establishing itself as a thought leader in the area of student growth and self-awareness, Proctor has developed an effective inbound marketing strategy to promote this program.

## LANDMARK SCHOOL: Learning and the Brain

Landmark School in Beverly, Massachusetts is a national leader in providing resources and support to students with dyslexia. While this identity has been central to the school's mission for years, Landmark's ability to develop inbound marketing content and research partnerships around its work with dyslexic students has been impactful. On the school's homepage, Landmark puts its "Resources" front and center for visitors to access. Not only does this page strengthen Landmark's brand, but it also reiterates to current parents that the school is a leader in providing a quality education to students with dyslexia.

Why Becoming a Thought Leader Is Time Well Spent for a Marketing Team

Inbound marketing is not just a hypothetical marketing strategy; it works. Wistia®—a video hosting, analytics, and marketing company—models the impact of an inbound content strategy. As a young start-up, Wistia intentionally dedicated significant internal resources to developing content that would attract new customers.

Alyce Currier, who works for Wistia's marketing department notes, "We definitely made a distinct transition from product-focused to mission-focused marketing (focused on empowering businesses to do awesome things with video and making online business more human), and I think the earlier an organization can get started with that, the better!"
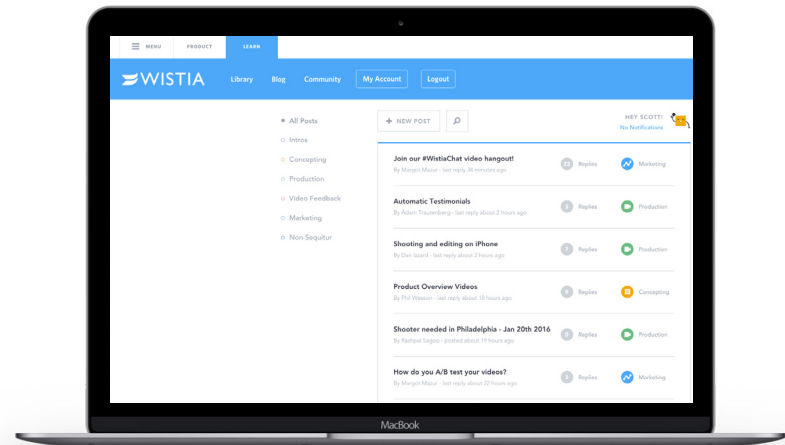
Like Wistia, schools have two main marketing challenges before them:

1. Attract more visitors to the admissions pool by increasing the size of the admissions funnel.
2. Nurture those visitors into qualified leads by educating them on the value of your school.

When you establish yourself as a thought leader through the creation of high quality, useful content, you not only increase the size of your funnel, but also you increase the number of qualified leads who enter your funnel by proactively educating visitors on your school's brand.

The buying cycle for independent schools is a long one; very rarely do parents make a spontaneous decision to enrol their children in an independent school. Therefore, schools must be willing to play the long-game of engagement through valuable content rather than the traditional direct marketing game that relies on in-the-moment, emotional decisions.

An additional benefit of an inbound marketing strategy lies in the internal brand strengthening that occurs when mission-centric content is created. Many schools have regional reputations that can be difficult to change in a short period of time through word-of-mouth marketing alone. Through a comprehensive inbound marketing strategy, you not only establish yourself as a thought leader in a specific area critical to your enrolment initiatives but also quickly shape your reputation by clearly communicating an area of expertise.

Developing thought leadership content for your website can be some of the most cost effective marketing you can do and it reinforces your brand internally by leveraging those voices within the community critical to your differentiators.

Telling Your Story

In order to effectively tell your unique story, you must learn to use powerful visual images, rich media content, and brand-centric content that tells your story over a sustained period of time.

The Power of Visual Images

HubSpot explains the power of visual images in marketing in this blog post, citing 93% of all human interaction is based on visuals. Additionally, the human brain processes images in just one-tenth of one second, about 60,000 times faster than it processes words. Think about that for a minute: by the time a visitor to your website reads the copy you spent hours writing, he or she has already processed the image you chose and developed a first impression about your school. Additionally, visual content results in 94% more engagement than non-visual content and has been proven to actually influence human emotions. The images you choose for your homepage are incredibly important, but so are the visuals you use throughout your entire site.

Not only are visual images key to your homepage, but they are equally important to shareable content you create, like blogs, videos, and social media posts. Creating strong visual pieces, like this infographic, can be just as impactful for boosting search engine optimization and increasing the size of your marketing funnel as having a strong image on your website's homepage.

Using Video to Tell Your Story

Every good marketer knows to show, not tell. There is no better tool to show your school than video. Ideally, your video strategy is integrated into your website, content, and social media strategies and is drawn from your brand identity.

In this blog post, Wistia masterfully educates its consumers on the role video plays in storytelling: "An exceptional onboarding experience creates an 'aha' moment. Whether it's a genuine, warm welcome or a clear explanation of a solution to a user's (family's) problem, something will spark a sudden realization that they've found the right fit. When you create this moment for your new users (families), they become excited and eager to join your community."

As you develop a video strategy that shows your school in action through interviews, b-roll, and informal glimpses into school life, you should also be cognizant of how visitors are consuming your video. Wistia adds additional insight here: "By understanding how viewers are consuming your content, you can update your videos over time and make them more valuable for your users."

Video must not only live on your website, but also it must be integrated into blog posts and social media content. As a core component of your inbound marketing strategy, your video content must be targeted to the right constituents at the right time through the right medium to have optimal impact during the constituent journey.

Patience, Grasshopper

Perhaps the most important lesson you can learn as you develop your website, content, and inbound marketing strategy is that you cannot create your school's brand through a single piece of content. Your brand is developed over time, through consistent messaging around a core set of principles.

Do not expect to change the world with one blog post, one video, or one homepage image. Just as an individual's reputation is the sum of his or her actions, your school's digital brand is the sum of your content and messaging. This is why it is important to have an integrated approach to content development that ensures a consistent message is being told across the many facets of the digital space.
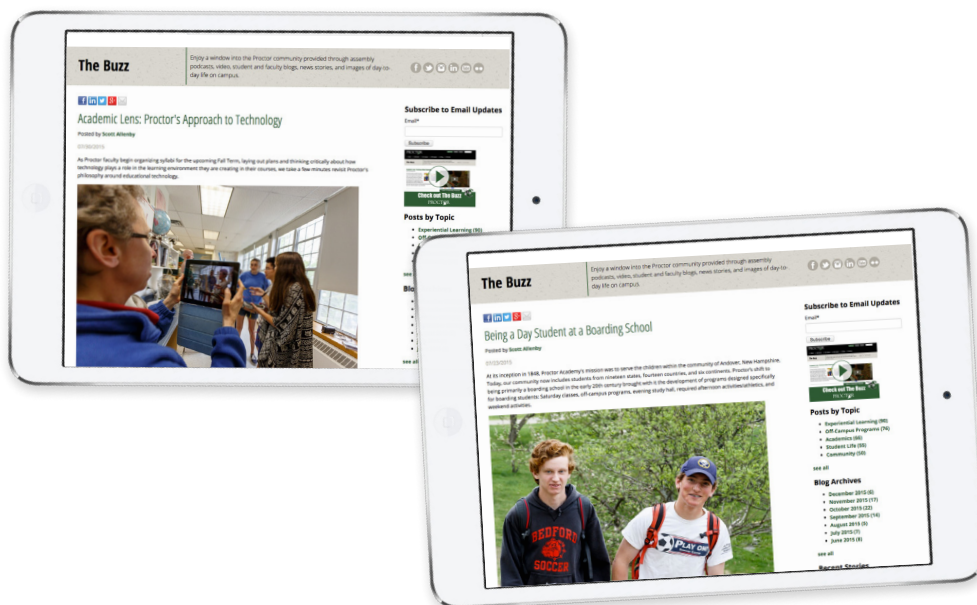
Each piece of content is a chapter of your school's marketing narrative. This narrative becomes richer, deeper, and more impactful over time as you build a library of consistent, brand-centric content online.

Now that you understand your audience and the importance of telling your story visually, it is time to give you the tactical tools to implement your new ideas.

PART

02

Site Optimization

BY HANS MUNDAHL

Once you are ready to start optimizing your site, you'll need to make sure you can answer four questions:

✓   *Are we set up for success?*

✓   *Do we clearly communicate what we do?*

✓   *Do we make a strong case for why it matters?*

✓   *Do our site visitors know what to do next?*

Setting Yourself up for Success

Before you can get the most from your website, you'll need to make sure you are set up for success. Follow these best-practices to ensure that you have the appropriate processes and procedures in place to effectively operate your site and track progress.

Analytics

Web stats are a rabbit hole: we could spend hours obsessing over user flow and conversion rate. To make matters worse, analytics software is often designed for ecommerce, emphasizing metrics that don't always apply to schools. Of course we care about our website visitors taking action, and we certainly want families to click "inquire" or "apply," but often families aren't ready to make a major decision until after they have come to campus. A simple, actionable dashboard serves schools much better.
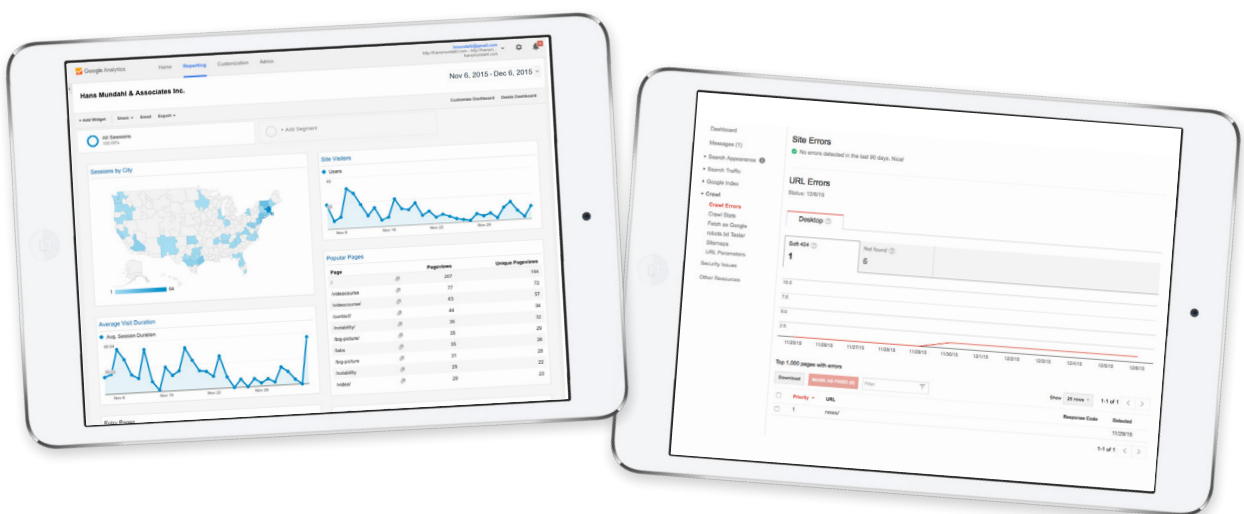
Here are the metrics to include in your web analytics dashboard:

Geographic Location:

Whether you are a boarding school or day school, you care about where your families live. Look for strong traffic in affluent nearby neighborhoods, but also pay attention to new and emerging markets.

Next Step: If possible, set up your dashboard to look at metro regions that may cross state or county boundaries.

Unique Visitors:

Your bread and butter will be how many people come to your website. Don't bother comparing site visitor metrics month to month, as you're likely to see decreased traffic over the summer and a spike once admission season starts. A better comparison would be year over year, so you can see how many site visitors result in inquiries and applications.

Next Step: Site traffic often is high on a Monday and then decreases during the week with the lowest traffic over the weekend. Plan new content so it hits the site at peak times.

Popular Pages:

Your homepage will certainly be the most popular page on the site, but pay attention to the next 10 most popular pages. If you don't have the time or people power to create dynamic content for every page on the site, then focus on the top few.

Next Step: If a program leader comes to you with an urgent request to update his or her page on the site, check to see where the page sits on the popular pages before you commit to a project timeline.

Average Visit Duration:

How many people come to your site is important, but how long they stay is even more critical. Average visit duration will give you a sense of how many minutes you have to catch the attention of your audience.

Next Step: An easy way to increase visit duration is to use auto-rotating photo carousels. Videos are even more effective at grabbing site visitors and keeping them engaged.

Entry Pages:

Which pages are users hitting first on your site? Odds are your homepage is at the top of the list, but what are the next 10? Can any of the entry pages be grouped together into a category? For example, athletic team pages are often entry pages for families interested in a particular sport.

Next Step: Include an appropriate call to action on all of your top entry pages. For example, adding a "Have a coach contact me" button to an athletic team page could be a great way to get families in contact with the admission office.

Devices Used:

How many of your site visitors are checking you out on their cell phones? This is important data if your website isn't optimized for mobile browsers using responsive web design (RWD). If you are using RWD, make sure engaging interactive content like photos, videos, and calls to action are displaying correctly.

Next Step: Monitor devices used more frequently than other parts of the dashboard. If you aren't using RWD, start thinking about a redesign as soon as possible.

How Visitors Find You:

You certainly care about site visitors who typed your URL into their web browsers or who intentionally searched for your name, but these folks already know something about you. Site visitors who found you through social media, a referring website, or through an organic search are becoming aware of you for the first time. Make sure you know who your top referring websites are and optimize your content appropriately.

Next Step: If you are seeing significant traffic from a particular site, consider creating a customized landing page for visitors from that site.

Of course there is a great deal of additional data we could look at, but these key metrics make up the core elements of an independent school analytics dashboard. Review your dashboard quarterly, and compare site traffic to the year prior. If you are adding new content to the site or launching a new initiative consider monitoring the dashboard more frequently.

Testing for Broken Links

Nothing is worse than when a user clicks on a broken link. Not only do prospective family members miss out on the information they need, but they may also get the feeling the school is asleep at the wheel.

The Google® Search Console is a great place to start to make sure nothing is broken on your site. A monthly check for crawl errors will show what may be broken with your site before it disrupts your visitors' experience.

Have you ever written a letter only to discover a punctuation error after it has been sent? Sometimes when we are too close to our website, it is hard to see errors or mistakes. A great way to avoid this trap is to periodically look at your site with someone else. For example, ask a parent to navigate the admission section of the site or see if a visiting coach can find the scores section of the athletic page. By watching how site visitors interact with your website, you may uncover an error you hadn't noticed before.

Search Engine Optimization

Search engine optimization, or SEO, is the science and art of teaching search engines why someone should visit your website. A full SEO campaign could take months or years to develop and implement. If you're not ready for that type of investment, at least make sure your site follows a few basic best practices:

Sitemap:

You don't need to actually have a sitemap on your site for search engines to know your sitemap. Google Search Console allows you to upload one directly so it can appear in search results.

Meta Tags:

Meta tags are little bits of code that tell search engines something about your site. Include your basic school information—like location, grades, and genders served—in a meta tag on your homepage. Meta tags will improve the information that displays under your school name in search results.

Vanity URLs:

When possible make sure important pages on your site—such as, admission and academics—have those keywords in their URLs like www.[schoolname].org/admission.

Robots File:

Don't worry about optimizing your robots file, but make sure you have one by going to www.[schoolname].org/robots.txt.

Domain Authority:

Improving your domain authority is the topic for another eBook. For now it's important to know what your domain authority is. Head to the Moz® Open Site Explorer and enter your school's website URL. Domain authority changes slowly over time, but check your authority once a year to look for progress.

Staffing

There are many ways to manage the content on a school website. Some schools have a team of dedicated editors, while other schools may have a single webmaster. Whatever the case, there are a few best practices to follow when thinking about staffing.

The Owner:

No matter the size of the communication team, there should always be a single owner of the website. This person is the primary contact with all vendors involved with the operation of the site and should be the most skilled with the process and procedures of keeping the site active. Often this person has the title of webmaster.

The Backup:

Make sure 1–2 other users have the top credentials on the site. Although they may not be tasked with day-to-day management of the site, they can step in during an emergency or if the webmaster is unavailable. The advancement director or director of technology may fill this role.

The Big Picture:

The webmaster may be the most technically skilled member of the web team, but he or she may need some context and help with prioritization. The director of advancement or communication should work with the webmaster to create strategic goals and make sure those goals align with the objectives of the school.

Content Editors:

At a large institution, the webmaster may not be able to keep up with site edits. In this case individuals may be given access to edit their areas of the site. The athletic director could enter scores and highlights, for example, or the admission office staff could update open house dates. In many cases, content editors don't need approval to make edits to their parts of the website.

It doesn't matter if you have a large communications team or you're a one-person shop: a clear management structure and effective workflow are important to effectively tell the story of your school through your website.

Clearly Communicating What You Do

Your homepage is the most important page on your site. For many visitors, this may be the only page they ever see. It's important to optimize your homepage to meet these two objectives:

✓ *Catch the visitors' attention*

✓ *Identify who you serve*

Compelling Images or Power Statements

As we talked about in section 4, a great way to catch the attention of a site visitor is with a compelling photograph. Now it's time to put this idea in to action.

- Make sure the highest quality photos are used on the homepage even if they don't change frequently.

- If your homepage includes a gallery, vary the pictures in the gallery to speak to more of the school's key messages.

- Favor photos that tell a story or make the visitor wonder what might be happening.

- Update photos of campus buildings each season.

Power statements are simple words or phrases that say something about your school. These types of statements are particularly effective when paired with a compelling photo and call to action. Consider this example:
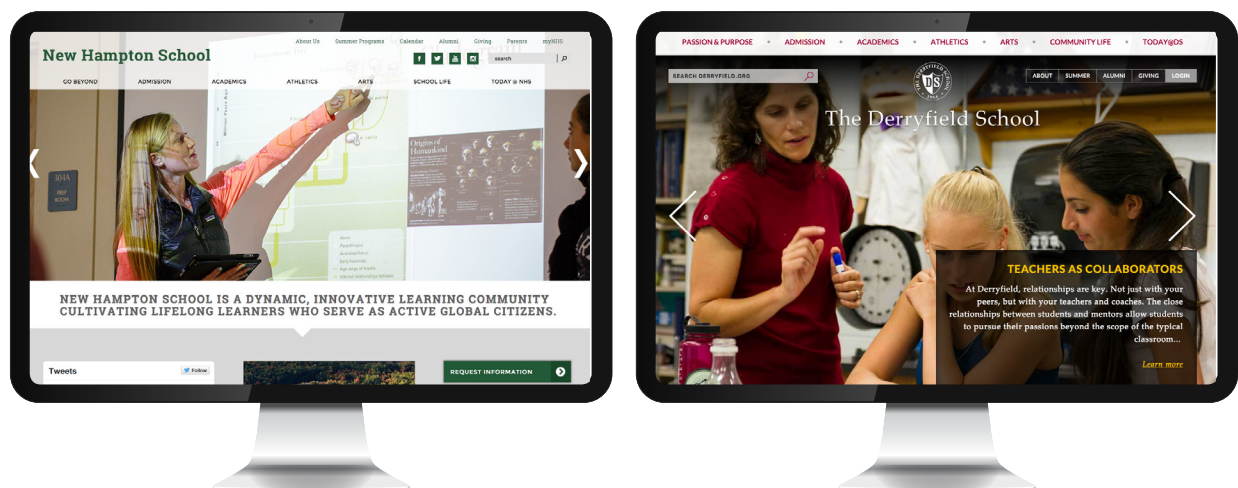
Composition and Flow

In Western cultures, the human eye is trained to read from top to bottom and left to right. As such, the composition of your homepage will appeal more to the user if it follows these conventions:

- School name or logo positioned at the top left or top center
- Key messages centered or on the left and higher on the page
- Key messages placed progressively toward the right further down the page

Try this activity to reflect on the composition of your homepage:

- Take a screen capture of your homepage, and project it on a white board.
- Stand as far away as possible from the white board, and identify the first thing that jumps out when you look at the page.
- Draw a circle around that element of your homepage with a dry erase marker.
- Look down the page, and identify the next thing that jumps out.
- Draw a line between the first element and the second.
- Continue on down the page.
- Ask yourself: Does the line zig zag across the site or does it travel smoothly from top left to bottom right? A homepage layout that flows easily from top to bottom and left to right is pleasing to the eye.
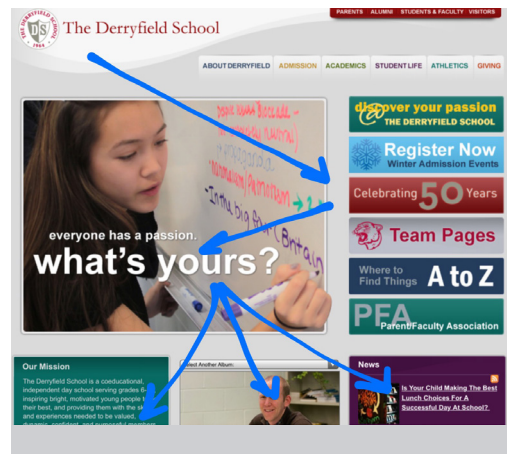
Most families won't expressly notice the composition and flow of your homepage, they will still appreciate a well-designed and professional site.

"Whofer"

Who does your school serve? Who are you for? Your "whofer" should be at most a single line of text that appears above the fold on your homepage. A well written "whofer" allows site visitors to quickly confirm the gender, age, and interests of their children fit with your school.
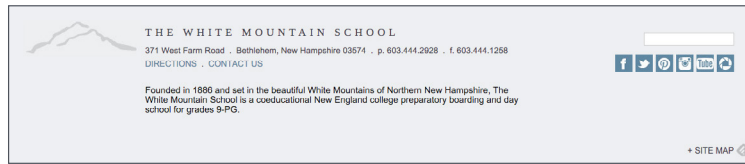
Making a Case for Why It Matters

Although we may spend most of our time looking at our website alone, the same can't be said of most of our site visitors. As families research potential schools, they may spend time on a dozen websites. Help make their job easier by making the case for your school right on the home page.

Value Proposition

Simon Sinek once said, "People don't buy what you do…they buy why you do it." This is particularly true for schools. In many ways schools are similar: academics, athletics, teachers, arts. These elements are present in every school. In other ways schools are very different.
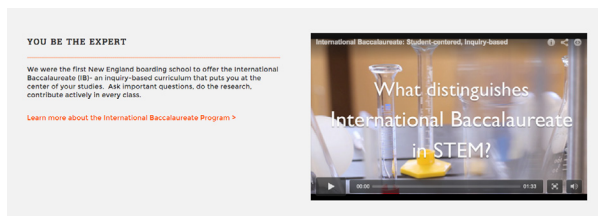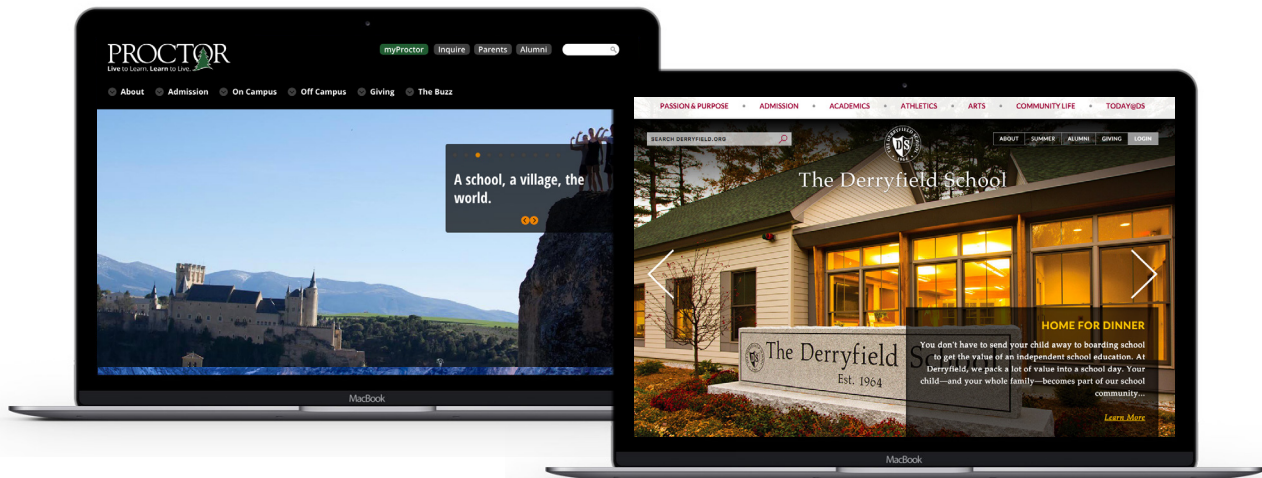
As we talked about in section 2 above, the most effective school websites explain what makes them different right on the homepage. Consider highlighting key elements of your value proposition, examples of your mission in action, or students and teachers who embody the values of your institution.

Features and Benefits

One way to explain the value proposition of the school is to draw a distinction between features and benefits. A feature is a fact, figure, or clearly visible element of your school. Examples of features include:

- Class size
- Number of faculty with advanced degrees
- New buildings or facilities
- Key programs or initiatives

Although features are important, they can be difficult to hang your hat on. Chances are most independent schools have a small class size and talented teachers. Benefits explain the value of the feature in the context of your school.

- Small class size means every student is challenged.
- Learning from a subject area expert means a student will be prepared for college level work.
- A new science building means students are using cutting edge tools and techniques.
- Breadth of AP courses means every student can find his or her passion.

Be sure to list the key and notable features of your institution, but don't stop there. Interpret those features so their value is highlighted.

Selling Your School

Chances are your school really feels distinctive when a family comes to campus. Why do so many school websites fail to express this vibe? Don't be shy about pointing out the value proposition of your school.

If you've identified five to seven key benefits of your school, consider grouping them together in a dedicated section of your site. Each page could be a powerful examination of a key benefit and offer the family links deeper into the site to find out more.

If you've identified specific types of families or roles within families, you can target your messaging more strategically. Examples include:

- Advice for moms sending a daughter to boarding school for the first time
- Guidance for new students on the value of athletics to a successful first year
- Resources to connect families to specific program leaders within the school

The Fold

The fold is an anachronistic term from the newspaper industry. Newspapers were folded to be delivered so publishers placed the most compelling content above the fold so it wouldn't be missed.

In web design the fold indicates the bottom of a browser window. Content below the fold on a website requires the user to scroll to see it. In the past, the fold was easy to identify and important to avoid. Most families used Internet Explorer® on computers with roughly the same screen size and would easily miss content below the fold.
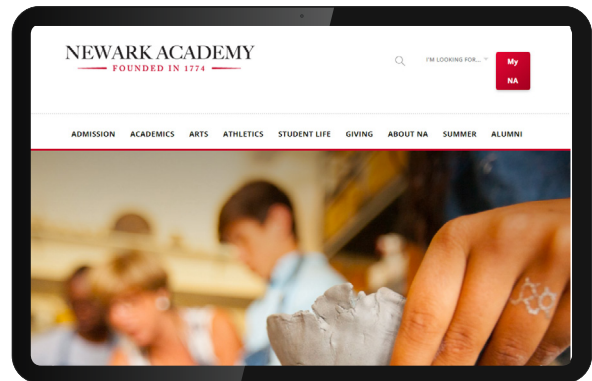
Today, a parent may look at a site on a smartphone on the way to work and continue browsing on a desktop at work. A child may start on a tablet, move to a phone, and end up on a laptop.

RWD allows the school site to look great on each of these devices, and those users who are accustomed to a smaller screen are not confused by content that's a quick swipe away.

Many school sites are including key messaging and content below the fold to encourage users who land on the homepage to stay and explore the school without needing to go anywhere else.

Creating Calls to Action

Websites are often organized like a supermarket. In a supermarket food is placed in aisles that make sense to the grocer but may not make sense to the shopper. Many supermarkets even

include drop-down menus to help the shopper navigate the store. Grocery shopping in a different store than usual can be frustrating: are the raisins in the produce section, cereal aisle, or with the snacks?

A well-organized website will organize content into Level 1 landing pages and also provide suggestions on the homepage to help users find exactly what they are looking for.

This type of organization is similar to the way a certain Swedish furniture store chain is organized. Furniture is grouped together into rooms in which the shopper moves through in sequence. As the shopper moves along, there are frequent opportunities to skip ahead or make a shopping decision.

These suggestions are known as "calls to action" as the site calls on the visitor to take a specific step.

Inquire, Apply, Give

Of course every school website wants a family to inquire, apply, or make a gift. The process for these tasks should be straightforward, seamless, and quickly visible on both the homepage and key interior pages.

Test this procedure frequently to ensure that everything works as intended and isn't confusing.

Find out More

Inquiries, applications, and gifts represent a fairly high level of commitment. In addition to these high value calls to action, consider the simple navigation suggestion. A navigation suggestion directs the visitor to an interior page with related information. Examples include:

- Link from athletics page to a team YouTube® account
- Link from the academics section to a detail page about an exciting course
- Link from the reunion page to the giving section
- Link from the homepage to a recent notable news story

These kinds of links might change frequently, in the case of news stories, or infrequently, in the case of a course offering.

Watch a Video

Videos are a great way to pull a user deeper into the site. Consider including the length of the video in the link so site visitors know they won't waste their time on content that is too long.

Connect

Sometimes families aren't ready to connect directly with the admissions office. Provide an opportunity for a family interested in soccer to connect directly with the soccer coach. Often coaches and program leaders are great advocates for the school as families make their way through the admission process.

Get a Present

Does the school have content or freebies it's willing to share with others? Consider swapping white papers, eBooks, or bumper stickers for an email or physical address. Once you've captured contact information, you can consider them prospects.

Attend an Event

Does your school have an open house, revisit day, or big football game? Encourage families in your funnel to attend events with clear calls to action on the homepage and on key interior pages.

Consider hosting a free webinar for families who can't attend an in-person event.

The Next Steps

Managing a school website can be daunting. Different audiences pull you in many different directions, and you may feel like you never have quite enough time. Never fear; here are a few tips to get you started!

Web Audit

Before you get started working on the site, take a deep breath and complete the web audit worksheet below.

WEB AUDIT WORKSHEET

(1) Web Analytics

Do you have a web dashboard? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Does your dashboard track:

☐ Geographic location   ☐ Entry pages
☐ Unique visitors   ☐ Devices used
☐ Popular pages   ☐ How visitors find you
☐ Average visit duration

We report statistics to: _____

We report statistics   ☐ Annually ☐ Quarterly   ☐ Monthly ☐ As requested

Notes

(2) Mom Test

Ask your mother or other family member to help you. Why your mother or family member? They are used to giving you advice and probably don't know too much about your school. Their task is to find out who your school serves. Show them your website and start a timer.

How long did it take for them to find out who you serve?

Who do they think you serve? Are they accurate?

Notes

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(3) Grandparent Test

Ask a grandparent of a current student to help you. Why a grandparent of a current student? They probably love your school but may be a little fuzzy on the details. Can they tell you three things about your school just by looking at the homepage?

1.

2.

3.

Notes

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(4) Calls to Action

List all the calls to action on your homepage - anything from 'Find out More' and 'Inquire Now' to 'Click here' or 'Submit.'

Calls to action:

Once you know how many calls to action you have, consult the chart below:

0 Calls to Action	**Supermarket:** You're leaving your site visitors up a creek without a paddle! Give them some help navigating your site by adding a link to the inquiry form at least.
1–2 Calls to Action	**Upscale Supermarket:** You've got a few endcaps on your supermarket aisles, but come on! Help a shopper out! What is the single biggest thing users want when they come to your homepage? Ask a few people, and then link to that information right from the homepage.
3–5 Calls to Action	**Swedish Furniture Maker:** Nice! You're helping people out without overwhelming your visitors.
6+ Calls to Action	**Whoa there, partner!** Dial it down a notch by picking the most important links that families really need or want.

The Best Time to Start

It's easy to think that now is not a good time to get started with your site. Admission season may have started, or perhaps it's still a long way off. We believe the best time to start working on your site is right now!

Small steps can add up to significant upgrades to your site. For example, work on a level 2 or level 3 page as a test to see if you like a new design or feature. If you don't like it, no worries! Traffic on those pages tends to be pretty low anyway. On the other hand, if you like how the page turned out, you can use that experience to build higher value pages.

We've found that once you get started you also work more quickly as you learn shortcuts and tricks to make your efforts progress faster. Often the first page may take you a few hours to update, but the next pages will go much quicker!

The Never-Ending Redesign

A web redesign is never really done; you just pick a moment when you're happy with your work and go live. A live site has seasonal demands related to the admission and development cycles. Here are a few tips to keep your site fresh in between redesigns.

Ongoing Evaluation

A good webmaster keeps an ear out for feedback. What works well? What doesn't? Where do users get lost? Listen for opportunities to tweak and adjust the site.

One good way to see where navigation is falling down is to monitor what users are searching for on your site. Chances are if they are searching it, they can't find it easily in the main navigation.

Prioritizing Competing Demands

Unfortunately most schools don't have time to make every edit demanded by every program leader. One way around this problem is to simply grant limited access to the website so program leaders can make updates directly to the site.

If this isn't possible, or if a program leader is asking for a bigger update than his or her permissions allow, the school must prioritize the project in the context of all the other demands.

When a program leader makes a request of the website, ask these questions and then consult the urgency grid below.

PAGE TRAFFIC	CONTENT UPDATE	CONTENT FIX	BUG FIX
HOMEPAGE	This Week	Today	Immediate
TOP FIVE PAGE	This Week	Today	Immediate
BOTTOM FIVE PAGE	This Week	This Week	Today
OTHER	This Quarter	This Month	This Week

What is the nature of your request?

- Content Update: The current information is correct, but it could be rephrased, expanded, or clarified.

- Content Fix: The current information is inaccurate or out of date.

- Bug Fix: Something is broken. A link doesn't work or a website feature isn't behaving as expected.

How much traffic does the page in question receive?

- Homepage: Page receives the most traffic of any page on the site.
- Top Five Page: Page is among the top five most popular pages on the site.
- Bottom Five Page: Page is in the top 10 most popular pages but in the bottom half.
- Other: Page is not in the top ten.

Staffing and urgency vary from school to school. If these timeframes don't fit for your institution, modify them. An urgency grid that takes into account page traffic and nature of the update can be a valuable tool in communicating expectations to program leaders.

Seasonal Tasks

Some tasks come up every year at the same time. Make a list of the seasonal tasks, and build time in your schedule so they don't sneak up on you. Examples of seasonal tasks include:

- Promoting students to the next grade level
- Managing departing and returning faculty
- Featuring a student or athlete of the month
- Creating annual fund appeals
- Pushing admissions
- Providing quarterly dashboard reporting

Multi-Year Tasks

Many broad strategic communication initiatives should be viewed on a multi-year timeline. Examples of multi-year tasks include:

- Adding a video to the homepage and every level 1 landing page on the site
- Moving to a complete online process for inquiry, application, and all internal forms
- Fully implementing an inbound marketing strategy

Don't worry if you don't complete these huge undertakings in one year! Set benchmarks and goals for each step of the process and allow yourself time for complete implementation.

An Ongoing Process

Your website is never really done; you will always be monitoring, adjusting, and updating the site to meet changing needs and your ongoing multi-year plan. Telling your school's story is an ongoing process that will evolve and grow—just as much as your students will.

About the Authors

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A native of Proctor, Vermont, Scott Allenby began teaching, coaching, and advising in the independent school world right out of college. Since 2006, he has held a variety of positions at Proctor Academy, including social science teacher, learning specialist, dorm parent, and varsity soccer and basketball coach. Currently, Scott serves as the director of communications, managing the school's digital brand and coordinating all admissions, development, and internal communications and marketing for Proctor. He also teaches economics, coaches basketball, and is an advisor to a group of six students.

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Hans Mundahl has been an educator since 1995 when he first stepped into the classroom as a Fulbright exchange teacher in the former East Germany. Since then, Hans has taught in a variety of settings including as an Outward Bound instructor, classroom teacher, house parent, and academic tutor. As a school administrator, Hans served as an admission officer, strategic planning liaison, and experiential learning program head before focusing on academic technology integration. In that capacity, Hans pioneered a values-driven approach to technology integration grounded in meaningful faculty and student engagement. This approach won New Hampton School praise when it was named an Apple® Distinguished School for its 1:1 iPad® program. Hans's writing and videos appear in several locations around the web, including edSocialMedia, Carney®, Sandoe & Associates, and ClassBook. com®. Hans has been quoted in Mashable and US News & World Report, and his own eBook, Teaching with the iPad, is available on the iBookstore. He is currently the Head of School at Sant Bani School.

About Blackbaud

Serving the nonprofit, charitable giving and education communities for more than 30 years, Blackbaud (NASDAQ:BLKB) combines technology solutions and expertise to help organizations achieve their missions. Blackbaud works in over 60 countries to support more than 30,000 customers, including nonprofits, K–12 private and higher education institutions, healthcare organizations, foundations and other charitable giving entities, and corporations. The company offers a full spectrum of cloud and on-premise solutions, and related services for organizations of all sizes, including nonprofit fundraising and relationship management, eMarketing, advocacy, accounting, payment and analytics, as well as grant management, corporate social responsibility, education and other solutions. Using Blackbaud technology, these organizations raise, invest, manage and award more than $100 billion each year. Recognized as a top company, Blackbaud is headquartered in Charleston, South Carolina.

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