



## Increasingly, school districts are jumping into the marketing game

By Beth Hawkins | Thursday, April 15, 2010

Think of it as an adult variation on putting the principal into the carnival dunk tank.

If, at the end of April, Stillwater's schools have attracted more fans than rival Mounds View, the losing district's superintendent, Dan Hoverman, will be forced to don the crimson of Stillwater Area High School's Ponies.

If Mounds View wins, Stillwater Superintendent Keith Ryskoski can choose the green and white of Mounds View High School or the burgundy of Irondale. (The district serves Mounds View, New Brighton, Arden Hills, Shoreview, North Oaks and parts of Vadnais Heights and Roseville.)

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"Or maybe a T-shirt that says, 'I got schooled by Mounds View,' " quipped Colin Sokolowski, public relations director for Mounds View Public

Schools and the instigator of the month-long Facebook Fanpage Face-off. "Really all that matters is that at the end, two PR directors still have their jobs."

On that score, Sokolowski and his Stillwater counterpart, Carissa Keister, have nothing to worry about. Both are recognized as peerless guerrilla marketers, and if they're feeling friendly toward Facebook, school district communications departments everywhere ought to rush online with them.

A generation ago, kids went to the school in their neighborhood — period. Principals didn't have to concern themselves with selling their programs to families and school administrators didn't fret about their image with the community.

If Sokolowski's job existed back then, a lot more of his time would be spent cranking out press releases about snow days and scholarship winners. Today, it's intimately tied to the success of the district's schools.

Most obvious, in the face of increased competition from open enrollment, private schools and charters, districts need to market themselves to students and parents. State funding follows students, and enrollment is declining across Minnesota.

But the message isn't just aimed at prospective families. With state funds shrinking, Minnesota districts are more dependent than ever on local residents' willingness to pay extra taxes. Voters, however, are increasingly likely to reject referendum requests.

In most metro-area districts, only about 20 percent of residents have kids. So schools need to market to non-parents. One not-too-subtle message they want to send: Property values are closely tied to local schools' desirability.

Which is where Facebook comes in. Schools have lots of tools for communicating with current and prospective students and staff. Reaching parents and the larger community, however, has proven tougher.

With its status-update-hungry adult audience, Facebook is a great medium for keeping schools visible, explained Sokolowski. "So many of our parents are users of Facebook," he said. "It makes sense to pop up in their feed."

And their friends' feeds. and their friends' friends' feeds. providing a

school district with viral access to residents, business owners and alumni.

Current posts on Mounds View's wall concern an upcoming fundraiser, the Chalkboard Capers, speculation on the potential impact of a phys-ed bill at the Legislature, a request for feedback on new Spanish-language programming, and a smattering of mash notes from teens.

Not all of it was posted by Mounds View employees, which is just fine by Sokolowski, but not necessarily with his counterparts in other districts. "There are a lot of school districts that are reluctant to jump into this -- for very good reason," he said. "They're worried it's going to be negative, it's going to be profane, it's going to be overly personal."

Mounds View has a handful of rules about netiquette, and when posters cross the line, a district staffer will step in and ask them to rephrase their comment. Fans or not, however, visitors are welcome to air negative opinions.

"Putting your fingers in your ears is not going to stop the conversation from happening," said Sokolowski. It might drive it elsewhere, and school administrators need to hear criticisms and concerns, albeit only so they know there's a rumor in need of quashing, he said.

Minneapolis Public Schools' [Facebook fans](#) certainly prove that point. Conversations simmering on the district's new page concern the ongoing deadlock in teacher contract talks, controversial proposals to remodel or replace district headquarters, and whether seeking International Baccalaureate status for high schools is worth the expense.

In recent years, dozens of angry debates concerning MPS have taken place on an online parents forum on Yahoo and in even smaller neighborhood [forums](#) set up in response to contentious issues. The district has had a hard time addressing controversies once they hit the grapevine.

Sokolowski has long tried to "own" those types of conversations by setting up chat rooms to accommodate them. Most of the time, discussions are civil and rumors easily quelled, he said.

"Eventually we plan to do more on the engagement end," said Sokolowski. "But we're starting off with information sharing. Right now our goal is to significantly increase our fan base."

On that score, both Mounds View and Stillwater are winning. Entire alumni organizations have been quick to sign up, as have fans of unofficial Facebook pages celebrating varsity teams.

As of last night, about halfway through the face-off, Mounds View had more than tripled its fans with 1,459; Stillwater had 1,420. The district that gains fewer fans loses.

"We're really neck and neck," said Sokolowski, reluctantly admitting that he himself "fanned" Stillwater. "Who really cares who loses the competition. Well, except the losing superintendent."

*Beth Hawkins writes about schools, criminal justice and other topics.*

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