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The year 2020 has served up its fair share of challenges for schools, ranging from the rapid establishment of remote learning (in some cases, overnight) to the creation of a sense of normalcy for students, staff and parents amid massive global uncertainty. The response of schools to this panoply of challenges has been nothing less than impressive.

It has been our privilege to talk to many schools and learn the methods they've employed to not just survive in 2020 but to thrive. Their tactics have been varied, to say the least, including some revelatory 'Shape of the Day' planning that accommodates both the limitations and strengths of online learning and new methods for addressing The Whole Student. However, the one common thread that has emerged from these discussions is that leading schools have all concentrated on building and consolidating their communities.

With many schools experiencing extended periods off-campus in 2020, the concept of community has taken on a different look. Its constituents may have stayed the same, but how these constituents interact has taken on new characteristics to account for physical distancing.

Not surprisingly, the right digital platforms and communications (such as EdSmart) have proven to be indispensable tools during the COVID age. But consolidating a community is about more than just the tools; it's about knowing how to stoke the fires of your community in a way that goes beyond the immediate, short-term demands of a crisis such as the global pandemic.

By learning how to nurture and develop community, you put your school in a position of strength that should continue well into the future.

Think of your school community as a customer

While the education you deliver will always be a significant factor in growing your student population and cementing your reputation over time, the quality of the relationships nurtured and sustained across your school community is more important than ever. As the recent global pandemic has shown us, a school community acts as a mirror to the school itself, especially when we're physically removed from campus.

In business, customer experience (often called CX for short) is the result of the interactions between an organisation and its customer over time. Each individual encounter – whether a phone call, a store visit, a delivery, a social media comment or an event – adds up to an overall sense about that organisation. You will have experienced it yourself. Do you look forward to dealing with certain organisations and dread dealing with others?

While we know the members of a school community are more than mere customers, it is helpful to think about their school experience in terms of CX.

Consider the following:
- How many opportunities are there for families to engage in relevant school activities?
- How easy is it for parents to immediately access information from the school online?
- How accessible are staff members to parents?
- How much do you ask for parents' time and for what reason?
- How much do you respect parents' time?
- How do you choose to communicate and interact with them?
- How wisely are you using data and insights they provide?

Everyone is time-poor and feeling the pressures of life in the 21st century, which has recently necessitated an unexpected increase in online schooling. Parents expect their school to be mindful of these pressures and alleviate them where possible. They also need to see that the responsibility for educating their child is still being handled by the school, not handballed to the household.

When this happens, they feel heard and respected. They have a sense of belonging and influence. And they're more likely to stick around and recommend the experience to others.

Digital transformation can drive community

Parents, teachers, students and service providers live digital lives outside the school environment. Whether organising finances, arranging transport, planning recipes, online shopping or communicating with friends and family around the globe (or around the corner), we're now used to getting things done in a way that involves a keyboard or a touchpad.

We talk about how innovation and sustainability are at the core of a school's ethos. Yet, many schools do not reflect the reality of our digital lives, sticking to paper-based methods instead. What some schools deliver to their community can be an overload of repetitive, confusing and time-consuming documentation. It's not aligned with the world that school communities inhabit, and it's aligned with out-moded practices that are not only costly but also negatively impact the environment at large.

The global pandemic has shown that schools who have been either electronically advanced or, at the very least, digital-ready in 2020 are the schools that have adapted to the crisis most impressively. For those schools, embracing the best technology available to do the heavy-lifting and keep their community connected has not only enabled them to continue functioning as 'normal' but also pressed a positive impression on their community at a time of stress and anxiety.

Digital transformation of schools has proved to be the lynchpin for maintaining school communities when physical interaction is not possible, which can apply to many circumstances beyond COVID-19 (e.g. illness, travel, etc.).
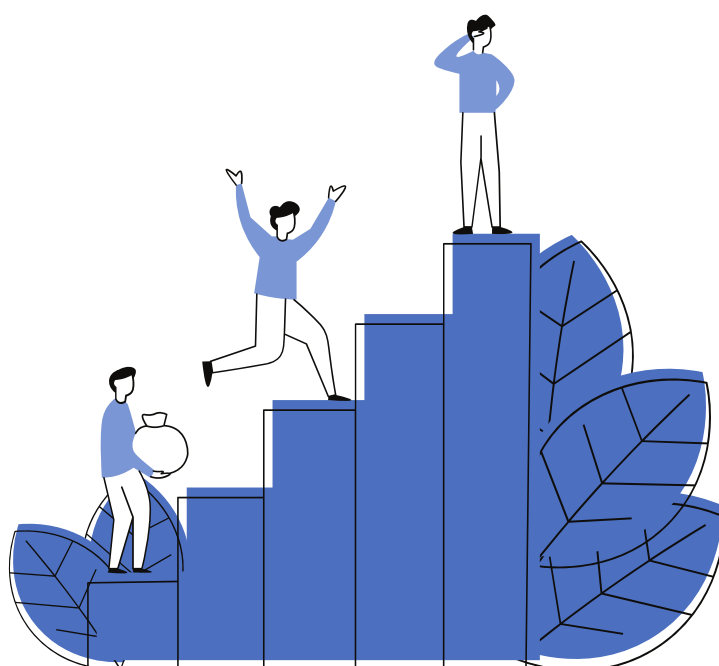
A new world of community engagement

The days of parent engagement equalling help with the occasional fête or sports day are a thing of the past. Parents are more connected to their children and their lives. They're driving them to events, watching them play sports, attending artistic events and supporting their online learning. Engagement is now immersive and total.

As well as the powering of core school administration, which needs to work smoothly, there are those extra 'asks' or context you need to deliver families to get the most out of everyone's efforts. For example, this is how we want you to barrack, this is how we want you to help on game day/backstage and so on.

Of course, engagement isn't a one-way street. Parents need opportunities for feedback (that won't cripple school function), and they expect to access the information they need when they need it, in the simplest way possible. If it's not easy, engagement will diminish and sentiment will decline with it.

School staff – from teachers to business managers to principals and everyone in-between – are also in a new engagement culture, with new demands and realities. Studies worldwide point to crippling teacher admin and workloads outside of core responsibilities. A University of Sydney survey revealed 91 per cent of teachers in NSW alone reported administrative demands were a hindrance to their core job (University of Sydney, 2018).

Schools can leverage automation and technology to liberate teachers from admin that needs doing but doesn't necessarily need their time. In addition to saving time, streamlining the staff customer experience and empowering them to do the same, opens up more opportunities for meaningful work and impact to the school.

Staff will be more engaged by a sense of non-menial purpose, have the time for professional development, and the time to invest in delivering a first-class experience for parents and students. In this way, customer experience is inter-connected across departments, jobs, locations and channels.

Smartsheet's Automation in the Workplace 2017 report registers 72 percent of participants as saying they planned to use the time saved through automation to perform higher value work. Meanwhile, 78 percent said automating manual, repetitive tasks let them focus on the more interesting and rewarding aspects of their jobs, and made them more likely to stay and perform to their best.

Consider this in your school: How can automation help paperwork get sorted, gather data, help people make decisions quicker (and in a more confident, informed way), relieve fatigued staff and drive your overall purpose and mission?

# Listen to the voices in your school community

Today, almost every business has a Voice of the Customer (VOC) program designed to drive first-class customer experience. Educating the next generation of students is one of the noblest of human pursuits. But the flip-side of this mammoth undertaking is that you – as the principal or one of the decision-makers in a school – are the head of a multi-million dollar business.

The days of school leaders lingering in corridors are gone (if they were ever truly there, to begin with). Instead, you're in council meetings, writing reports, poring over budgets and trying to meet a range of important obligations that make it harder and harder to get a feel for the realities of your school.

Technology can assist in this scaling process. You need tools that let you be in 'many places at once'. Getting quick feedback from people across your school ecosystem is an integral part of developing a winning and sustainable CX.

Call it Voice of the Educator (VOE), Voice of the Parent (VOP) - whatever suits your school community. Real-time and aggregated feedback communication is a vital input to help shape the kind of school environment people want, especially at a time when education is experiencing its most accelerated change. If you make this information transparent, you'll build trust, social capital and mobilise the whole school around your vision for the future.

Data also allows you to see shifts and trends that may not be immediately apparent. How parents, staff and students respond to an event (e.g. a global pandemic) will impact the way you react to similar events in the future, provided you capture the right data and synthesise it in a timely fashion. Your Voice of the School should help you provide more relevant, therefore more successful, content, events and practices.
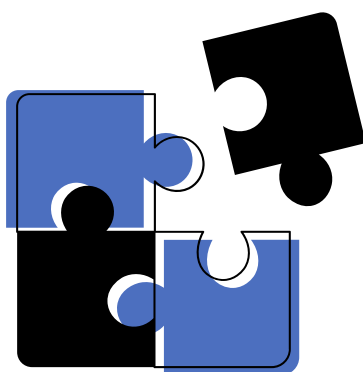
Create a frictionless community

Making it easy for people in your community to access important information and services is an essential part of improving customer experience and reaping the benefits. As Phillip Heath highlighted during our Big Thinkers principals' webinar, "trust is on trial" and schools now need to consolidate trust in their communities rather than take it for granted.

Every process you ask someone to follow adds up to positive or negative customer experience. Whether it's social (excursions, fundraisers, concerts or sports), commercial (school fee payments) or OH&S focused (fire drills or critical incident response), these transactions between a school and its stakeholders leave an impression about your school. From this, people infer your attitudes to your constituency and to the world around you.

Take your school's enrolment experience – if it isn't as efficient (for those completing it) as other processes in their lives, you're on precarious ground. Let technology reduce the workload of departments and remove friction points. Time and money saved can be reinvested between staff, parents and students to tackle what really matters.

Friction points happen anywhere people interact with your school. They're the times your parents, staff, alumni, students and other stakeholders are paying the most attention, are the most anxious, and are the most likely to appreciate value and convenience. In the school community, enrolment, paying tuition, confirming attendance for professional development days, assessment reports and online learning are only a handful of examples where friction points can develop.

Reducing friction – or reducing anything that makes completing a transaction difficult – makes it easier for people to continue their relationship with your school. And this is where technology can be a school's best friend. It's not about bells and whistles; it's about reducing cumbersome effort where it adds no value (and may in fact yield harm).

Understand and improve customer experience*

Assemble your troops

Gather a small group of representatives from around the school that can accurately identify the journeys that different school stakeholder groups take — from those stakeholders' points of view. Make sure you include parents, staff and students (at a minimum). We also recommend including prospective staff and students, alumni and contractors to get a holistic view of how your school is viewed from a CX perspective.

Map the journey

Understand how these groups move through touchpoints as they interact with your school. A good idea is to map these out visually using sticky notes on a wall or butchers' paper. Adopt a persona (i.e. 'wear the hat') of the group you're representing. Think about all the interactions they might have.

Focus on feeling

As well as capturing the nature of the interaction, note how those people are most likely to feel about the interaction. For example, a parent receives a letter in the mail concerning poor student behaviour. The letter has instructions they will need to follow up. They may be upset, angry and inconvenienced by the instructions. Alternatively, a student has received a scholarship for an overseas trip. They have confusing paperwork to complete. They are excited, nervous and impatient.

Gather the data

Once everything is captured, take photos of it in context, then gather it up and aggregate the information. Ideally, it should be represented visually as well as textually.

Unpack the lessons

Gather your core group and have honest discussions and analysis around what is working – and what is not – in the current journeys and processes. How is the school making people feel? Is it making things easier where it can? Are there opportunities to anticipate needs, expectations and desires to delight people with a smooth and intuitive experience?

Identify change opportunities

Determine precisely what needs to be modified and how possible it is to change. Explore what those changes could look like. Identify barriers to change, in each instance, and ideas for overcoming those barriers.
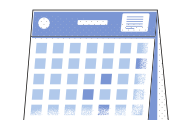
Create your action plan

Set priorities and timelines with clear goals and persons responsible. Make sure everyone is aligned and understands the part they will play in removing friction points and enhancing school experience.

Get moving – and keep it real!

Commit to addressing any foundational issues and begin that work, while also working through shorter term 'wins' to keep momentum. Your work will take time and will be multi-pronged. It will need agile thinking and reflexivity. But it's worth it.

Drawn from McKinsey's 2016 customer journey framework, this process will reveal challenges and possible solutions.

Get in touch with us today

Find out how EdSmart can help your school streamline school communications and strengthen engagement with your community.

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Email us at sales@edsmart.com

or call us at (03) 8560 0890