

A GUIDE FOR INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

How to Pivot From Mission to Brand to Growth

By Maria Kadison

President and CEO
EdwardsCo

HINT:
IT'S NOT
ABOUT
YOU

“We discovered a really powerful way to share our story, so parents and students understand—and are inspired by—what a Country School education can deliver.”

— Rob Macrae, Head of School, New Canaan Country School



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About EdwardsCo

EdwardsCo is a brand consulting and creative design firm that works exclusively in education with independent schools, colleges, and universities. Founded in 1994 by Mark Edwards, the firm has provided brand strategy development, communications planning, and creative services to many of the top independent schools across the country.

Because the firm works closely with a select group of clients each year to implement unique branding strategies, highly engaging communications, and beautiful design, EdwardsCo has become a trusted, long-term partner to schools who want to stand out.

Introduction

In an increasingly competitive environment, every independent school wants to stand out to prospective families. From leadership to administrative staff, faculty to alums, the school's community wants target families to hear their school's name and have something so powerful and meaningful come to mind that they are compelled to apply, enroll, and tell other families about their experiences. Increasing awareness and enrollment rates quickly and happily follow.

The million-dollar question for schools is: **How exactly do you make that happen?**

Schools often begin with a look at their strategic plan and the mission statement. When a school's internal community is broadly and strongly aligned around shared goals and key areas of focus, the mission makes an excellent **starting point** for inspiration on the unique and timeless value their school—and ONLY their school—delivers to students.

Note the emphasis on “starting point.” The reality is that, no matter how universally the internal community shares the belief about what is important to an educational experience and what prospective families should understand

about their school, most parents just want to know one thing: **How will going to your school benefit my child?**

At the end of the day, unless a school shows prospective families how it is uniquely able to help them realize the aspirations they have for their child's future better and differently than competitors, parents may not give it a second look. A school's mission is not intended as an articulation of how a

school's priorities translate into achieving the vision parents have for their children. For that, you need a [brand](#).

Successfully pivoting from mission to brand to accelerate growth requires a strategic approach to translating your deeply held beliefs about what's unique and special about your school into a brand that captivates target parents and their children. As is often the case, the hardest step is the first step: accepting that it's not about you.

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Case Study: New Canaan Country School Begins the Pivot

Take the example of [New Canaan Country School](#) (NCCS), a coeducational day school, Pre-K through grade 9, located in the highly competitive Fairfield and Westchester Counties, just outside New York City.

The 100-year-old school had a rigorous academic program and a well-established educational approach, which included the use of a variety of developmentally appropriate learning strategies to foster curiosity, confidence, and achievement. The school's mission encapsulated the internal community's dedication and drive to encourage a love of learning and to engage each student on his or her level.

NEW CANAAN COUNTRY SCHOOL MISSION

The mission of New Canaan Country School is to guide students to reach their intellectual, creative, moral, and physical potential. We value the imagination and curiosity of children and respect childhood as an integral part of life. Our teachers set high academic standards and challenge students to question, to think, to collaborate, and to act with integrity. The school works in partnership with families to teach personal, social, and environmental responsibility and to create a community that honors diversity and our common humanity. New Canaan Country School inspires students to be lifelong learners with the courage and confidence to make a positive contribution to the world.

Like many independent schools in recent years, NCCS faced increasing competition and pressure to attract prospective families to fill available places. In response to declining enrollment—especially in the lower grades—the school redoubled efforts to share the mission but struggled with how to describe its academic program.

To emphasize their balanced and less-pressured pedagogy, which was unusual in their market, the school used softer language. Communications explained to

parents that “play-based learning” was the school's strength and to “trust the journey.”

Unfortunately, the frequent use of softer language undercut the reputation of the school's academics. As a result, the marketplace thought of the school as “new age” and “not rigorous.” This serious misperception negatively affected enrollment further—NCCS was having an even tougher time convincing prospective families to consider the school.

“While we at the school understood what an NCCS education meant and the value it provided, we also realized that the external market did not share that same understanding—we needed a better way to articulate our identity,” explained Brooke Springer, Director of Communications and Marketing at NCCS.

Added Rob Macrae, Head of School at NCCS, “We knew we had to make a more compelling case for ‘why NCCS.’ At the same time, there was definitely concern among faculty and staff that making the case would mean moving away from our mission and going in a different direction.”

Understandably, letting what target parents and students indicate they want and need determine decisions about your school’s brand does produce some apprehension among the internal community. The natural concern is that by “bending to the will” of the market, the school will become something it’s not to attract students.

Communicating strengths and priorities in terms that are most meaningful to

prospective families, however, **under no circumstances** obligates a school to build a brand based on a concept that goes in an entirely different direction from its mission.

Think of it this way: Your **mission comes from taking a look in the mirror**. An internally focused statement, it describes a school’s purpose and primary objectives. It drives leadership’s decisions and provides measures of success. **Mission reflects your aspirations** for what the school can and should deliver to students as part of an unparalleled educational experience.

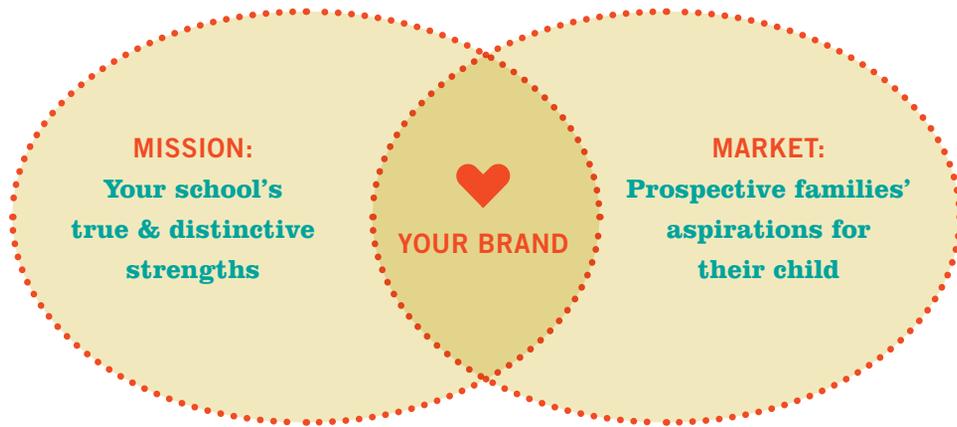
Meanwhile, your **brand comes from a look out the window**. Externally focused, it describes a school’s primary and

**HINT FOR
HEAD OF
SCHOOL**

Consider that what the internal community believes makes for good education for children doesn’t mean the same thing to prospective families, especially those in the marketplace for the first time. Shift the mindset from “What do we think is important as educators, and what do we want parents to know?” to “How can we describe what we do in terms of how it benefits a child, and what do parents want to know about us?”



differentiating value in terms of how it addresses the educational needs and motivations of its target audience. It reflects **how your school can help achieve a family’s aspirations** for their child.



In our experience, **schools see the most dramatic increases in enrollment when mission and brand are strongly aligned.**

A credible and authentic brand should flow directly from the school's purpose. It takes what your school values and works hard to deliver (i.e., the mission) and reframes it in terms of what parents want and need to know to ensure they are making the best choice for their child.

After reading NCCS's mission statement, parents indicated that they believed NCCS was a place where children could be children, yet they also wondered, "Will my child learn anything?" What parents said they were looking for was a school that

provides a foundation for success in life and produces well-rounded, well-prepared, and happy graduates.

What the school viewed as a priority in an educational experience as reflected in their mission and what prospective families said they wanted were not incompatible. In fact, the school's approach consistently produced the very outcome parents wanted—well-rounded, well-prepared, and happy graduates.

As a result, the school's mission and the resulting brand positioning statement—a.k.a., the declaration of what the school's brand stands for and the heart of brand strategy—had a strong, close connection.

Very importantly, NCCS **did not base their brand positioning statement on assumptions** about what educational outcomes prospective families wanted for their children.

"We had to talk to the market in order to find our place in it," clarified Springer. "For us, a critical piece of that look out the window was a more extensive talk with the families who would most likely embrace the value of an NCCS education."

"You will find a truly inspiring brand at the intersection of what your school most wants to be and what parents want most for their children."

— Brooke Springer, Director of Communications and Marketing, New Canaan Country School

Of course, when it comes to better understanding a family's motivations and decision-making process, there are more than a few voices from which you need to hear.

Prospective Families Invest in the “Why”

Parents and their children choose independent schools for myriad reasons. When asked **what they are looking for in a school**, they tend to give a variety of very rational answers. “We want to see a strong record of college placements and lots of AP classes,” for example.

Obviously, any independent school could offer attributes such as “lots of AP classes.” As a result, when a school sticks to talking about how it offers one or more of these in its communications, the message gets lost in the clutter of similar messages from the competition.

If you want your school to rise above the rest, the better question to ask parents is, **Why do you want those attributes?** For families, those attributes represent a perceived benefit. **And it’s the perceived benefits of an attribute that drive interest and selection.**

Interestingly, prospective parents do not universally share the same opinions about why a particular attribute is important.

In its *2011 Parent Motivations Survey*, the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) divided parents into five different segments based on their motivations and attitudes regarding independent schools. As demonstrated in our table below, there is a clear difference between two parent segments in their perception of the benefits of the same attribute.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR YOUR SCHOOL?

Offering a list of attributes doesn’t set a school apart in the hearts and minds of prospective families. Your school will only stand out when you **provide a context** for the attributes that taps into the benefits prospective families want.

Making assumptions about what’s in the hearts and minds of prospective families that makes an attribute important to them, however, can easily lead you in the wrong direction. Getting the “why” directly from prospective target families, as NCCS did, is a critical step in the process.

WHAT the School Offers	WHY It’s Important to Our Family	
	Parents Who Push*	Character-Building Parents*
Strong record of college placement	Increase the likelihood of my daughter getting into an Ivy League college	Help us determine the most fulfilling, best-fit college for my son
Small class sizes	Teachers who have the time to monitor and push my daughter’s performance and advancement	Teachers who will know and appreciate my son for his strengths and weaknesses and will guide him to make good decisions
Lots of AP classes	More opportunities for my daughter to excel and stand out in college applications	Nice to have those options if my son chooses to go that route
A wide assortment of extracurricular choices	I want her to choose one that she is really good at and achieve as much as possible	I want him to be exposed to a variety of interests so he can be well-rounded. I want him to struggle through trial and error to develop resilience.

* 2011 Parent Motivations Survey, NAIS

Stop Talking, Start Listening

If you want to get inside the mind of a prospective family, talking to parents of newly admitted students to better understand what inspired them to consider an independent school and choose yours is the obvious place to **start**.

Once again, note the emphasis on the word “start.”

The most powerful and successful brands are built on insights gathered from families who chose your school, from those who chose a competitor, from key influencers on school choice, and others. {See “**Who to Talk to and Why**” at right.} By talking to these different groups, you will have more information about barriers to enrollment growth.

WHO TO TALK TO AND WHY



Newly enrolled families

This audience is your sweet spot. They’ve committed to you above other options, but they are not insiders yet. They offer a fresh market perspective, having just gone through the admissions process.



Families who were admitted, but went elsewhere

So close, yet so far! You must know why they did not choose you. Most likely they will give a financial reason or say, “It was a matter of fit.” But you need to know why your school wasn’t worth the money/sacrifice and what part of your school wasn’t a good fit. It is worth hiring a third party to conduct these interviews, because otherwise parents will likely sugarcoat the real reason.



Families who inquired, but didn’t apply

Why did they inquire? What intrigued them enough to reach out? Why didn’t they apply?



Decision influencers like feeder schools, placement consultants, secondary schools, and college admissions officers

Their perceptions of your school are incredibly influential, yet these folks are susceptible to outdated or inaccurate perceptions. They speak with authority even when some have never been to campus or haven’t been to your school for over a decade.



Families who left the school for reasons other than relocation

If retention is an issue, you need to know why. Some families are simply not a good fit, and that’s OK. If you’re routinely losing good-fit families, however, there’s a problem. And more importantly, dissatisfied families tell friends and other families about their decision. It’s worth hiring a third party here, too, to get at the deeper issues causing problems.

Insights that fuel a powerful and successful brand need to identify the **real drivers** of a family's decision to invest in a private school education. As noted in **Prospective Families Invest in the “Why”** on page 5, you have to do more than just talk to these significant groups about attributes you offer, such as “lots of AP classes” or low faculty-to-student ratio.

By digging more deeply into **what most motivates families to choose an independent school**, you get at the bigger picture of why that's important. You get a sense of the emotions involved in decisions regarding their child's future—there's nothing more emotional for parents! You also get a sense of the effect—positive or negative—families believe different attributes and characteristics will have on their child's life.

Identifying the perceptions of target families and their influencers vis-à-vis how well you fulfill their primary decision criteria will help pinpoint opportunities to capitalize either on areas where your school is seen as strong or on areas where your school is seen as especially weak.



“You really have to listen to get underneath their surface answers and identify what's in their hearts and minds.”

— Brooke Springer, Director of Communications and Marketing, New Canaan Country School

In the case of NCCS, for instance, target families indicated that while academic rigor was important, it was not the be-all and end-all. Instead, they valued most a foundation for success in life that produces well-rounded, well-prepared, and happy graduates. That said, academic weakness was not acceptable. As a result, the school needed to address

misperceptions about being “too unstructured” and “loosey goosey.”

When families offer quick attribute-driven answers—“I'm looking for rigorous academics and a commitment to character education,” for example—press forward to find out why. Why do you want rigorous academics? Why character education? How do you envision your child benefitting from these things? What is the impact on your child's life of rigorous academics and character education, right now as well as down the road?

HINT FOR HEAD OF SCHOOL

Think of a brand strategy as a statement of the values and priorities you want parents and the school community to share. Shift the mindset from “What do we need to say to enroll more families?” to “How do we enroll more of the families who appreciate our values?”

The end goal with this investigative line of questioning is to go beyond collecting basic data points and to build a more comprehensive base of knowledge that will help your school become a **trusted partner** in realizing the family's vision for their children. By getting a clearer picture of what that vision looks like, your school moves one step closer to developing a meaningful and powerful brand.

7 QUESTIONS...

To Get to a Deeper Emotional, Level with Prospective Families

1

What are you looking for in a school and why?

2

Describe the perfect school for your child.

3

Picture your child on the day of graduation. What three adjectives do you hope to use to describe him or her?

4

What do you think of our school and why?

5

What is driving those perceptions?

6

What motivated your ultimate school choice?

7

What other schools did you consider?

Give Your Brand an EDGE

Now comes the next step—using your knowledge base to select the one message that

- * Resonates deeply with a target set of prospective families
- * Is very specific, highly motivating, and timeless
- * Can't be easily replicated by other schools

That one message will give your school an [EDGE](#) in the marketplace because it **Expresses Differentiation** and **Generates Engagement**. An EDGE is the concept that cuts through the clutter, captures attention, and drowns out the competition.

Within the framework of a brand strategy, it is known as the brand positioning statement—one to four sentences that bring the soul of the school to life in a way that is magnetic with your target families because it aligns exactly with their vision for their child. {See **NCCS's Winning EDGE** on page 10}.

How do you develop options for your EDGE? Let insights from your knowledge base about the shared dreams and aspirations of best-fit families and their perceptions of differences, weaknesses, and advantages of your school guide decisions.

Use your school's mission as another selection guide. Check options for compatibility and eliminate the ones that the internal community rejects as “not us.” Your brand positioning statement **must express a concept the school can authentically and enthusiastically deliver**. If your school's strategic priorities don't align with a proposed brand positioning and the internal community doesn't believe in it, no one in the marketplace is going to buy it either.

As a first pass, develop a few possibilities to consider. They should be **real alternatives**—not variations on a theme—to allow the internal community to have a robust discussion and come to consensus on the two to three to test with prospective families.

And yes, after internal discussion, you should go back to prospective families for feedback on positioning statement options. Words mean different things to different

people. What's beautiful and moving to one group could sound harsh and negative to another. (See **Case Study: St. John's School Learns the Benefits of Testing** on page 11.)

Remember, a winning EDGE resonates, motivates, and is difficult to replicate. It's the heart of your school's brand strategy and will direct all future communications with prospective families. In a highly competitive market, when you have less than 60 seconds to establish a memorable connection between your school and the fulfillment of family aspirations, taking the time to test potential positioning concepts is time well spent.

GIVE PROSPECTIVE FAMILIES REASONS TO BELIEVE

With a winning EDGE in hand, the next phase in developing a brand strategy is to craft three Supportive Messages.

The Supportive Messages flow directly from your winning EDGE and stand as the reasons to believe in the promise captured in it. They describe the distinct environment in which your school delivers

New Canaan Country School's Winning EDGE

“A Country School education is deliberately designed to bring out the unique, personal strengths of every child. By embracing the very concept of childhood, we have created an academic program that allows students to progress naturally and confidently from day to day, and year to year—prepared, grounded, joyful and emboldened. Because what a child learns, sees and feels today is the very fiber of what he or she will become.”

on the promise, how you do so differently and better than alternatives, and/or the outcomes from this distinct package.

Very importantly, the Supportive Messages also provide a hierarchy to follow in communications and a framework to focus your message.

Once again, draw directly on feedback from prospective families. What secondary



CREATE AN INSPIRING PRESENT AND AN INSPIRED FUTURE WILL FOLLOW.

At New Canaan Country School, our purposefully designed learning environment balances the right combination of academics, socialization and nurturing at each level, to build the intelligence, awareness, character and spirit that lead to bold outcomes. Because what a child learns, sees and feels today is the very fiber of what he or she will become.

NEW CANAAN COUNTRY SCHOOL. GO BOLDLY.

www.countryschool.net

EdwardsCo created print advertising for NCCS with copy that reflected the winning EDGE and Supportive Messages.

concepts or points did they consistently emphasize during the initial and concept-testing phases of your brand positioning research? The Supportive Messages often come directly from the highest-priority

must-haves that ranked just below the most compelling positioning, reframed in terms that clarify HOW you fulfill family aspirations and/or WHY you can be trusted to do so.

NEW CANAAN COUNTRY SCHOOL'S SUPPORTIVE MESSAGES

LEARNING ENVIRONMENT. Each grade level is intentionally planned to balance the right combination of academics with nurture, socialization, and support for that level.

FACULTY. Our compassionate teachers, advisors, coaches, and role models enable each student to learn and excel—not because students are pressured to but because they want to do well.

RESULTS. Our graduates are recognized for being exceptionally well-prepared, superior writers and analytical thinkers, as well as for taking a disproportionate share of leadership roles.

Case Study: St. John's School Learns the Benefits of Testing

While it is true that testing elements of brand strategy at key points in the development process takes more time, the information gathered from a market test very often saves the day.

Take the case of [St. John's Episcopal School](#), a Pre-K through grade 8 coeducational school in East Dallas, Texas.

Of the three positioning statement alternatives, one clearly rose to the top as the favorite with the *internal* community. The concept translated the unique qualities of the school's approach to education into what parents hoped their children could achieve. The concept centered around the phrase, "the courage to question, the courage to believe."

HINT FOR HEAD OF SCHOOL

Giving your school an EDGE—a brand positioning that **E**xpresses **D**ifferentiation and **G**enerates **E**ngagement—empowers you to elevate the conversation to an inspirational level. Shift the mindset from "What do we *offer*?" to "What do we *do* that helps parents realize their vision for their child's future?"

THE INTERNAL COMMUNITY'S FAVORITE

"St. John's has intentionally created a learning environment and community that prizes both intellectual richness and spiritual conviction. We believe that it is this partnership between academics and faith that makes both stronger in our students—giving them the courage to question and the courage to believe. As a result, St. John's graduates are well-educated, compassionate, and service-oriented members of their communities and beyond."

The internal community loved the way the concept integrated faith without sacrificing intellectual richness. Yet when the school showed the concept to prospective parents, they did not like the religious component:

"Religion should not be top billing. People here are not faith first; they are education first."

Several fundamentalist schools operated within St. John's market area. As a result, the positioning concept actually triggered an unappealing association with these competitors among prospective parents.

Because they tested three potential brand positioning concepts, St. John's had the opportunity to refine each of



them until one of the concepts was preferred by the external

community. Prospective parents were asked more specifics about their reactions. What words or expressions drove their feelings? New words were substituted and tested, and the preferred positioning statement was reformulated into a concept the internal AND external communities embraced.

THE EXTERNAL COMMUNITY'S FAVORITE

"While your child's preparation for a demanding high school and college education is important, you want more for them. You also value a balanced education that deeply inspires your child to learn. At St. John's, we know when to push and, just as important, when to pull back. Students take pride in their accomplishments, develop their natural curiosity and awaken an inner-drive to think independently, critically, and creatively. And when children love to learn, they will thrive throughout life in an unpredictable world."

The reactions from prospective families demonstrated the appeal of the new statement:

"This is exactly why we chose St. John's—it is balanced between your child and what they need to be successful in life."

Because they invested the time in testing, St. John's avoided what could have been a major problem that would have seriously jeopardized recruitment and retention efforts for many years to come.

Making Your Brand Work for You

So you've taken a look out the window and come away with a powerful articulation of the timeless value your school provides in answer to the hopes and dreams of prospective families—a.k.a., your EDGE, your brand positioning statement. You've also set a communications structure with three key Supportive Messages.

Where to next? How do you make your brand work for you?

Often the assumption is that you jump headlong into tactics and design: "Let's redesign the website—if it looks better, it won't hold us back so much with new families!"

It's completely understandable that the conversation about how to get more families interested in attending your school might gravitate to a particular marketing piece and a tactical element such as the website. It's what members of the internal community group see, have familiarity with, and have the sense that they can do something about relatively quickly.

When done in isolation outside the context of your school's EDGE and without consideration of how to most effectively establish an emotional connection with your target audience, updating the website alone will have minimal impact on growth.

Imagine for a moment that you are new to a city or town. You walk into a restaurant—you love the atmosphere, and the service and food are top-notch. You go back again and again and each time are more impressed. Although you expect to see a line out the door, the place is never busy.

You believe the restaurant is a hidden gem and strike up a conversation with the owner to suggest he do something to get more people to come. He agrees that, yes, he needs to do something and already has a plan.

"I'm going to redesign the menu—give it a new color and font."

Sounds crazy, right? What possible effect could a one-off, almost arbitrary design change to the menu, of all things, have on bringing more people into the restaurant?

It's no different when it comes to driving enrollment. Updating the website, redesigning the logo, or any one-and-done design change will not get you very far when you want prospective families to **deeply and truly feel** that you can help realize their dreams for their children.

Based on our work with hundreds of independent schools during the past 30+ years, we have developed an estimate of the return on a variety of investments, ranging from individual tactical elements and visual identity to more strategic work to develop and implement a brand strategy.

HINT FOR HEAD OF SCHOOL

Reframe the discussion from "We need a new website" to "We need to attract more families." Shift the mindset from what individual tactics to use to what communications strategy to follow to achieve the real goal.

Brand Work and Return on Investment

ONE-OFF CHANGES...



Logo redesign	0 – 2%
Advertising	0 – 3%
New visual identity	0 – 5%
Brochure redesign	0 – 10%
Website redesign	10%

VERSUS IN COMBINATION WITH A COHESIVE BRAND STRATEGY



Advertising driven by brand strategy	105%
Brochure redesign/messaging driven by brand strategy	105%
Website redesign/messaging driven by brand strategy	125%
Social media plan/messaging driven by brand strategy	110%
Message training for faculty/staff driven by brand strategy	135%
Coordinated execution of all of the above	250% – 450%

As illustrated in the chart, when you bring together all the relevant tactics and execute them with guidance from a brand strategy, you see the **most substantial return**.

If you want to increase enrollment, the real question to ask is, “What do we need to do to inspire interest in our school?” Your school can **significantly magnify** the impact of any individual tactical element or communications piece when you answer the following questions:

- 1** How do target families use and interact with the website, brochures, social media, and other points of contact during different phases of the decision-making process?
- 2** How do we best bring our brand’s positioning to life and unify the message across all points of communication?

MAP ENGAGEMENT ALONG THE ADMISSION CYCLE

To answer question #1, look at the insights from recently admitted families, as well as

other data sources to better understand what you need and when you need it.

Based on our experience, for example, emotions drive decisions early and late in the admissions cycle. If your initial communication to prospective families focuses on facts alone, then your school won’t make it to the next phase of consideration. With that in mind, find out from recently admitted families what first **inspired** them to learn more. Where did they go, what did they look at or read, or from whom did they seek advice **before** coming for a visit?

You can also review data from your website and social media channels—what content are visitors engaging with and sharing? When? Learn more about who and where your target families are; what they watch, listen to, and read; and where they go online.

While you build your base of knowledge about family aspirations, determine when and how to best get a message in front of them to inspire an inquiry and a visit.

INSIST ON MESSAGE DISCIPLINE

To answer question #2, recognize that bringing your brand positioning to life first and foremost requires **Message Discipline**. Always use your winning EDGE and Supportive Messages to keep the content of communications focused.

The most effective way to convert skeptics into believers is to continuously and consistently reiterate, reinforce, and restate what your school can do for a child.

You also need to determine how to deliver those messages in a way that steadily streams the magnetic force of your school's brand positioning—engaging, captivating, and surrounding target families with your school's brand story. For families to select your school, they have to **know in their heads and feel in their hearts** that your school is the place they need to be.

Not only do you have to bring the EDGE you have on paper to vivid life in the real world, but you also have to do it in a way

that's compelling and compatible with very different communications channels—word of mouth, open houses, campus tours, website, social media, print, etc. This task can seem daunting and makes the tendency to jump to updating one or two tactical elements without thinking through a creative strategy all the more tempting.

TURBO-CHARGE WORD OF MOUTH WITH MESSAGE TRAINING

The first and most important way to instill Message Discipline is through Message Training. Evaluate and improve every point of interaction in order to deliver your school's message loud and clear. Word of mouth, for example, is one of—if not THE—most influential marketing vehicles to reach and engage prospective families.

Educating the entire internal community about your school's brand positioning and training them in when and how to share the priority Supportive Messages are absolutely critical to your school's marketing success. Written language and spoken language are very different.

Whether or not your brand message breaks through the clutter depends on getting the words right all the time, everywhere, in all that you do.

As an added benefit, properly training admissions, marketing, and development staff; board leadership and trustees; faculty; senior administrators; and tour guides and parent ambassadors to communicate your school's winning EDGE and Supportive Messages is the fastest way to earn a return on your investment in a brand strategy. When everyone can authentically and enthusiastically share the same powerful message about how your school will help fulfill family aspirations differently and better than the competition, you will see marketplace perceptions begin to shift and interest in your school increase.

Training that focuses on tone, style, and paying attention to cues from the prospective family also empowers your internal community to adapt to the needs of their primary audiences. When they can do this naturally, they will become formidable “recruiters,” and strong contributors to enrollment growth in their own right.

Only when you combine brand messaging, creative strategy, and execution will you successfully drive substantial enrollment growth and/or selectivity. There are no shortcuts. Thankfully, there are important tools you can use that make the process infinitely more manageable.

THE CREATIVE BRIEF IS YOUR NORTH STAR

In addition to word of mouth, you also need to translate your brand positioning and Supportive Messages into tactical elements such as your visual identity (e.g., logo, colors, typefaces, etc.), website, and admissions brochure.

To more seamlessly move from a descriptive brand positioning statement to executing it, we recommend crafting a strong creative brief. Think of the brief as the North Star for your creative execution. It will keep the creative team focused exclusively on bringing your positioning to life through the specific tasks as defined in the brief.

Keep in mind that effective communication is not a skin-deep process. A new logo,

website, or viewbook might look gorgeous, but if it conveys a tone, voice, or imagery that does not reflect or illustrate your brand positioning, its beauty will quickly fade. You need to make creative and design decisions deliberately, not only to grab visual attention, but also to communicate your EDGE and Supportive Messages in a fresh, inspiring, and meaningful way.

The creative brief is essential to guiding thoughtful, purposeful, and highly effective creative executions.

With a brief in hand, you can begin to explore different creative approaches. Consider all the ways you can convey your brand positioning and reasons to believe. What are some distinct taglines that can quickly encapsulate the essence of your positioning? What descriptive copy flows from these distinct taglines? What images, colors, typography, words, and visuals complete the package?

As you consider approaches and options, think of the effect you would like your creative pieces to have on a best-fit family. When parents visit a campus, for example,

Components of a Highly Actionable Creative Brief

Questions to Ask About Each Component

- * **Project** What are we producing?
- * **Objective** Why are we doing it?
- * **How will the creative execution achieve this objective?**
- * **Primary communication target** Who is the #1 audience we need to influence, and what do we know about them?
- * **Enrollment challenges** What is preventing the target from choosing us?
- * **EDGE** What is our brand positioning and the main idea we need to communicate?
- * **Supportive Messages** Why might they believe the brand positioning?
- * **Tone and manner** What type of brand voice supports the message?
- * **Executorial considerations** What to keep in mind when developing the work?
- * **Elements of the creative execution** What's our first priority (website, tagline, logo redesign, print, campus banners, etc.)?

they get a feeling about the culture. Some parents will feel comfortable and relaxed in one type of environment. They will think, “Yes! This feels right for my child.” Of course, other parents will feel less comfortable. They are most likely not your best-fit families.

All of your marketing pieces should aim to replicate that feeling a family gets when they are on campus. For the best-fit family, you want them to feel such a strong connection that they are compelled to learn more and come for a visit. For the family with other preferences, they will understand another school might better meet their needs. And that’s OK.

Remember, your brand strategy is intentionally designed to attract and enroll more families who value and appreciate your school’s unique strengths and qualities. A clear benefit exists for recruiting time and budget, yield, and retention when the end goal of your creative pieces is not just to look gorgeous, but also to move best-fit families along the consideration process towards your school.

IN ACTION AT NCCS

[Back at NCCS](#), with their winning EDGE and Supportive Messages in hand, the school began to think through execution. The discussion turned to how prospective families used different types of marketing materials—from websites to information sheets, print and digital ads to viewbooks—during the consideration process, as well as how the critical elements could work together most effectively.

Although not every school opts to use a tagline, NCCS felt a tagline would be an important focal point in its communications efforts.

According to Brooke Springer: “We really felt that we needed a succinct tagline. We wanted something that could be used as a rallying cry—that we could picture students saying and sports teams chanting—and encapsulated everything we’re trying to say about the school.”

Grounded by NCCS’s creative brief, EdwardsCo developed a new graphic identity, brand campaign, and the tagline, “Go Boldly.” Working from this foundation, the school prioritized updating the website with the new campaign and identity. NCCS also opted for a short but powerful inspiration brochure rather than a text-heavy viewbook.

HINT FOR MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR

Once a school has a final brand strategy, the race is on to get the creative elements designed, drafted, programmed, and posted. Throughout our 30+ years working with independent schools, we have observed a **tendency to underestimate** the amount of staff time needed for successful creative development and execution—even when hiring an outside firm to do it. An outside firm cannot do it without significant participation by the directors of communications or admissions.

Unlike a traditional viewbook which is designed to inform, the Inspiration Piece—as the name implies—is built to inspire. While a viewbook is primarily intended for prospective families, an Inspiration Piece can be a powerful attraction piece for prospective families, a retention piece for current parents, and a call-to-arms for fundraising.

It positions the school as a whole through the power of its impact on students and includes a pocket folder in the back for branded content sheets. A school can select the appropriate information sheets to include based on the intended recipient. For instance, information on academic details by division, athletics, and college placement can be included for prospective families, and annual fund and capital campaign goals for alumni.

As a final step before rolling out the new strategy, EdwardsCo conducted message training on campus for trustees, faculty, staff, coaches, tour guides, and parent ambassadors to introduce NCCS's EDGE and Supportive Messages. Participants received coaching on how to verbalize the

messaging in a deeply personal way, using their own words and examples.

“We had at least 100 people in training—key stakeholders and in very influential positions—feeling well-versed and comfortable with the school's new messaging and language,” said Springer.

“The new brand strategy brought our internal community together right away,” reported Head of School Rob Macrae.

“From faculty and staff to board members and parents—everyone could see the authenticity of our message and how our positioning brought our mission to life in a vibrant way.”

The school experienced a quick boost in spirit and pride, and, armed with message

training, energized a natural increase in word-of-mouth support. The stronger language, clear direction on messaging, and new materials made faculty, staff, and current families want to spread the word and share their love of the school. The “Go Boldly” tagline became part of the internal community's vocabulary—the 3rd-grade rock band even wrote and performed an original song entitled “Go Boldly!” for a lower school assembly.

Prospective families also responded to the new brand strategy. Within one year, the school experienced a boost in overall enrollment and opened a new pre-kindergarten class in response to the surge in demand.

“We now have a brand that reflects what we want to provide for our students and what prospective families want for their children.”

— Rob Macrae, Head of School, New Canaan Country School

Case Study: New Canaan Country School Brings It All Together



Inspiration piece: double-fold brochure with back pocket for timely information



Stationery suite



Message discipline

extended through all NCCS communications, all created and designed by EdwardsCo. The “Go Boldly” tagline and the Supportive Messages focused and prioritized the school’s messages, ensuring cohesive communications across all channels.



Spirit wear for students and staff



Campus banners

[Website](#) featuring two home page slider messages and two secondary web pages

Conclusion

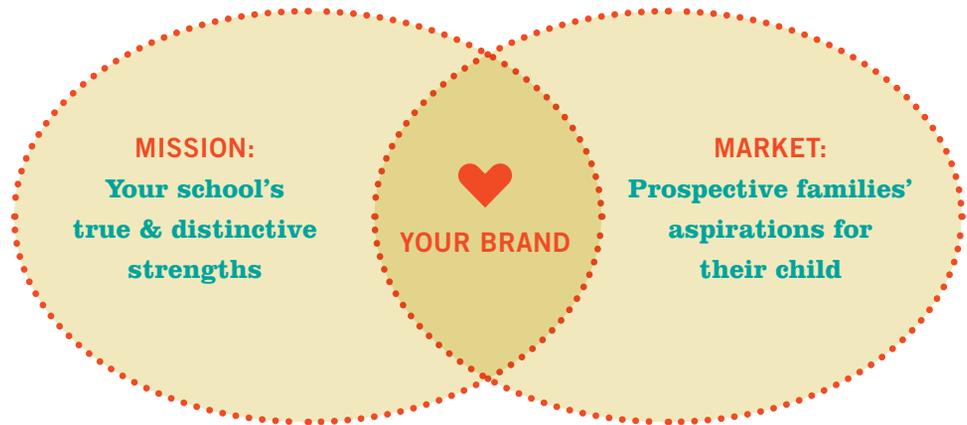
Building and executing a strong, compelling brand strategy dramatically improves the ability of your school to stand out from the competition.

Why? Because a strong brand cuts through the clutter of nearly identical messages in a way that resonates memorably and meaningfully with your best prospective families.

And having a strong brand in the marketplace is a direct result of

- 1** Solid research into the needs and wants of target families
- 2** The selection of a winning brand positioning after testing/refining with the internal and external community
- 3** Flawless execution across key marketing and communications touchpoints

All independent schools feel passionately about their values and the difference they can make in the lives of children and families. For parents, there's no more [emotional decision](#) than one related to their hopes and dreams for their children. Clearly and consistently making the connection for families between what your school can offer differently and/or better towards the achievement of those hopes and dreams is how you pivot from mission to brand and achieve lasting enrollment growth.



**HINT FOR
HEAD OF
SCHOOL**

BEFORE YOU CAN SPEAK WITH THE RIGHT VOICE, YOU HAVE TO LISTEN.

Listen to the EdwardsCo Insights Podcast to hear more from Brooke Springer, Director of Communications and Marketing at New Canaan Country School, about how the school pivoted from mission to brand to accelerate enrollment growth. <http://bit.ly/edconccs>



About the Author

[Maria Kadison](#)

President and CEO, EdwardsCo

mkadison@EdwardsCo.com

(617) 651-0522

Maria is a trusted partner to senior leadership and trustees in independent boarding and day schools and higher ed institutions across the country. Under her leadership, EdwardsCo has doubled in size while adding recruiting and retention services to its robust brand and creative strategy offering.

After a successful career in international strategy and marketing consulting, Maria sought more mission-driven work. Her education career began at Simmons College as the vice president for marketing where she led institutional branding, admissions marketing, and advancement communications for the undergraduate college and five graduate schools. Maria's team is credited with doubling enrollment, increasing student quality, and reducing the discount rate by 50% at Simmons within four years. Maria and her teams have won several CASE and other industry awards for the overhaul of marketing materials, multi-media marketing, and industry research and analysis.

Her love and appreciation for the work of independent schools began early—Maria is a graduate of the Wheeler School in Providence, RI. She also earned a BA from Emory University and an MBA and MA in International Relations from Yale.