



USP MARKETING STRATEGY

A Guide to Identifying and Marketing Your School's Unique Selling Proposition



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INTRODUCTION

Your school website is the equivalent of your shop window - it's your opportunity to showcase your values and ethos as well as to demonstrate how your school operates and what your students and parents can expect when choosing to pursue an education with you.

However, with thousands of schools across the country, many of which are likely within your own local area, it can sometimes be difficult to make your school stand out from the crowd and ensure that your prospective parents are choosing your school over your competition.

That's why, to make certain you are getting in front of the right people, you need to guarantee that your marketing is consistent, effective and tailored to your specific audience requirements.

One of the most important ways of doing this is by **identifying your school's Unique Selling Proposition (USP)**.

THE AIMS OF THIS GUIDE ARE TO:

- Help you identify your school's USP
- Start you thinking about your marketing strategies and plans
- Use the information and knowledge gained to help you influence your marketing through online and offline channels.

This guide has been designed as a comprehensive starting point for school professionals who wish to know more about marketing strategy and USPs.



USP: AN OVERVIEW

USP stands for Unique Selling Proposition which is basically a condensed way of saying *‘the standout feature of your school which is unique and individual to you.’*

This feature could be anything from your stunning grounds to your state-of-the-art facilities to your outside-of-the-box curriculum. It just needs to be something which **your school has** that your competitors **do not have**.

To help identify your Unique Selling Proposition, you first need to conduct **SWOT** analysis.

This will help you to acknowledge your:

- **Strengths**
- **Weaknesses**
- **Opportunities**
- **Threats**

Once you have identified these features, you can then use them to:

- Define your USP
- Analyse your marketing strategy
- Work out areas to target and focus on going forwards

We have put together this comprehensive guide to give you all the information you require to get started.





IDENTIFYING YOUR STRENGTHS

A good starting place is to think about the **first thing** that you tell any prospective parent about your school. Which piece of information do you share at every open morning, in every prospectus and every advert? Which parts of your school are you most proud of?

When identifying your strengths, it's also important to figuratively 'step outside' of your role and 'take off your school hat' to approach your brand from another angle. If **you** were a prospective parent or were looking for a job at your school, what would appeal to **you**? What would make you want to pick up the phone or send an email or enquire further through your website?

Every school will be different and every school will place a different emphasis on what they find important but in this exercise, all that matters is what is important to **you**.

For example: *It could be that you're a 50-student primary school in the middle of a really rural village. In this instance, your strengths may be that you have small classes, a very family-orientated community feeling and that you are situated in a really-safe low population area with reduced traffic and easy access to the countryside.*

Or *you could be a large, vibrant secondary school in the centre of London. In this scenario, your strengths could be your diverse cultural population, your fantastic easy-access location via the capital's extensive transport system and your vast links to industry (when it comes to work experience and career potential) due to your proximity to the head offices of leading brands and suppliers.*

SOME IDEAS TO START YOU OFF...

We've put together some examples to help you start to think about your strengths and how you can market them to your own audiences. Some of them may not be relevant, but hopefully our suggestions may spark inspiration for identifying your own strengths:

- **Where is your school based?**

Are you in the countryside, are you in a city or are you half-and-half? What benefits do your surroundings offer your prospective parents, do they have an effect on commuting times and on accessibility or on the activities you partake in?

- **How do you teach the curriculum?**

Do you have a Forest School or an alternative way of teaching? What syllabus are you following or methods are you using?

- **Who are your main audience?**

Do you attract students from the local area or do you have a large international reach?

- **What are your results like?**

Are you a popular choice for local primary schools, or are you successful at getting your students into university? Did you recently receive an outstanding Ofsted inspection or a glowing ISI report?

- **What extra-curricular clubs do you offer?**

Do you have trips away to different countries or do you offer international exchange programmes? Do you participate in any schemes, awards or charitable endeavours?

- **Have you turned a negative situation into a positive?**

Have you struggled with any bad press in the past or had to deal with challenging circumstances which you have then managed to turn around?

Once you have listed all of your strengths, you are ready to move onto the next step of the process, which will allow you to identify your USP by analysing your competitors to work out which of your strengths are unique to you.

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What's the first thing that you tell any prospective parent(s) about your school?

STUDYING YOUR COMPETITORS

As mentioned at the start of this guide, the key element of your USP is that it is **unique**. This means you need to work out not only which feature of your school is strongest, but also which feature **you have** that your competition **does not**.

To do this, you need to do a little competitor research, which we're pleased to say can be easily accomplished from the comfort of your own desk, using these 5 simple steps.

- First of all, you need to **identify your main 5 competitors**; you may have more (or less) but we would advise that you focus on the top 5 - the ones who you are regularly competing with in terms of admissions, scholarships and recruitment.
- Next, **draw up a competitor analysis document*** either by hand or in a spreadsheet which lists all of your strengths from Section 1 in the first column and then the name of your competitors in a row across the top of the next 5 columns. You will use this document to compare your strengths with those of your competition.

**We have included an example of how this document could look on page 15 of this resource.*



Key Tip:
Identify the schools you are competing with in terms of admissions, scholarships, fees and/or recruitment.



Key Tip:
Your marketing should *always* be about building your brand and *never* about tearing down a competitor. This exercise is only for research

- Working through your list - **visit your competitors' websites and social media accounts**, as well as have a look through their prospectus if they have an online copy. You are looking to see if they also mention any of the strengths you have identified for yourselves as a feature of their school.

If they do - how do you compare, is there anything you do differently or anything about your offering which is unique? Make notes on your analysis document in the relevant column as you will need this for the next step.

- Once you have analysed all of the information about your competitors - **highlight the areas where you feel that you that your offering is more effective or where you are confident that, even though you all have the same feature, your approach to it is unique.** This will help you to narrow down your USP.
- List out these highlighted points and then rank them in order of your preference - **at the top should be the stand-out feature that you feel is the most individual and encompasses your school values and is unrivalled by your competitors.**

The other points will still be relevant for your marketing, **but in terms of identifying your USP, the top one is the one you'll need going forwards.** This feature will form the basis of the next part of your marketing strategy which is about how to use your Unique Selling Proposition to market your school effectively.

EXAMPLE OF A COMPETITOR ANALYSIS TABLE

Your Strengths e.g...	Competitor 1	Competitor 2	Competitor 3	Competitor 4	Competitor 5
Rural school surrounded by fields					
Small class sizes - 15 pupils per class					
Forest School nature area within the grounds					
20 extra curricular clubs					
Fresh locally-farmed produce cooked by local caterers					
Easy access to the coast for geography trips					
Excellent teaching staff with high records of achievement and excellence					
Outstanding Ofsted results					

MARKETING STRATEGIES TO HIGHLIGHT YOUR USP

Now that you have identified your USP and know which feature makes you stand out from the crowd, the next step is to start marketing your school in such a way that everyone else knows it too; namely your prospective parents, prospective students and future employees.

You also need to do this in such a way that you don't forget to mention all of the other things which are brilliant about your school.

You have many strings to your bow and it's just as important to emphasise these as well - it's crucial to appear well-rounded in your offering when appealing to prospective parents.

To the left are some examples of how you can use your marketing to effectively highlight your USP, whilst also making the most of your other features and successes.

For example: If your school is situated in the middle of a highly populated area, but your USP is that you are fortunate enough to have large school fields as well as a state-of-the-art astroturf and football pitches then you could emphasise this across your marketing by:

- **Utilising beautiful photography** showing your students playing sports on your facilities or eating lunch on your school fields. These will stick in the mind of prospective parents - they'll see happy children and also take note of the facilities in the background.
- **Creating a strap-line** to encompass your USP - i.e. '*Sporting success in the heart of the city*'. A strap-line like this could also have a double-meaning - depending on which word you choose to emphasise; your school could be having 'sporting success' (athletic results) but it could also be 'sporting success' - i.e highlighting your achievements.
- **Designing a landing page on your website** specifically related to your USP - talking about how the facilities were developed, the benefits they provide for your school and the advantages that are available for your community. Ideally this should be linked to from your homepage or navigation and we would recommend utilising a relevant friendly URL, for an additional SEO boost.

Don't Forget:

The **most important** thing about a USP is that, whatever it may be, it needs to be reflected within everything your school does; from the first contact someone has with you until to the last.

The worst thing you can do is have a USP (or values or a strapline for that matter) which are not accurately reflected within your organisation or that can be easily undermined.

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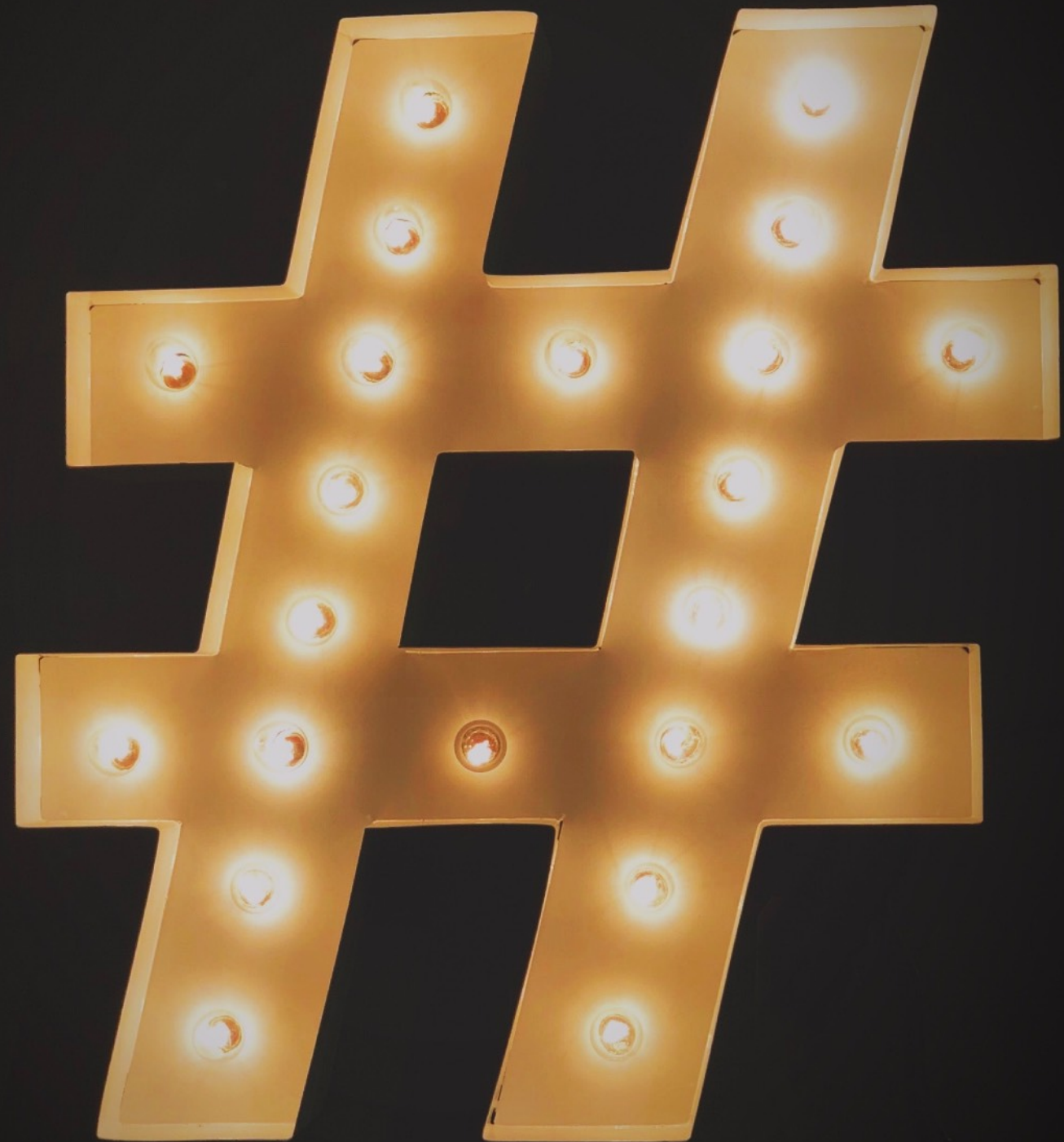
UTILISING YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA CHANNELS

As well as utilising your website and printed literature, don't forget that you can also highlight your USP and general strengths through social media - using innovative content driven posts and captivating videography and photography to share a flavour of your school with your target audience.

Your goal is to make your social media feed a dynamic, engaging and interactive journey that offers your followers an inside glimpse of your school - allowing them to see a 'day in the life' of your students and staff. Open mornings, sports days, shows, productions and assemblies are all great events to share on your account - especially if you can coordinate real-time updates or generate build-up to the event with sneak previews.

You can also create a custom hashtag which you use on all of your posts to drive traffic, enhance your brand and increase recognition of your posts. Some examples of relevant hashtags for your school could be ideas such as *#schoolnameandme*, *#schoolnamestories* or *#talesfromschoolname*.

You can find out more about social media marketing for Schools and Multi-Academy Trusts in our helpful resource: **Social Media Marketing**.



Two sharpened pencils, one grey and one brown, are positioned diagonally on a bright yellow background. The pencils are sharpened and have some eraser residue on their tips.

ACKNOWLEDGING YOUR WEAKNESSES

Identifying your strengths and your USP is vitally important for working out your marketing strategy, completing successful marketing campaigns and for boosting your reputation and online presence through SEO and content.

Yet one of the most-overlooked and hardest parts of marketing is to also be aware of your school's 'weaknesses'. As negative as that may sound, we want to emphasise that that this doesn't necessarily have to be a bad thing.

We know that it's never easy to acknowledge what we 'don't do as well' or what features our competitors have that we don't, but this is a critical part of your marketing strategy. It's only by working out what you're not as strong at, that you can a) change it or b) work with it and turn it into a positive element of your marketing.

Over the next two pages, we give an example of a 'weakness' as well as strategies for turning these on their head and positioning these weaknesses to appear as strengths.

Top Tip:

Don't forget to utilise parental research when identifying strengths and weaknesses - a simple survey may provide some interesting results



FOR EXAMPLE:

A weakness (in your competitors' eyes) may be that you have no school fields of your own and not too much outside space for children to run around and play.

This may be a concern for parents with athletic children or parents who are concerned about health and fitness. *However*, if you are aware that this is seen as a weakness, you can flip this on its head and change your visitors' perception.

For instance, rather than focusing on what you don't have (*fields and outdoor play space*) you could instead promote what you do have - which in this scenario could be your incredible gym facilities and state-of-the-art sports hall, or your brilliant relationship with the sports club down the road who give you unlimited access throughout the year to their courts, pitches and swimming pool.

CHALLENGING NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS

Once you have identified your weaknesses (perceived or actual), you can then work out a strategy for dealing with these elements - whether that's positioning yourselves as an authority figure and turning a 'weakness' into a strength or, if the issue runs a little deeper, by working to address them within your school.

As long as you come up with a positive solution for dealing with these points, or challenging them accordingly, you can then work on promoting your strengths with confidence and pride.

Ways to deal with this could be by:

- **Producing positive content** - strong website content, engaging blog posts and informative news articles can all help with improving public perception.
- **Challenging the negativity** - creating a specific area on your website which subtly turns negative conceptions on their head and promotes the positive alternatives instead can be very powerful.
- **Acknowledging the truth.** If this weakness is something you are unable to offer your students, for whatever reason, then explaining why this is not possible can be beneficial - especially if there is a genuine reason. It's also good to be able to say '*we don't offer this, but by doing so, we can offer our students this, this and this*'.

Key Tip:

Identifying weaknesses means that you can counteract them, it doesn't mean you are doing anything 'wrong'



USING SEO TO BOOST YOUR USP

One of the biggest things about getting people to view your content, especially when you are working to highlight your newly found USP is to ensure that your website is search engine friendly.

We would recommend following these key pointers to get the most out of your school website:

- **Use friendly URLs across your website** (l.e e4education.co.uk/e4econnect) they will be more search-engine friendly, are easier to use in printed or shared marketing literature and provide a clean, easy pathway for your users to find the information they need - especially with crucial pages like admissions, term dates and policies.
- **Add in meta-descriptions for all of your key pages (or all pages if possible).** This is a short snippet of information about the content on the page that contains your important keywords, and should be in the format of complete sentences, as this section will influence your search results and may show in the listings on some search engines. The meta-description should contain between 50 and 320 characters.
- **Ensure that your content is unique, genuine and authentic.** Search engines will punish sites who try and 'cheat' the system by using content which has specifically written to use keywords as many times as possible, rather than to convey information or a message. Your content needs to be relevant to your school and written as though you were communicating directly with your audience. Visitors will respond much better to your content if it is clear, easy to read and makes sense.
- **Regularly use alt tags on images.** To ensure that your website content meets accessibility requirements, make sure that all images used within your content have an 'alt text' set which will display if the image is not shown or is unable to be loaded. They will also help SEO as alt text helps search engine crawlers to index your images correctly.

If you require any help and advice, or would like a demo of any of our fantastic products - please get in touch with our team.



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