



## Santa Ana USD creates engagement gold by getting social on all fronts

Santa Ana USD | [www.sausd.us](http://www.sausd.us) | Santa Ana, CA | 56,000 students and 56 Schools

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**Deidra Powell,**  
Chief Communications Officer

When Deidra Powell, Chief Communications Officer of Santa Ana Unified School District in California, arrived at the district in 2012, she immediately noticed an unkempt website, very little electronic communications, no social media presence, and not even informational brochures. She was told by staff that the district had a poor relationship with local media—they viewed it as a “problem district” and gave it negative coverage.

“People were unaware of the great stories within the walls of our schools. I needed to understand how we got to this point, and then do something about it. With my media background, I knew how to bridge that gap,” stated Deidra.

Three of her top objectives were:

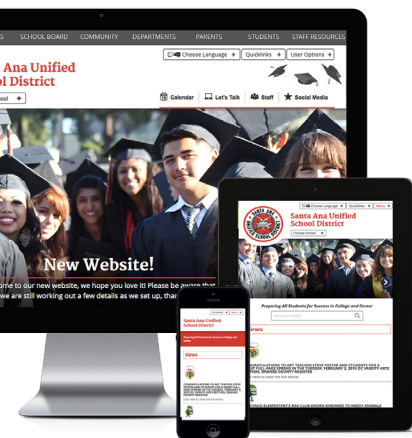
- Be strategic
- Tell our own story
- Be vigilant about who we are

One of Deidra’s first steps was to set up face-to-face appointments with media contacts, including the local editor of Orange County Register and several TV stations—even one in Los Angeles located 30 miles away. Her goal: to develop positive relationships. Deidra was pleasantly surprised that her media contacts wanted to develop partnerships and assist the district in telling its stories in a positive light. She added, “I can recall visiting the local ABC station and one of the news executives asking me what types of educational stories should be covered. At the time, my district was one of the few in California launching Common Core, so I mentioned it. Within two weeks, ABC featured us in a two-minute package that aired during the 5:00 p.m. news. If I had not made that connection, that story may not have happened.”

Another step was to work with the Board of Education to determine how best to support their goals. A major focus was to improve community relations and communications so that Santa Ana USD would be seen as a positive influence in the community. So, Deidra’s team of four—Department Secretary, Media Specialist, Media Technician, and Deidra—took an offsite retreat for part of the day to focus and avoid office disruptions. There they developed a communications strategy that included tactics to make positive changes and have a significant impact in their community.

Fast forward two years...

The Santa Ana USD’s communication team has worked hard to develop business, media, and community relationships. And that hard work is really starting to show.



The communications team researched websites nationwide, including other school districts, universities, and businesses to find the most effective ways to tell their story via their website. According to Deidra, “We showed our designer examples of what we wanted, explained our vision, and described how we needed to tell our story front and center on our website. When our designer put it together, we said, ‘Wow! No stock photos! That is us telling our own story!’ And the feedback from our staff and community has been very positive.”

The communications team ensures success of their marketing efforts through a comprehensive marketing plan, detailed campaign plans, prioritized tactics, analytics, and measurements to ensure they are doing things that work and eliminating activities that don’t work. According to Deidra, “That is the way we do business now. And we have the results to prove our marketing and communications strategies lead to success.”

Here is a sample of their exciting results:

- The media turns to the district’s website and social media for positive stories, and contacts the district to get further details. According to Deidra, “Our website has become our own newswire! And we are featured weekly in some form of media coverage, in a positive or neutral story. I attribute that to reporters feeling confident in getting what they need from us to do their jobs.”
- **Parent and family engagement has skyrocketed.** In 2014, over 5,000 parents attended several meetings held over two months to discuss student success. Meetings have started up again this school year, and attendance has surpassed last year’s numbers. “People are excited to learn and have a voice. They are attending these meetings, and so far, it’s been an amazing school year,” stated Deidra.
- The district’s **website** is the portal for all information. The community members can provide feedback through the website and the district counts it a huge success for community engagement. “In fact,” Deidra states, “even on a Tuesday after a recent 3-day weekend, at 8:30 in the morning we had a full house of over 200 attendees at a meeting. That’s a huge success!”

Deidra loves to share the district’s family engagement and community outreach best practices with her peers. Here are some great tips for other districts that are developing their marketing and communication plans.

- **Save time:** Create a marketing plan template that can be used during each planning period.
- **Save money:** Take an inventory of what resources you currently have, such as your email network, school newsletters, voice notification system, the sides of campus buildings to hang banners, and student interns. Utilize your existing resources.
- **Focus your message:** Segment your audiences because they have different needs and should be communicated with via different channels and messages.
- **Use strategic planning templates:** List all resources you have, what you need, the communication channels you use, and the costs for each.
- **Build camaraderie:** Discuss with all departments and schools what their needs are and determine the best ways for you to support them.

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*We now have 80 media partners and around 200 business partners,” stated Deidra. “And, we’ve implemented a mobile app to keep our parents, students, and community informed. We’re using Facebook and Twitter to reach families where they’re at. In fact, we have around 2,500 Facebook fans and over 660 Twitter followers. And we’re using photos, videos, and exciting stories on our website—it’s a huge piece of our strategy to tell our own story.”*

**Deidra Powell,**  
Chief Communications Officer

- **Plan campaigns for the year:** Make sure you include details on how to promote before, during, and after each campaign. Some examples of channels Santa Ana USD uses are:

- Website
- Mobile app notifications
- School newsletters
- News and alerts
- School marquee signs
- Social media
- Phone messages
- Emails
- Publications
- Banners, flyers, and postcards
- Television: photos and videos
- Submit articles to local newspapers and magazines
- Community forums

Santa Ana USD has come a long way in building the technology infrastructure for their marketing and communications strategies. Now their focus is on how to use the resources more efficiently and effectively. Most recently, they started their “I am SAUSD” campaign, with marketing tactics including stories from alumni, banners on the sides of their school buildings, postcards, videos, community forums, presentations to the Board of Education, and much more. According to Deidra, “This campaign resonated with our K-12 stakeholders—it really caught on in a short amount of time. We’re in a great place now and excited about what the future holds for our students, families, and community!”

## Contributors to story



**Deidra Powell**  
Chief Communications Officer,  
Santa Ana Unified School District

### Goals for website

- Tell the district’s positive stories in compelling, exciting ways
- Be the communications hub for families, community, and media
- Increase family engagement and community outreach

### Challenges

- Unkempt website
- No social media presence
- Very little electronic communications
- Viewed by local media as “problem” district
- Poor public and media relations

### Solution

- Made-to-order custom website
- Professional design team
- Large slideshow highlights important initiatives, events, and projects
- Video and photo functionality

### Results

- “Our website has become our own newswire!”
- The community relies on the website as the communication hub
- Parent and family engagement has skyrocketed

“  
*We’re in a great place now and excited about what the future holds for our students, families, and community!*”

**Deidra Powell,**  
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