Be seen. Be heard. Be bold.
SoWashCo Schools: Branding For Better

A strategic branding process helped a rapidly changing district execute a long-term facilities plan, launch a new website and elevate the role of student voice in district leadership. A suburban Saint Paul, Minn., district with 18,000 students, South Washington County Schools navigated COVID and civil unrest following the murder of George Floyd to create a lasting difference.

Problem Statement

In fall 2019, a new superintendent and communications team were tasked with modernizing district communications and confronted with three critical realities: 1) Rapid growth would require a long-term facility project, with a possible referendum in 2022. 2) The district’s brand was tired and didn’t reflect the progressive goals of a changing community. 3) In a competitive market, the district needed a new website with strong communications and enrollment marketing tools. Informal conversations also revealed a growing divide between the district’s north and south residents.

Research and Analysis

Partnering with a firm that specialized in K-12 communications and branding, the team conducted primary research:

- Competitive analysis of neighboring districts, geographic features and landmarks, online reviews.
- Survey and focus groups with representative groups of families (2,205), leadership and staff (390) and students (1,940).
- District leaders were sensitive to taking on a branding project (initiated two weeks before schools shut down for COVID) during a time of uncertainty and a sustained crisis. Each school was also sensitive to maintaining their own mascots and colors under the umbrella of the district. Early stages of the rebranding process were essential components of the district’s equity and inclusion work which were high priorities adopted by the Board and leadership.
- District leaders were committed to elevating the student voice strategy.

Initial focus groups revealed that the existing brand name and tagline did not resonate, nor did it reflect the district’s vision or values. Key themes documented in research were tracked, including diverse, inclusive, progressive, rigorous, collaborative, large, high-performing. Empowering each student to learn and be heard along with retaining and recruiting employees who shared the values and vision was most important, according to the feedback. The student voice was to be heard and shared.

Planning

The Mission Ignition™ branding process and planning tool provided essential insights and the following directives for the branding campaign:

- Messaging must be memorable and meaningful, and translate easily to four languages
- Racial equity is a priority in district communications
- Voices of students must be seen and heard
- Families, staff and students are passionate about their schools and would not be required to change mascots or colors
- Need to balance unity across the district with desire for the 25 schools to retain their individual mascots, names and colors

The effectiveness of the new brand’s success was, in part, due to the process and buy-in of key stakeholders on the “why”, the visuals and messaging for the future. Virtual focus groups and surveys were used to understand — and to create ownership. The campaign was initiated by leadership, but it was propelled forward by students, staff, families and community members.

Implementation

Be Seen. Be heard. Be Bold. South Washington County Schools moved toward a new future as a student-centered district with the brand name SoWashCo Schools. The rebrand messaging, tagline and visual identity was implemented with strong support. These changes triggered print and digital communications throughout the district from posters to ID badges and slide decks. Drawing from the four high schools’ colors, a new color palette created a unified district identity, with an expanded color palette, logo variations, patterns and fonts were compiled in a brand standards guide. The brand complies with accessibility requirements with some modifications to individual school colors. School electronic newsletters, posters and materials were templated for district consistency throughout all schools.

The completed rebrand supports the district’s objective for a more equitable, accessible, and modern website. The website was designed to amplify core values with the tools needed to support effective, ongoing communications and enrollment marketing. By late 2021, the district’s April 2022 referendum informational campaign was in full swing with the new branding and messaging.

Evaluation

The rebranding campaign has helped advance powerful district goals of equity, elevating student voice, facility planning, and enrollment marketing:

- The Board adopted the new brand on a 6-1 vote. Six months after the Board vote, the one dissenting Board member thanked the superintendent and said the branding campaign was the right thing to do.
- District- and community-wide adoption of SoWashCo as the official name. There has been increased engagement and wide acceptance of the brand. With all school colors represented, schools have the flexibility to use a variety of the brand assets and have adopted it.
- Student voice has secured its role in district leadership and operation, while advancing equity work. The student advisory group now presents to the school board on a range of issues.
- Three elementary schools asked the district to update their mascots to meet the standards of the school’s advancement and in line with the district-wide vision and priorities.

Next steps include an evaluation of the brand’s use in the referendum campaign. Annual surveys of students, staff and families will document open-ended responses; with specific measurements identified.
A brand style guide provided SoWashCo staff with clarity on using the new branding and, importantly, how to create accessible content. Consistency in use strengthened the district’s new brand identity and ensured adoption across 24 individual schools.

**Implementation**

To create an accessible digital presence in accordance with American With Disability Act (ADA) guidance, color combinations should be limited to those listed here. Printed documents also should follow these standards. The goal is keeping text accessible to individuals with visual impairments by meeting contrast minimums between the size and color of the text and the background. These combinations apply to all text, including presentations, infographics, charts, tables and text on top of images. The Web Accessibility Initiative provides additional information.

**BRAND GUIDELINES**

**logo**

The logo for South Washington County Schools is a distinctive, energetic wordmark that lets us market and promote South Washington County Schools as one community. It communicates on two levels simultaneously. Verbally, it conveys the name many people already use when they talk about the district — SoWashCo. Visually, in its full color expression, it shows many elements coming together to form the name in much the way our cities and townships collectively form the foundation for our district. The colors in the wordmark come from SoWashCo schools. Note that there are two options in terms of its shape — a vertically stacked version and a horizontal logo — to accommodate different space demands. The horizontal option uses initial capital letters to communicate how people say the name — SoWashCo. The logo can be used on white backgrounds, dark and colors specific to our schools.

**accessibility**

keeping text accessible

Patterns provide even more flexibility within a graphic identity system. Often used as backgrounds and color fills, they work with other visual assets to create striking new combinations. These patterns are approved for all media, and you can zoom and crop as needed as long as you don’t stretch the artwork horizontally or vertically.

**brand voice**

Be seen.
Believe in who you are
Find your voice
Be heard.
Speak your truth
Empower yourself and others for good
Be bold.
Create the change you want to see
Contribute to our world
Implementation

New business cards and letterhead married the updated designs for SoWashCo Schools with the district’s formal name of South Washington County Schools. The modernized designs create a cohesive presence for the district in a competitive enrollment market.
Implementation

SoWashCo students collaborated with the district to identify and amplify key qualities among their diverse population, and boldness was fundamental. A bold design for posters and brochures draw your attention first to student and staff images and make a strong visual impact.

**POSTERS**

**BROCHURE TEMPLATE**
SoWashCo Schools identified creating real, measurable and lasting results as a critical goal of their rebranding process, which led to migrating their website to Finalsite. The new site delivers consistent quality and functionality across all district schools in a mobile-first, equitable and accessible design.