

# building

If you want to make your business a success, give careful thought to the ways in which you communicate with your customers, says **Sarah Steel...**



I remember a friend who works in PR looking through a selection of business cards in her wallet and pulling a face. "I do hate that," she said, "When people have a Hotmail or Yahoo email address for their business." To be honest, at the time it wasn't something that I'd ever really thought about. When we started The Old Station Nursery part of the start up process was to talk to a graphic designer, who worked up a logo for us, then started to build our brand from this logo. We had the usual letterheads, business cards and stationery made, uniform with our logo on and a selection of signage. Next came the website (now on version three) and gradually, without really doing much more, our brand was born. At the same time we bought a domain name, so that we could have several email addresses with the same ending as our website address.

It probably all sounds fairly straightforward so far, if a little expensive. However, how many times have you been given a business card which is either misspelt, features no logo on it, or has a Hotmail (or similar) address? Similarly, many nursery companies still don't have websites, which is not only a wasted opportunity but is hardly the mark of a forward-thinking business either. It's really worth considering how an outsider sees your

# YOUR



# brand

company – assuming you do have a website, when people visit it, do they get the same first impression as when they receive a copy of your prospectus, make a phone call to your nursery or send you an email?

I am sure that many of you, like us, benchmark the local competition before your fees are increased each year. Do you always get a good response when you phone a nursery? Do you get a prospectus promptly by post or email? In a recent round of benchmarking, I was fairly amazed that two or three settings close to one of our nurseries didn't reply to repeated emails at all, while some promised prospectuses which never came. Seeing as the people who do our benchmarking for us are usually genuine customers, and customers are generally precious commodities, this strikes me as pretty careless. Don't get me wrong, I would like to say that every single enquiry to one of my nurseries gets the textbook response, but in reality everyone has the occasional off day, or maybe a junior member of staff answers the phone and doesn't cover every base. However, I would hope that they realise quite how precious new enquiries are and treat them accordingly. So, don't be afraid to see



your nursery as a brand and to be brand aware. If first impressions count when you meet someone in person, so does the first impression your nursery makes, whether this is a real or virtual encounter.

### Spread the word

As our customers become increasingly Internet-savvy, so must we embrace different ways of communicating with them. Certainly, we don't bother advertising with Yellow Pages or in many printed publications, as so many people now turn to the Internet to find the information they're looking for. As I've mentioned, having a website is a necessity these days, but if you want people to find it you will need to think about search engine optimisation to make sure it appears near the top of the page when someone looks for it. There are nursery sector-specific sites, for example, [daynurseries.co.uk](http://daynurseries.co.uk), that are a relatively inexpensive way of helping your website to be found. Google Adwords provide a way of promoting your nursery's position on the search rankings and can be controlled by you, so that you manage your own budget. If this sounds daunting, then find a local business who can help you with developing your online presence, but do shop around and don't spend a fortune.

Even better, you might consider if someone within your organisation is keen on social media and whether they might be able to help you to develop your online presence. The world of social media may seem one that's not necessarily relevant to the early years sector, but I think that is a dangerous view to hold. We started a Facebook page for the company about a year ago and now have over 200 people who interact with us regularly – funnily enough, I had expected it to be mainly for communicating with our customers but staff like it too, and if they won't always read my newsletters in the nurseries, at least we can engage with them on Facebook!

For those of you who are feeling really

## Careful planning

Like all great ideas, it's important that your social media strategy is part of a plan; you could spend a lot of time and money on something that has little benefit, or you could spend very little but see great results. Have a think about your marketing plan and how social media can help you to achieve the targets within your plan. It's essential to think about what your message is, who your target audience is and where they 'hang out' online. We're currently trialling Facebook Ads, which allows us to advertise the nurseries within a very specific geographic area, to customers aged between 25 and 40, with children. To me, this makes more sense than spending a lot on much more blanket advertising through local publications. Time will tell how effective it is, but so far money we have spent on Google Adwords has been cost-effective, so I am cautiously optimistic.



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SARAH STEEL

## find out more

Sarah Steel is the founder and MD of the Old Station Nursery Group, which operates 14 settings in England. If you would like to get in touch with her about any of the issues raised in her article, you can email her at [sarahsteel@theoldstationnursery.co.uk](mailto:sarahsteel@theoldstationnursery.co.uk)



brave, you might consider a Twitter account, which allows you to network and communicate with lots of other people both in the sector and the wider business community. There are some great conversations to be had and contacts to be made, but remember it is not just a sales channel and prepare to engage with others. So, good luck with developing your own brand and come and say hello online!

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