



# EXPOSED THE TRUTH BEHIND MARKETING TO K12 SCHOOLS



# SPRINT EDUCATION...

is an award-winning digital agency that has pioneered education marketing to the education sector since 2007.

We create millions of teacher connections for our clients every year through our unique education-focused digital marketing campaigns, that attract K12 school and college teachers and personnel to our clients' brands.

## This whitepaper was created by Ben.

"I co-founded Sprint Education back in 2007, and since then I've learnt so much about our industry, the inner-workings of marketing to the education sector, and importantly the pitfalls education businesses **MUST** avoid when it comes to choosing an agency to manage their marketing. This report is designed to help guide you towards investing your marketing budget wisely, and ensure your K12 marketing strategies succeed."



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# EXPOSED!

## **The truth behind marketing to schools, and the three conversations you MUST have with your marketing team or provider.**

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I don't believe in keeping secrets and over-complicating concepts which can baffle customers; concepts which could, with a little straight-talking, be grasped by anyone.

I also strongly believe in having enough clear knowledge to make sensible and informed decisions, especially when it comes to making business decisions which can, let's be frank, change lives!

It's these two concepts, coupled with the recent rise of the battle between outreach and inbound marketing philosophies within the education sphere that has encouraged me to write this groundbreaking education marketing report.

Over the last few years I've spoken with hundreds of education suppliers (it's what I do every day). Some are new to the market, some have been looking to leave their current marketing agency, some are looking to bring their marketing back in-house, and some are companies with many years' experience of selling to schools.

It struck me, in no small way, how much some of these companies failed to consider when planning and executing their marketing. To be honest, it petrifies me that the most fundamental issues surrounding marketing to schools are not being considered, or worse, that education suppliers are being misled down a strategic path that is doomed to fail.

## The 3 Conversations

I will now dissect the three most common conversations I have with education suppliers aiming to sell more to schools. As you are reading this report I'm guessing that these are the conversations and questions that you are hoping to have answered too. I'll then give you the precise questions that you should be asking your marketing team or external provider within these conversations to ensure your marketing budget is invested with the right team and the right strategy.

Any education marketing specialist worth their salt should be willing to have these conversations with you, and be happy to answer the questions I am about to recommend.

What I'm about to share with you might cause you some alarm... it might make you feel uncomfortable, or you might read it and sit back with a confident smile on your face knowing that the facts I'm sharing with you have already been shared with you by your marketing team or external education marketing provider; and you already know how to not fall into even the most basic pitfalls surrounding education marketing this year.

Oh, and you'll notice, in the interests of transparency, and in the spirit of this very report, I've asked members of our team to answer these questions on behalf of Sprint Education. I like to think that these are exemplary answers, and if you agree, you can use them as a benchmark when you're talking to other marketing specialists.

**This report will be so powerful to you that it is likely to change the whole way you execute your K12 marketing.**

# #1

## THE DATA CONVERSATION

In the past, when I've been asked the question, "What makes Sprint Education different from other agencies?" I've always gone on to explain the following...

Our ground-breaking digital strategies and ability to write and design content that engages teachers on their level, and the fact that we're the only agency to own and host our email servers (which results in open rates 43% higher than the industry average by the way), sets us apart.

Although our data is vast and super-accurate, this is a fact I don't focus on too much. Yes we have incredible K12 data, but we are far more than just a data broker. We are education marketing experts that has the K12 data to power our clients' campaigns.

However, despite the above, a marketing campaign will live or die by the quality of the data used in it. It's pretty obvious to anyone that if you use inaccurate data your marketing is worthless, you lose money, and to be honest look a bit silly when you receive a snotty email saying that the particular member of staff you were targeting left months ago!

It is YOUR responsibility to ensure that the data your marketing team or provider is using is high-quality, accurate, and ethically sourced.

## Questions to ask when acquiring a K12 school, college and district database:

### Q. How accurate is the data, and how is it updated?

Ask about their cleansing and expanding cycles, and what techniques they use to keep it clean. Sprint Education's Data Managers make, on average, **617,000 data updates every 30 days**.



**Sophie says** - *“With over 800 data points for institutions, and over 6 million people, we have to make A LOT of updates every month. For example, if we do a Federal metric update, we can instantly update with new data, millions of records in one “update” command.*

*CASS Certification, which we do every two months (for most institutions), has hundreds of thousands of updates applied. While personnel alone, we make millions of updates and verifications annually.*

*All this equates to a monumental average of 617,000 updates per month.”*

These numbers are fantastic, but the real reason we make this huge investment is, of course, to generate higher delivery and open rates for our clients. And it's works...

- Previous 12 Months' Average Open Rate = 22.9%
- Last 12 Months' Average Open Rate = 26.8%

This is a significant increase, which really does show that the data is more accurate than ever before. And not only that, with the database

continually expanding (we can now place your brand in the inboxes of over 3.1 million K12 and school district staff), our clients are now able to shout about their products and services to a much wider audience.

It's undoubtedly an exciting time to launch your marketing to our world-class K12 education database.

### **Q. How many other businesses use your data?**

Recent research shows that many education data brokers sell their data without vetting the customer first, this results in huge communication "spikes" where many businesses (education focused or not) are hitting the same teachers' inboxes, many of which with either poorly presented content, or content that is not even relevant to the recipients education sector job role and responsibilities.

Here at Sprint Education, we only work with businesses that offer great products and services that provide a positive outcome to US schools and colleges.

Therefore, we don't pass out our data to any old business. We only work with the best education businesses.

This significantly reduces the impact and strain on the inboxes of the educators within our K12 database, which consequentially improves the open and click rates for those incredible education businesses that we work with.

Ultimately this ensures that only the best education solutions make it into the US education system.

## Q. Do you have any data integrity reports running?

With the best will in the world, it's just not possible to keep such a vast database up-to-date only by cleansing a district or state one at a time.

Trust me, we used to update our database this way until we realized that we would have to work way smarter if we were ever going to be able to keep it all in tip-top condition.

So, make sure you ask your K12 data provider for a detailed overview of how they cleanse their data. Do they have data integrity reports running across the database that helps identify records that are incorrect or which need urgently updating or investigating? If they don't, they may be aimlessly ploughing through the database at best!



**Ian says -** *“We have over 50 SQL reports running over our database on a nightly, weekly, and monthly basis. These reports highlight everything from where a teacher's name or email address is formatted incorrectly, to discrepancies between our data and data published by online, and importantly where a data record hasn't been updated or visually checked in a certain period. These reports are automated, so all we have to worry about is investigating the results and making the relevant updates, ensuring we focus on the data records that need attention!”*

# #2

## THE DIY VS “EXPERT” K12 STRATEGY CONVERSATION

*“I just need the data so I can manage my own K12 strategy, OR use a local design agency to do it for me.”*

Eight out of ten calls I take from education business owners and marketing managers are all focused on an insatiable desire to grab hold of a K12 database; upload it into MailChimp, HubSpot, Salesforce, or the like; and then send any old content expecting there to be a flood of leads and sales hitting their inboxes.

Sadly, more often than not, it doesn't work out this way!

This is due to several reasons that have not been considered before setting out on a DIY/generic agency approach to education marketing.

If the above strikes a chord with you then it is crucially important that you read this next chapter.

Here are the two most common and concerning statements I hear when speaking to education businesses that are just after “the data”.

1. *“I just need the data. I have a marketing agency I use for my design/strategy work that know what to do.”*

2. *"I just need the data. My marketing team and I are great at producing our own marketing content to schools."*

If the above statements were always true, then K12 education marketing would be a straightforward and delightful experience for businesses selling to schools.

The reality is however, that these statements are usually misinformed. My response to them is usually, *"Hold fire, don't make the same mistake so many education businesses make by either, assuming that because you know your product/service, best you know how to convince schools to buy it. Or that because a marketing and design agency can create pretty websites, they understand the complexities of striking a chord with key decision makers in education."*

To prevent you falling foul of the above pitfalls, and so you are fully informed of what to do when planning your own K12 education strategy, consider asking your marketing team and provider the following questions.

## **Questions to ask when attempting your own education marketing:**

### **Q. What's your experience of designing marketing and sales strategies specifically for education businesses?**

Please, please do not spend thousands of dollars on deploying a K12 education strategy with a local or generic marketing and design agency without checking this first.

Before you part with a dime, you need to be sure that whichever external agency you work with are education experts and that they understand the subtleties of selling to schools.

That said, it is just as risky for business owners to try and save cash by cutting corners and passing the design and management of their strategy to an internal marketing department.

No doubt their marketing team are good at their job. Still, I question the data, infrastructure, and experience that they have at their disposal to execute an advanced digital strategy that wins a rush of sales orders, or contracts for their business.

Whether you're quizzing a potential marketing agency or discussing your options with your internal marketing team, you and they must recognize that to do marketing to schools "right" you've got to understand all facets of how to connect with, and sell to K12 schools.

From email code-bases that navigate school filter systems safely, through to what is the best call to action to use for Principals on a Monday afternoon that will generate the highest click rate.

At Sprint Education, we know the answer to these, and every other detail required for mastering your marketing to schools. It's what we thrive on here, being the best at this special niche (marketing and selling to schools), and ultimately helping our customers win.



**Ollie says** - *"Since 2007, we've been the global pioneers of digital education marketing strategies. Our education experts comprise of strategists, designers, copywriters, and software developers who have collectively launched over 5,000 marketing and sales strategies for some of the world's biggest corporations through to newest EdTech start-ups. No other agency in the world has the experience and education data insight to grow education businesses better than us."*

## **Q. What approach would you take if I used your company to create my marketing content and strategy?**

When asking this question, if the answer you hear sounds like this...

*“Let’s hit as big an audience as possible, which types of teachers do you want to target?”* (The scattergun agency).

Or, *“Let’s follow an inbound methodology* (they may show you a generic inbound diagram) *and slowly encourage teachers to fall in love with you, like a tender loving marriage... blah blah blah!”* (The inbound agency).

Then alarm bells should be ringing.

Although both approaches have their place (and some success) in the education marketing world, both are relying on two very distinct and generic approaches to marketing.

Scattergun is old-school, obtuse and clumsy; while inbound (also now a dated approach) tends to be an off the shelf concept that is not truly education focused at all, and encourages you to invest heavily in the hope that a small and slow stream of teachers will begin to follow you and begin to buy over a long period of time.

Neither strategy is created specifically for the marketing to schools and teachers, (which is dramatically different than the B2B or B2C marketing world). Build your approach to smart, education-focused design, content, and strategy on themes, principles, and timings that are created and designed for selling to K12 schools and teachers.

When we plan, write and design the content of a K12 email strategy for our clients it generates, on average, 57% more responses than their own efforts, and other agencies.

How do we do this? Let Benjamin explain...



**Benjamin says** – *“I could harp on about how our experience, our ability to write on a teacher’s level (many of us were once teachers), our email coding that successfully navigates filter systems, and how our world-class designs generate more leads for you, but what really gives us the edge is our unique approach to crafting a K12 strategy and the content that comes with it.*

*For each client’s strategy, we construct a strategy framework built on specific themes and timings, all hand-selected to complement the client’s unique objectives.*

*Our collection of theme” and database of timing stats have been chiselled out from a pool of performance data collected from over 5,000 education campaigns we’ve executed.*

*We’ve then tested and polished each theme profile, format, and timing, so we know precisely when and where to implement the right theme, design, wording, subject line, and timetable within a strategy to maximise teachers interest and generate every last response possible for you.”*

If you’d like to understand more about our themes from concept to design and strategy, get in touch. We’d be delighted to explain how it works within our K12 email strategies.

# #3

## THE EMAIL BROADCASTING CONVERSATION

*“An education marketing provider should be much more than just a data broker or inbound-only agency; they must prove that they have a robust and secure broadcasting infrastructure in place to ensure your communications are broadcast safely to your target teacher audience.”*

Whether you've partnered with a marketing agency to manage and broadcast an email strategy on your behalf, or you've subscribed to marketing software to send your own email marketing to K12 teachers and personnel, the conversation about the sending infrastructure you will be relying on is **INCREDIBLY IMPORTANT!**

When you commission somebody to send an email campaign on your behalf, there are things that you should know as standard! Feel rightly dubious if your education marketing provider cannot talk to you in-depth about the technical aspects of your campaign – getting all of the technical aspects of a campaign right is no easy task. You'll want to be 100% sure that your marketing provider knows what they are doing, why they are doing it, and what affect their technological infrastructure and expertise will have on the success of your campaign.

To send marketing emails to K12 personnel properly it isn't cheap or easy. At Sprint Education, we invest \$750,000 a year in our technical and data infrastructure to ensure our clients' emails achieve the highest delivery rates in the US education sector. The high cost and expertise involved in doing emailing "right" means many other agencies simply cut corners with their infrastructure. They know that it will save them thousands of dollars a year and that you'll probably never even know that the mismanagement of their broadcasting infrastructure is detrimentally effecting the safe delivery of your email communications to teachers inboxes.

There are three broad technical areas (that are actually pretty easy to get your head around) that you need to understand the principals of or run the risk of executing a poor email marketing campaign and even damaging your brand. They are **software**, **IP addresses**, and **deliverability**.

## **Questions to ask when planning an email strategy:**

### ***Q. Where is the email software installed?***

If your marketing provider cannot prove to you that their email marketing software is installed on their web servers, beware - it means they are not 100% in control of the system they use. If they are renting space on someone else's server it could go down for maintenance, it could break, or the company owning the server could even go bust. I know what you're thinking, "Anyone's system can do that." but at least those who have their own system also have the power to go down for

maintenance when it doesn't affect their customers or have someone in-house ready to fix the problem straight away.



**Jackie says** - *"We host our email software on our servers. We do not rent them or share them. They are 100% ours, and they live in a secure site just 9 miles from our offices. We control our servers remotely, and if anything does go wrong our slave (backup) server takes over with no downtime – they're what a tech would call 'mirrored' – it's all very clever. If things were to go drastically wrong, one of our technical experts would be on-hand to fix the issue. Since launching in 2007 we've not had to do that though."*

### **Q. Can you tell me about your sending IP addresses?**

You should know the IP number of the email sending server that your provider is using to send your emails through. They will be able to give you a list of the IP addresses that they use to send your mail. If they cannot, or will not, alarm bells should be ringing.

The reason you need to know the IP address is that it has the BIGGEST effect on the success of your email marketing campaign. If a receiving network doesn't like the IP you send your mail from, it simply won't let it through. Fortunately, when your provider gives you the sending IP, you can perform a couple of quick and easy tests to check the 'quality' of the IP. You'll want to check it against global blacklists, e.g. <http://whatismyipaddress.com/blacklist-check>. If the machine sending your mail has, in the past, sent spam email campaigns then you're likely to be tarred with the same brush – a lethal blow that you MUST avoid.



**Jen says** - *“We have two substantial sending IP ranges, each of which we have lovingly christened with the name of a Harry Potter character. Keeping a sending IP healthy is like keeping a tidy backyard. You’ve got to feed the plants (send through it regularly), get rid of the weeds (only send using quality school data), and mow the lawn (regularly manage your relationships with ISPs and Blacklists). We continually monitor the cleanliness of our IPs to ensure superb deliverability. We would NEVER jeopardise our clients’ reputations by sending their marketing material out through an unhealthy IP.”*

## **Q. How can I be sure that my emails will be delivered?**

There are several critical technical items that your provider should have set up AS STANDARD. If they don’t, and they don’t talk you through why they are essential, then your campaign will simply not reach as many inboxes. Check the following with your provider:

- Does your provider have forward-confirmed reverse DNS set up on their IP/domains? They should have!
- Does your provider have SPF (Sender Policy Framework) set up? They should have! SPF essentially ‘signs’ your email as it leaves their server and proves to the receiving server (your customer) that the server is allowed to send out mail. In simple terms, SPF set up protects against a spammer hijacking the domain you are sending from and making you look very bad.
- Do they have DKIM set up? They should have! This is an industry standard. It shows that the ‘from’ domain and the DKIM signature match when sending traffic over a dedicated IP.

When you receive a test email from your provider, open the message and view its headers (if you don't know how to do this then give us a call, and we'll talk you through it). Check through it and if you find:

- Received-SPF: none – this is bad
- Received-SPF: pass – this is good
- dkim=neutral (no sig) – this is bad
- dkim=pass (ok) – this is good



**Pauline says** - *“We stamp every email we send with an SPF signature, reverse DNS and DKIM is set up/configured as standard. We’ve spent a great deal of time and money to ensure our sending infrastructure is second-to-none.”*

# IMPORTANT DISCLAIMER!

As I mentioned at the start of this report - these three conversations are what I'm asked about daily by education suppliers. However, just because I'm asked to discuss them, that doesn't mean that is what I **should be asked by someone looking to sell more to teachers.**

If these are the only conversations and questions that you've been considering then you might as well pack up and admit defeat to the marketing to K12 world monster right now.

Why? These conversations are important, sure. Even more so five years ago. However, the selling to schools landscape has changed spectacularly in recent times, and so must your whole marketing to schools mindset. The questions you ask yourself (and your marketing agency), your methodologies, and the strategic approaches you implement must also change.

If you are brave enough to embrace change and be taken out of your comfort zone, then you stand every chance of trumping your competitors, and ultimately triumphing in your selling to schools battle.

As a thank you for reading this report, I'll share more information with you over the coming days, weeks, and months. I'll tell you more about what you need to know to sell more to schools, the concepts and blueprint strategies that genuinely work, and how you must think and act differently to take on the K12 education sector and win!

Keep an eye on your inbox!

# THE NEXT STEPS

I could go on about Sprint Education for pages, but frankly, you should get in touch and ask me about what I can do for you.

The two main channels you're probably interested in discussing are:

1. **Data:** You're after the education data and software/tools to manage your own direct to K12 teacher/personnel marketing, and you'd like to learn more about our data and support.
2. **Managed Strategies:** You want our team of education experts to plan, design, manage, and deploy a powerful K12 education digital strategy that will rapidly grow your education business.

I appreciate the time you've taken to read this report, and I hope that it makes a difference to your business. If you have any questions then I'd love to hear from you, so get in touch today by emailing me at [ben@sprint-education.com](mailto:ben@sprint-education.com).

Wishing you every success,



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**Sprint Education** 

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