STRONGER ROOTS

PARENTS' UNION

From a new website to a new voice

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The Parents' Union

is a network of parents and parent associations who want to be partners with schools. They seek ways to cooperate, to encourage parents and schools to communicate with each other, and to try to involve more parents in what is happening in schools. The association provides information, examples of good practice and practical tools.

At the beginning of the Parents' Union [Unie rodičů] project, there was a technical assignment: to improve the website. With the support of a mentor from the Stronger Roots program, however, the organization conducted a thorough analysis of why and to whom it was speaking and made the most of the strategic opportunity to redefine its own identity, mission, and relationships with its target groups. Thanks to this, the organization has developed from being a local initiative into a respected player in the area of cooperation between parents and schools.

Why it couldn‘t be done „just like that“

The Parents’ Union wanted to create a new website. The old one was messy, ambiguous and confusing to visitors.
Sometimes it spoke to parents, sometimes to schools, sometimes it took over other people’s content, sometimes it provided information about the organisation‘s own actions. Similarly, the Union failed to reach out, attract and retain supporters. The organisation wanted to expand across the Czech Republic and to create a network outside of the Kutná Hora region, connecting schools with parents and at the same time educating them, collecting ideas and topics and transferring them to the vocational education sector.

Originally, it seemed that a new design, with a better structure and technical modification to the website would be sufficient. However, in the first few weeks, it had already become clear that a technical solution would not be enough. First, it was necessary to start with basic questions like who are we, to whom are we trying to speak, what do we actually want to say and why. With the support of mentor Daniela Velová, the Parents’ Union therefore underwent a thorough reflection of its identity and target groups.

The organisation’s representatives tested the newly created narratives over a period of time and gradually fine-tuned the language and tone. They were not afraid to put themselves out there in the public sphere, to speak at conferences, to reach out to partners and to ask openly for feedback.

The result has been a new website that clearly presents the goals of the organization, its activities, services and a list of ways for parents and schools to get more involved.

“We were surprised by how demanding the process of publishing a story could be, including coming to an agreement on the photos and the texts. We have to be very considerate not to publish something that could be hurtful to parents or schools. The debates and discussions about what to publish are very long ones. In the beginning, it is necessary to establish good relationships through repeated face-to-face meetings.”

– Jana Neumajerová

Parents will find specific materials that can help them in setting up cooperation with schools and a blog that shows them inspirational stories of good practice.

The site also has a map of records from places that describe examples of interesting cooperation from the point of view of parents and/or schools. This collection of inspirational material proved to be significantly more challenging than the team had originally expected. Although they had an online questionnaire and disseminated it through its website, leaflets and Facebook, people hardly responded to it as topics focused on relationships are difficult to describe digitally. That is why the organisation’s team proceeded to collect stories through face-to-face meetings, which is a much more challenging but trustworthy method. Meaningful stories arose through conversations, repeated meetings and sensitive listening.

When the organisation speaks differently

Today, the Parents' Union communicates clearly, in a friendly way and with an emphasis on what is going well. Communication is focused on being concrete and supportive, helping schools and parents to overcome distrust and fears. The information is primarily focused on what is going well and not the other way around. Such a tone is particularly important for schools that are well aware of the concerns and risks of inviting parents to cooperate with them.

When the organisation talks about "setting up communication" between schools and parents, it also provides practical tools such as a communication tree, checklists, steps of engagement, or templates of parent manuals.

"When there is specific guidance on the website, everything is much easier for parents to grasp," says Angelika Gergelová.

The Parents' Union has also invested a few hundred crowns in promotion and paid advertising, thanks to which it has managed to increase its reach. The volunteer system proved to no longer be sufficient and professionalisation brought with it the necessary capacity for further development. As a result, the Parents' Union hired four new colleagues to deal with communication, PR, education, and thanks to this the processes and responsibilities within the organisation are now clearly divided.

The bottom line

If you are planning to make a change in your communication strategy, start with your vision and identity. A new website or a new newsletter are not just “outputs”. They are a mirror of how an organization views itself and how it wants to interact with the world. What do you want to say, to whom and with what intention? If this understanding changes, your response and the effect of your communication channels will also change. The whole process can almost have a paralyzing effect at the beginning due to its complexity. It is therefore important to break it down into a number of steps that you will follow. Don‘t be afraid to invite an outside expert, because an external and above all an expert view can open up new horizons and perspectives. Try things out. Test the language and formats that suit you. And don‘t be afraid of feedback.

WHAT CAN YOU START WITH?

1. **A technical assignment may hide a deeper set of needs – wanting a „new website“ often means that an organization needs to revise what it is, what it says and to whom it is speaking.**
2. **Reflection on the organisation’s identity and target audience(s) is required even before the actual creation of content or design.**
3. **Collecting stories about relationships requires personal contact – forms and questionnaires are not enough, especially when it comes to sensitive or emotionally charged topics (such as education, parenting).**
4. **Investing in a professional team and targeted communication pays off – even with a limited budget, you can work effectively if the strategy is well thought out.**
5. **Testing and repetitive usage of language increases both the credibility and clarity of the communication.**

Ondřej Besperát

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