

# 12 Common Mistakes Schools Make With Their Websites

*- and How To Avoid Them*



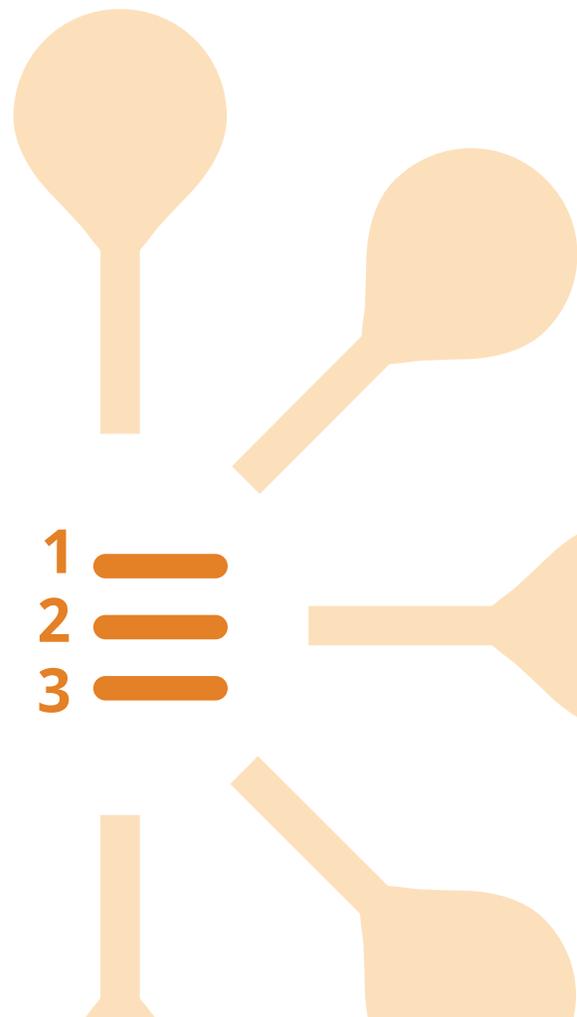
These days, having a great school website is almost as important as having a great program itself. It is one of the most critical investments your school can make.

If your website doesn't engage visitors and accurately portray your school's unique identity and strengths, the families you're most eager to enroll will likely move on—probably without having ever set foot on your campus.

You probably already know this, of course. So why, then, are so many school websites so bad? There are a number of reasons, but often times it boils down to ownership of the project and confusion about what a good website entails.

We can't help you out too much with the first part of the equation, unfortunately—other than to strongly recommend that you assign one specific person responsibility for building and maintaining your school website! But we can give you a list of the most common school website pitfalls to avoid. Avoid these, and you'll be well ahead of the game.

*Let's dive in, shall we?*



## **Mistake #1: The “DIY” School Website**

Many independent schools pride themselves—and rightly so—on their can-do attitude. Unless someone on your staff is an experienced web designer, however, your school website is not a project you should attempt to tackle in-house.

Why? Because do-it-yourself websites invariably tend to look DIY—and this is not the public image you want to portray.

Affordable website platforms may have great looking website themes, but they often lack the ability to customize your site to truly match your school’s “brand”. If the platform does let you customize your site (as in editing the CSS or pre-designed layout sections) it’s easy for design amateurs to build a site that breaks basic design principles which may result in a website that lacks wholeness.

Additionally, many schools often wind up with the related issue of the unofficial website person leaving the school at some point. This means that much-needed updates never get made at all, or wind up being cobbled together in a way that looks less than stellar.

The bottom line? Hire a professional.



## ***Mistake #2: Design Overload***

Schools can be tremendously fun places run by enthusiastic, creative people. In an effort to convey this spirit online, however, some school websites go overboard with wacky fonts, emoticons, and colors.

The very best school websites are streamlined, professional, and easy to read. This means choosing one or two main colors and fonts throughout. Your school's personality will still shine through, we promise!

On a related note, be sure you pick a font that's large enough to be read easily on all devices and by parents (and grandparents!) of all ages. Dark text on a light background tends to be easier on the eyes than the other way around, too.

## ***Mistake #3: One and Done***

Even as recently as 5 or 10 years ago, a static "brochure website" was both very common and completely sufficient for many schools. Once it was up and running, very few ongoing changes were needed.

Those days are over. Nowadays, hyper-connected parents expect their school's website to provide a constantly updated array of news, photos, and content. If you don't deliver, you look stale and out-of-touch (exactly what you don't want to convey!).

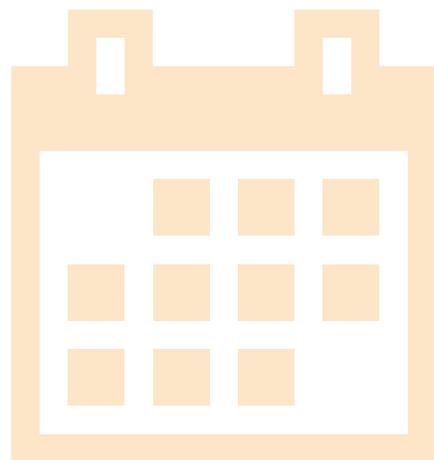
For this reason, you need a platform that lends itself to regular, user-friendly updates that can be made by teachers and administrators with just a baseline amount of web savvy—rather than something pristine and final that can only be changed by the web guy or gal.

## **Mistake #4: Outdated Technology**

Even if you aren't familiar with Flash software, you've probably seen it hundreds of times on various websites that use video and animated graphics. You've probably also seen that annoying "X" or unhappy face when Flash crashes, or isn't supported.

This problem is becoming more and more common, as Flash does not work—at all—on Apple mobile devices. So even if your website looks great from your school desktop, that's not what current and prospective parents (many of whom are joined at the hip to their iPhones and iPads) are seeing when they're browsing on the go.

You don't need to get into the weeds of keeping up with various web technology issues like this—and you probably have no desire to! But you need someone on your web team who does (refer back to Mistake #1).



## Mistake #5: *Stiff or Stilted Text*

Some of the most uniquely wonderful schools around have websites that read like widget factory manuals: boring and lifeless. Sometimes this is due to an administrator's misplaced fear of lawsuits, or the desire to appeal to as broad an audience as possible.

But here's the thing: When you try to appeal to everyone, you actually wind up appealing to no one, as all of the personality and life gets sucked out of what you're trying to say. Don't be afraid to let your school's unique personality shine through in your website—that's exactly what you want to do, in fact.

Spend some time thinking about the unique "voice" and message you want your school's website to convey—are you formal and academic? Warm and nurturing? A little geeky and goofy?

There are no right or wrong answers here, as long as what you come up with is a good fit with your school and carried consistently through your website and web presence (including your social media updates).

## Mistake #6: *It's All About You*

Your school website is about your school, of course. But the secret to a really compelling, effective school website is to present your story (or stories) in such a way that the reader finds himself or herself there, too.

You want folks to be reading your site, nodding along, thinking, "Yes—that is exactly something my kid would say!" or "I would love for our family to be part of this community." And the way you do this is by sharing stories about the real people at your school—your parents, students, teachers, and administrators.

Everyone loves a good story.

School marketing and enrollment specialist Rick Newberry has a great two-part blog series featuring 10 schools with exceptional websites. You can check it out here:

- [Part 1 \(click here\)](#)
- [Part 2 \(click here\)](#)

Not sure where to start at your own school? Well, we're guessing that right off the top of your head you can probably think of a few interesting characters in your midst. Go talk to them and post a Q&A on your website with a short intro—easy-peasy.

## ***Mistake #7: No Testimonials***

If you run a good program and have been around for even a little while, you probably have dozens or even hundreds of positive comments and testimonials from happy parents. Yet far too many schools fail to feature these testimonials in a prominent way on their school websites.

This is a huge mistake, as testimonials are some of the most compelling marketing around for prospective parents—not to mention current parents who appreciate being reminded in subtle ways that they made the right choice.

You can talk all day about how wonderful your school is, but showing that other people feel that way is absolutely priceless. Many of these testimonials make for great storytelling, too (see above).

Where should the testimonials be on your website? All over the place! You can really never have too many. As a good general guideline, put a few on your homepage, with a separate tab devoted entirely to testimonials. And don't worry about editing them too heavily—testimonials are best when they sound authentic and not too polished.

## ***Mistake #8: Too Much Text and Not Enough Photos***

People love seeing photos on websites – especially photos of happy, engaged kids at your school. This is one area where schools tend to overthink things.

You do need the appropriate publicity releases for legal reasons, of course, but once you have those in hand you shouldn't hesitate to put those great photos up on your school's website. And don't make the mistake of relying too much on stock photography—those images you can buy online. They tend to look, well, stock-y.

If you're just getting started, a few stock images on your site are better than no images at all, but swap those out with real photos of real kids at your school as soon as you can. There's no better way to instantly build engagement and trust online.

## Mistake #9: The “Anyschool, USA” Website

Too many school websites talk about classroom ratios, “commitment to learning,” a desire “to make a difference,” and so forth.

While these are all good things, they are not your things. When you’re planning out your school’s website, it’s important to make sure you focus on your unique story and strengths. This should come through both in the text and in the design (incorporating school colors, mascots, slogans, and so forth).

If any page on your website would be equally at home on another area school’s website, it’s time for some updating!



## Mistake #10: Stale Updates

Many schools that recognize the problem of having a brochure website (see #3) go great gangbusters in starting a blog, a Twitter feed, a Facebook page, and so on—and then fail to regularly update those media after the initial burst of enthusiasm has passed.

This is a huge mistake! While a blog, for example, can be a great asset to your school’s website, a blog that hasn’t been updated in six months is far worse than having no blog at all. Part of your school’s website plan must include a plan for, and ownership of, social media and other updates.

On a related note, start slowly and build up. For example, blogging just once a month to start and building up to one post a week is much, much better than blogging every day for two weeks and never again.



## ***Mistake #11: Typos, Typos Everywhere!***

While it's never good to have a website up that's loaded with typos, misspellings, and grammatical mistakes, it's particularly bad when the perpetrator is a school website. Parents have high standards for the people who educate their kids on such things!

Even if you think everything looks A-OK, get a few outside sets of eyes on your website copy to proofread it before the site goes up. Don't take it personally if there are things you've missed—mistakes are notoriously hard to spot in your own work, especially when it's a project you've looked over many times before.



## **Mistake #12: Having Just One Website**

Parents who are just thinking about sending their child to your school are an entirely different bunch of folks than parents who are already sending their child there—what they want and need from your school website is completely different.

**Prospective parents are concerned about questions like these:**

- “Is this school a good fit for my child?”
- “Can we afford it?”
- “Do kids who go here seem happy and fulfilled?”
- “Where is this school located?”

**Current parents are more concerned about things like:**

- “What’s the lunch menu for next week?”
- “Where can I get another copy of that permission slip my kid lost track of?”
- “Are there any photos from today’s field trip?”
- “What is Madison’s mom’s name and contact info, so I can plan that playdate?”

For this reason, you need two different website experiences for these folks—not necessarily two whole separate websites (though you can go that route if you want to), but at least a different portal for existing parents.

Your school website is one of the very best ways to keep existing parents informed and engaged, so you need to make sure yours gives them the info they want in a secure, convenient way.

Your office staff can’t be there to answer questions and supply permission slips at 10:00 pm, but your website can. And if yours does, your current parents will love you for it.

## **Mistake #13: Not Optimized for Mobile**

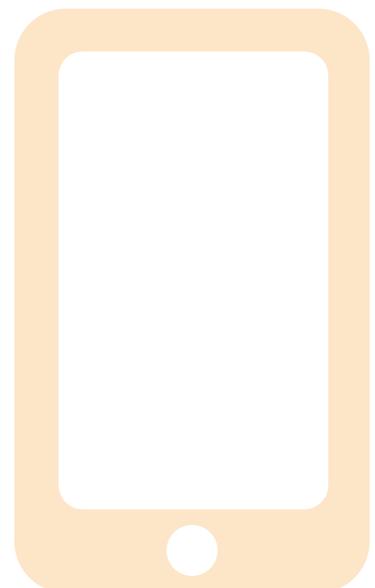
Okay, so it's a baker's dozen and we're giving you 13, not 12 tips! But this one should be 100% so obvious that if you don't know it you should be concerned.

### ***YOUR WEBSITE SHOULD BE FULLY RESPONSIVE.***

Fully responsive is just a fancy way of saying that your website **MUST** be optimized for mobile. This means that every single page of your promotional website should adapt its layout to the size of the screen that it's being loaded on.

Almost all website technologies now build websites that are fully responsive and your school website should look fantastic on a computer, table or mobile device. Your contact information should be easily found and your contact forms (and call-to-action's) needs to be optimized for mobile devices as well.

If your website is not fully responsive right now I would suggest that you cannot afford to **NOT** hire a professional to build your school a new website as soon as possible.



# About MemberHub

MemberHub provides schools with an all-in-one communication platform and website development services to help strengthen school community through increased communications.

Our team prides itself on working closely with your school to create a stunning website that is functional, beautiful, and affordable.

We then integrate your school's private MemberHub into your public website which gives everyone access to a powerful school directory as well as appropriate school-wide, grade-level and classroom "hubs".

With MemberHub, your school can:

- Provide a digital online school directory
- Send text messages
- Maintain multiple school calendars
- Post volunteer opportunities and signups
- Share photos in secure online environment
- Start discussions about topics of interest
- Schedule automatic reminders
- Create newsletters and store files

To learn how we can help your school visit <http://memberhub.com> or call us **866-586-2080**.

## Additional Resources

### **Enrollment Catalyst**

<http://www.enrollmentcatalyst.com>

### **National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS): Marketing resources**

<http://www.nais.org/Pages/Learn/KnowledgeCenter/Marketing-and-Communications.aspx>

### **Gilfus Education Group**

<http://www.gilfuseducationgroup.com/education-consulting/web-strategy-services-and-education-marketing>

### **Innovation AI: A (Not So) Elementary School Marketing Plan**

<http://blog.innovation-ai.com/a-not-so-elementary-school-marketing-plan>

### **Starter Tips for Marketing Your Private School**

<http://www.slideshare.net/zoic/11-starter-tips-for-marketing-your-private-school>

### **Halladay Education Group**

<http://www.halladayeducationgroup.com/>

