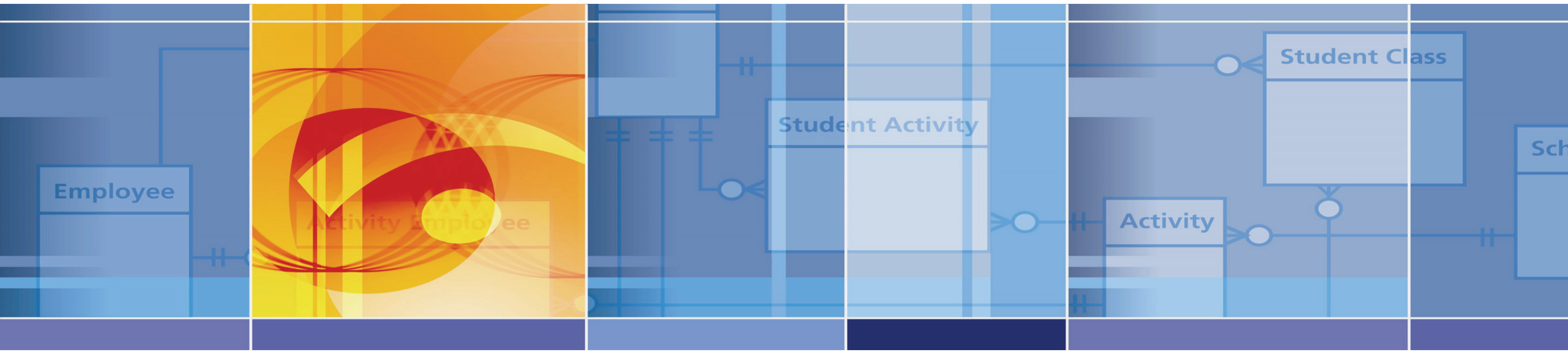

The Optimal Reference Guide:

Marketing Your Field of Dreams – The Process of Obtaining and Sustaining Buy-in,

Project Management Series – Part III

Extraordinary insight™ into today's education information topics

By ESP Solutions Group

ESP Solutions Group

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About ESP Solutions Group

ESP Solutions Group (www.espsolutionsgroup.com) is a PK-12 data consulting and technology firm specializing in education data systems and psychometrics. Our team is comprised of education experts who pioneered the concept of "data-driven decision making" (D3M) and now help optimize the management of our clients' state and local education agencies' information.

ESP is exclusively focused on PK-12 education. This is not a sideline business for our firm. We believe in what we do. We are former teachers, administrators, and district personnel. ESP has a comprehensive view of the current state and future potential of the entire PK-12 data ecosystem. We understand how campus, district, state, and federal education technologies are related.

ESP personnel have advised local school districts, all 52 state education agencies, and the U.S. Department of Education on the practice of PK-12 school data management. We are nationally recognized as leading experts in understanding the data and technology implications of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), Education Data Exchange Network (EDEN/ED*Facts)*, and Schools Interoperability Framework (SIF).

Since 1993, we have focused on putting quality data into the hands of decision makers. We provide consulting services for information systems architecture planning and large-scale implementations. We also develop products and services for improved data quality, data collection, data confidentiality, data recovery, data accessibility, and state and federal reporting. We have authored over 30 Optimal Reference Guides and Books (whitepapers) on topics relevant to education technology such as action reports, indicators, growth models, assessment, accountability, disaster prevention, etc. For our complete library of Optimal Reference Guides, Optimal Reference Books, and other education related resources, please visit www.espsolutionsgroup.com/resources.php.

Contributors

GLYNN D. LIGON, PH.D.
Dr. Ligon, the president and chief executive officer of ESP Solutions Group, is a nationally recognized expert on issues relating to data-driven decision making, data quality, action reports, growth models, and large-scale system design.

BARBARA H. ANDREPONT
Ms. Andrepont is a highly experienced IT/MIS senior executive who earned a national reputation for her work with the Louisiana Department of Education. She has over 30 years experience working at the state education agency level as well as valuable experience consulting with the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO).

JOSHUA GOODMAN, PMP
Mr. Goodman serves as a senior project manager at ESP Solutions Group. He coordinates a majority of ESP client projects, related workflow, and deliverables. He has over 8 years of experience in project management and earned his PMP (Project Management Professional) certification in 2005.

STEVEN KING
Mr. King has extensive knowledge of the data management and coordination needs of state education agencies and school districts. He spent 20 years at the Wyoming Department of Education coordinating data collection and reporting activities across all federal and state education program areas. His current responsibilities include project design and direction, data system architecture planning, data analysis, and strategy for local, state, and Federal education agencies. He is a project director on many of ESP client engagements and serves on the Board of Directors of the Schools Interoperability Framework.

LEE TACK, PH.D
Dr. Leeland Tack provides expert advice in financial data collection and reporting to clients of ESP. He also serves as a resource on implementing course code classification systems. Dr. Tack has been an advocate for quality education and access to quality information for decision making throughout his career. He spent thirty five years working for the Iowa Department of Education, seventeen of which he supervised the bureaus of information technology, school finance, statistics, internal operations, planning, research and evaluation.

ANNE-MARIE HART
Mrs. Hart has over 11 years of experience developing marketing communication plans for various industries. She currently serves as ESP's Marketing Director. With thorough, hands-on experience managing projects from concept to completion, she coordinates all of the marketing and event activities for the company. Mrs. Hart is highly skilled at message crafting, marketing communication strategy, and event planning.

Foreword

By Glynn D. Ligon

Buy-in from the stakeholders is becoming the consensus key to success for a technology project. An education agency must be proactive in building buy-in, but some are reluctant to do so. There are many positive steps that can be taken to achieve that elevated state of stakeholder support we refer to as buy-in. This Optimal Reference Guide (ORG) explores those in an interview format with our ESP professionals who have been on all sides of IT projects.

The reality I keep reminding myself of is that we shouldn't expect users of a new IT solution to give it more priority than they do to their daily work demands. Every new project competes for time and energy with on-going work that doesn't go away or get done by someone else. The promise of great future time savings just isn't too compelling to someone who has work with a deadline on the desktop today. The policy and legislative decision makers required to fund a project also have competing priorities. At budget time, how can they value an IT project over "direct instructional expenditures"?

With the varied perspectives of those contributing to this ORG, Anne-Marie Hart, ESP's Marketing Director, has taken on the challenges education agencies face. From the legislature to the classroom, everyone deserves a clear case for investing in a new technology. She also explores the time dimension—needing to market a new project from start to finish. Her approach is refreshing as well. The insights are presented as interviews, which they actually were, with our staff.

The ideas presented here may be traditional—after all, education agencies are traditional. However, readers should always be looking to the future to accomplish the same goals for buy-in through more wiki, collaborative, viral, web-centric technologies. The reality is that today, we don't have exemplars of those emerging collaborative processes to hold out as best practices for education agencies. That will change. As it does, we'll update our guidance.

Selling a Project

IT Projects do not sell themselves. They need buy-in at every stage—from funding to planning to production. There is a lot that education agencies can do to help obtain buy-in, but it is an area which is often overlooked, put off, or even dismissed. For those education agencies who forgo obtaining buy-in, we issue this caution—without the proper buy-in from stakeholders, your beloved IT project will fail.

Buy-in can be achieved by using standard marketing tactics. This Optimal Reference Guide answers common questions about marketing practices. First and foremost, education agencies need to understand that marketing is not just to or for end-users. The marketing lifecycle needs to begin with gaining support for initial funding, sustaining project enthusiasm during implementation, and end with the adoption of the project by all.

Every IT project needs a project plan that details the specifics of the implementation (testing, training, etc.). But few project managers have the foresight to include a marketing plan within their overall project plan. A well-defined marketing plan is an important tool that will help build the proper momentum needed for a project's acceptance and ultimate success.

Q: How can a project meet agency and statewide goals/needs?

You know your project is a good idea. You know other education agencies are moving forward with similar technology projects or others have already purchased hardware and software to move their technology project forward. But there is a sense that the need to "build it" has not caught on. This is where the difference between communicating and marketing is significant.

Administrators, boards, and other staff may be aware of the technology project that has been proposed or is being implemented but they may not have thought about how the project should be reflected in their goals and priorities. A few questions to ask are:

- Where does this technology project fit into our department's or district's goals?
- How will this technology initiative help achieve our goals?
- Do the goals need to be reviewed, expanded, modified to reflect how this and other technology projects will be needed to achieve the desired outcomes?
- When education agency budgets are presented to legislators or governor's office staff, is the significant expenditure for a technology project goal-driven?

Q: How do you make sure data systems compete as a priority for funding?

It is important to know the priorities and how your pet IT project supports those goals. Often, an IT project is presented as a stand-alone effort without discussing the benefits that will accrue from implementation. Your project will also need to show how it aligns with the overall direction and effort of your organization.

For example, state education agencies are asking school districts to focus on improving student performance. While SEA's can't improve student performance, they should be focusing their efforts on facilitating district improvements and minimizing the distractions. Efforts to streamline data collection, improve data quality, improve the timeliness of reporting, and providing action reports to teachers are all efforts that align with the overall stated goal of assisting improvement of student performance.

Steve King, ESP's Vice President and former Director of Data Management for the Wyoming Department of Education, got the WISE (Wyoming Integrated Statewide Education Data System) effort in place and funded by expanding the scope. Building a SIF solution only to solve state reporting needs was impossible to justify. It was easy to find horror stories of the efforts school districts had for sharing data amongst there own applications. If they solved that problem, state reporting could be solved almost as a side effect.

It was important to understand the problems and issues the local districts had. By listening to districts and getting them to understand they were trying to solve a joint problem, they gained their strong support. They were partners in developing a solution for everyone. Districts were the main advocates for the system with the Legislature.

Traditionally, legislatures want to serve and support their local school districts. In fiscally conservative times they need to show their cutting education along with everything else. State departments are often the target where education funding can be cut without hurting local districts. Getting districts to advocate for an SEA project is highly valuable.

It's also important to remind ourselves that from a taxpayer standpoint, whether tax dollars go to districts or the state does not matter. The hurt to the pocketbook is the same. Consolidating efforts at the state or regional level to gain the benefits from the economies of scale can go a long way. Also, many technical projects require a level of technical expertise that can often be most efficiently deployed at a regional or state level.

Legislators are receptive to arguments of efficiency, coordination, and service to districts, schools, and teachers.

Q: How do education agencies manage administration change and sell the project to the new regime?

New administrations—whether the state education agency, the state education board, local school boards and district offices, governors and/or legislators—come into office, evaluate projects and directions, and make decisions about their priorities. Because longitudinal projects are indeed long-term efforts for the education enterprise, project success depends on having project strategies to bridge administrations. Large and complex projects can be targets because the project is often associated with contracts, positions, specific costs, and funding streams. Each of those characteristics raises visibility.

The project with a wide variety of constituents and colleagues as project partners has many spokespersons that are both knowledgeable and often are in the right places to communicate with the incoming administrations.

Continually involving and preparing these partners to actually "own" project direction and successes allows them to participate actively in communicating needs and value of your shared efforts. Having easily accessible and up-to-date project publications and documentation will assist those partners to quickly and consistently bring the project message to new administrations.

Q: How does an education agency ensure participation in their project?

There is really no way to *ensure* participation. Of course, users can be mandated to use the technology that is born from the project. Often this causes resentment and resistance to change. The best way to *encourage* participation, even if the new technology is mandated, is through frequent communication of the benefits.

If You Build It, Will They Come?

This is a question that every project management team at an education agency should ask themselves when starting a new technology project. Whether your project is large or small, it involves a lot of time, money, and resources to get it off the ground successfully.

A few of the major risks in every technology project are lack of awareness, lack of funding, and lack of buy-in (see ESP's Optimal Reference Guide, ***From Risk to Reward – A Guide to Risk Management for Education Agencies***). Any of these risks can slow down a project's progress or even stop it in its tracks. A well-defined marketing communication plan can reduce these risks and build excitement at the earliest stages of a project, facilitate a project's acceptance, and increase internal communication.

Targeting the Right Audience

One of the first steps in any marketing communication plan is to define the characteristics of your audience.

Q: What type of audiences should be considered in a marketing communication plan?

If it's a state-level technology project, the different audiences might be:

- LEA and SEA users
- administrators
- state board
- legislators and their staff
- governor's office staff
- education associations
- the public

If it's a local-level technology project, the different audiences might be:

- users
- administrators
- local board
- parents
- the public

Q: Why is targeting an audience important for a marketing communication plan?

Defining an audience is key to understanding how to communicate effectively to the people, or groups of people, that will be impacted by the project. Some groups will be impacted differently and knowing their differences and defining their characteristics will help deliver the right message in a way that they will respond best. Different groups have different needs and will therefore respond favorably to messages that are directly relevant to them.

Q: How can education agencies effectively communicate with their audience?

It's all about getting the right message to the right audience. The focus of the marketing messages may need to vary given the role and responsibilities of each audience. For example, within an SEA project, funding and support from the legislature and the Governor may need to be focused on ROI (return on investment). While the focus for the LEA user will be less on funding and more on the system's functionality.

You should start by listing the various groups of people that will be impacted by the project, then list their characteristics as a group. This is typically referred to

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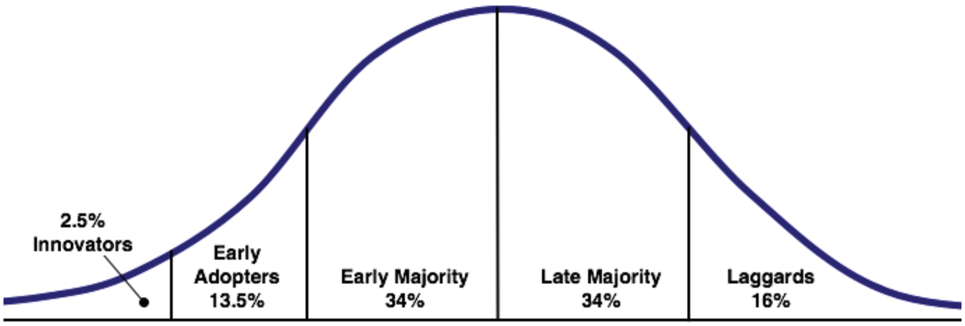
as user group or stakeholder analysis. Addressing stakeholder needs up front is essential to any project's success. Some of the questions to ask include:

- What are the stakeholder needs?
- Are the stakeholders technically inclined?
- Are they concerned with budgets?
- Are they resistant to change?

Listing the group's characteristics will help you make decisions on the type of messaging and tactics that will be best suited for them. Below is "The Innovation Adoption Curve" (Everett Rogers). It can help project management teams understand their audiences better and further delineate them. The Adoption Curve uses characteristics of groups to explain the rate at which new technology is embraced.



Innovators jump head-first into new technology. They pride themselves on being the first to embrace new technology. They are important to any marketing communication plan because they can kick-start viral marketing (word-of-mouth through social networks).

Early Adopters are open to new technology, although more careful than Innovators.

Early Majority are still careful but tend to accept new technology only if it is proven to work and provide value.

Late Majority are skeptics and only use new products when they are used by the majority.

Laggards are critical about new ideas and wait to adopt new technology until it becomes mainstream.

Q: What are the advantages of putting in place an advisory group? Should every project have one?

Even small projects should implement a project governance or advisory group. (see ESP's Optimal Reference Guide, ***Why 70% of Government IT Projects Fail – Quality Project Management for Education Agencies***). By instituting a project advisory group that is representative of the overall user group, the project management team is better able to gain advocates, garner project needs, and market and encourage early adopter involvement in pilots as an opportunity and a vehicle for system and process improvement.

Once the advisory group is implemented it is important to coordinate regular communications and schedule regular meetings to update and solicit feedback on plans, encourage further participation, manage expectations, and "forecast" next steps and plans for project expansion.

Q: Who else should be involved at the beginning stages of a project?

District personnel who are directly involved with the project should be engaged at the start of a project. They can be used to present on behalf of the project at regional and statewide meetings. According to Lee Tack, an ESP Consultant and former Division Administrator of Financial and Information Services at the Iowa Department of Education, "District personnel became our advocates. It was important to have district personnel telling their peers about our projects; not just state agency staff. Thus, our projects became viewed as the State doing something for them, and not to them." See Appendix A: An Iowa Case Study, for more information.

Communication Tactics

Communication tactics are vehicles that can be used to get an audience their intended message. It is best to start by brainstorming ideas that will help effectively communicate with your audience. All ideas should be considered and documented.

We've listed a few tactics you can use to reach out to your audience, but don't just go with the ideas we've presented here, use the actions that make most sense to you and your situation.

Q: Will the same tactics work for all audiences?

Actually, not equally well. As with messaging, it's advisable to have a strategy for different groups within your audience.

Email Campaigns

Q: What are the advantages of using an email campaign in the marketing communication plan?

Email campaigns are easy to set up and require virtually no budget. Email contacts are made valuable with frequent, short project updates. Because this communication method is immediate, the information given is the most current. In contrast, direct mail has a lead time between the time it is sent and when the audience receives it, in which time the information may become outdated.

Q: What are the costs of deploying an email campaign?

As mentioned above, one of the benefits of an email campaign is that the costs are low. Depending on the size of the project's audience, email campaigns require little effort. If the audience is large and varied, there are email marketing services available that provide list management, campaign management, and branding. Some of the more popular services are Constant Contact, www.constantcontact.com, and My Emma, www.myemma.com. Both have reasonable monthly fees and provide success metrics on each campaign sent.

Direct Mail

Q: What exactly is "Direct Mail?"

The term "Direct Mail" is used as a general term by marketing professionals. It is a way to reach your audience directly through a printed form of communication. Examples include letters, postcards, newsletters, flyers, brochures, etc. This practice is often used by education agencies to formally communicate official updates and expectations to relevant administrators and staff.

Q: How well does direct mail work?

If a project's audience is well defined, the response rate using direct mail can be good. For a high response rate, plan to use a combination of communication methods to reach your audience, such as email plus direct mail, or direct mail plus stakeholder meetings.

The challenge of direct mail is creating something that will stand out from the clutter of direct mail they already receive.

Q: How much does direct mail cost?

This really depends on the size of the audience and the quality of the materials produced. Forms of direct mail including letters, newsletters, flyers, brochures etc.

Conferences/Stakeholder Meetings

Q: Should I schedule separate meetings to discuss the project with my audience?

Yes, it is highly recommended that project management teams undertaking large-scale technology initiatives institute regularly scheduled project update meetings with the various stakeholder groups. Implementing a new IT project is no time to hold back information; in fact, it is the time to "over communicate."

As addressed earlier in this paper, it is extremely important and never too early to implement a project governance or advisory group. The institution of an advisory group allows the project management team to gain advocates, better understand and document project needs, and truly utilize the "what's in it for me" model by encouraging early adopter involvement in pilots as an opportunity and a vehicle for system and process improvement. Once the advisory group is established, it is important to continue to schedule regular meetings that update stakeholders and solicit feedback on plans, encourage further participation, manage expectations, and "forecast" next steps.

During the meetings the focus should be on clearly explaining the project, communicating the need for the project, building excitement, sharing the timeline, and describing how you plan to continue to communicate with the advisory group regarding project updates (through meetings, email, direct mail, etc.).

Q: Can conferences play a part in a marketing communication strategy?

Conferences are essential to any marketing strategy. The presentations at conferences allow for knowledge transfer and formal project updates that might not occur otherwise. Conferences also allow stakeholders to share their experience with their colleagues.

A good practice for the project management team is to engage district personnel who are involved in the project to present at regional and statewide meetings. This allows the advisory group members to address their peers as the future users of the system. By doing this the project team moves from having to "sell" the project to enabling the early adopters and advisory group members to advocate for the project with their colleagues.

Training

Training is most likely already accounted for in your project plan, but it can also be a powerful marketing communication tool.

Q: How does training qualify as marketing?

Training creates awareness of the project. Just letting people know that they will be required to attend training can be the spark that will encourage discussions within a given audience. Training also helps an audience understand the benefits of the project first-hand.

It is essential to always explain the benefits and "big picture" of the project to your audience during training so that these benefits become "sound bites" used by early adopters to relate their experience to others.

By providing training to both vendors and end-users alike, the project management team creates buy-in and collaboration. Over time as the commitment and readiness to move ahead with the new system creates alignment across the district or state, it is the frequency of successful training that provides both a preparedness and capacity for use.

Q: Training can be very costly, what are the alternatives to traditional training methods?

ESP has had a lot of success with Train-the-Trainer models, as well as with online training (WebEx, Elluminate). Both of which tend to be more economical than the classic training method of vendor supplied onsite/face-to-face training.

Media Coverage

Q: How do we get media coverage?

Most media coverage is kicked-off by a press release. A press release is a news synopsis that announces a newsworthy event to gain favorable attention from the media. Press releases can come from any source; education agencies, vendors, standards associations, stakeholder groups, etc. Most of the time, the vendor with whom you are working with on the project will ask if they can write a press release. Press releases from vendors usually cover the award of the new project, meeting a major milestone, or declaring the project's success. The vendor may ask the education agency to approve the final version of a press release before it is distributed to the media. Some require prior approval of any public announcement.

If you decide to write a press release on your own, start by defining the audience to whom you are writing and determine the messaging that will get their attention.

Q: Is media coverage necessary?

Projects don't *need* media coverage. But if drawing attention to the project outside of your immediate audience is a goal, consider adding press releases to your marketing communication plan.

Conducting Pilots

Q: What are the basic goals of a pilot?

The first is clearly to reduce user burden and generate "buzz." Pilots help to find and work out problems, if any, before burdening the larger user population with them. The next, maybe just as important is to build your group of advocates—at the very least generate some testimonials that discuss how the initial burden is worth the overall benefits. Pilots also have the side benefit of buying additional time to get the full implementation executed successfully.

There are pilots conducted to make a real "go, no go" decision. Some other pilots are conducted with alternative solutions and the intent to pick one or more for full implementation.

At times, education agencies conduct a pilot before even determining whether or not they want to go ahead with actual procurement and implementation. Tom Ogle from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education calls these "pilettes"—not quite a pilot.

A smart pilot occurs when time is a luxury and includes all potential users. A pilot year or period allows everyone to test out the new system without severe consequences for the user, the system, or the sponsoring agency. These pilots are typically run in parallel with an existing system upon which the agency relies for official data.

Q: Selecting pilot participants seems very straightforward. Is it?

Not at all. In fact, because pilots have different goals, the selection of pilot participants needs to be done with care to achieve those goals.

Q: What are the different pilot strategies that you've seen successfully followed?

The different piloting strategies available to a project management team includes utilizing volunteers, random or representative samples, the schools or districts that are most likely to be successful, the most competent participants, politically correct choices, and others. The bottom line is, don't be tied into thinking that a pilot has to be a true representative slice of the universe, because it does not. In fact, a successful pilot is probably more important than a representative pilot.

All that said, it is often desirable, if time and budget permits, to select from a representative group of early adopters. This can include but is not limited to varying technical, environmental, demographic, and geographic representation.

By definition, a pilot is a guide. To field test means to test in actual situations reflecting intended use. In practice, the difference in meanings is much less important than establishing up front in a pilot what the intended purpose is. If everything is decided, and the pilot is to work out all the details, by all means pick a representative set of participants. However, if the pilot is to demonstrate proof of concept, not to refine tactics, then choose participants that are likely to be successful. This latter approach is not at all deceiving if everyone is clear about the purpose of selecting them.

Q: Are pilots even necessary?

Unless there's a definitive mandate for implementation to occur a certain way or by a certain time, a pilot almost always makes sense. Working off the rough edges with a few close friends means only a small number of people experience the unforeseen and at times really dumb things that get done or overlooked when a new system starts.

Q: Would you recommend a pilot if time allows?

Yes, a carefully orchestrated pilot is one of the best strategies to achieve wide-spread buy-in for a technology project.

When to Market?

Q: When do I need to start planning a marketing communication strategy?

After clearly defining the need for the project, project managers should begin thinking about ways to use marketing to sell the project. Start by developing a marketing communication plan targeted at policy groups and stakeholders, whose buy-in will be integral for securing funding and approvals.

Q: Is the marketing performed throughout the life of the project or at certain select times?

There will be specific opportune times when the project management team will want to deploy their plan. This timeline should be based around milestones that are already included in the project plan.

In general, it is best to keep thinking about marketing opportunities throughout the project's lifecycle. Some marketing ideas will form during and even after the launch of a new technology project.

Q: Are there specific tools that should be used for scheduling marketing tactics?

Use the same tools that are used to put the project plan together. Marketing activities can be placed directly into the project plan's calendar. Don't forget to include start and end dates, who's responsible, etc.

Budgeting

Q: What percent of the overall technology project budget do you recommend be targeted for buy-in?

100% because it's all about buy-in. Seriously though, we can't answer this question with a percent. If we're talking about a total budget of $500,000 for a statewide rollout, the percent would need to be high compared to a $25,000,000 project with the same number of users.

We recommend that an education agency think in terms of the activities required and the cost to deliver each of them in their own context. ESP recently explored this issue with the District of Columbia's new state-level office. They are not likely to budget travel costs for statewide training sessions like in Wyoming where most attendees have no choice but to spend the night. Alaska or Hawaii must use more planes and boats for a meeting event than Missouri would. On the other hand, parking in DC and Honolulu is expensive, but may be free in Cheyenne and Juneau. I know, you can't drive to Juneau, but you can take your car on a ferry.

Q: What activities should be budgeted?

In addition to the standard activities such as training, support, and materials, I'd include some that have been successful in other states. Iowa has conducted statewide data quality conferences supported by funding from the National Center for Education Statistics. Many states and districts have their own annual conferences that provide a great opportunity to present, demonstrate, and ballyhoo.

Leveraging the conferences of other agencies and associations is cost effective. Business officials, teachers, administrators, school board members, and many other groups meet at least annually. They are often looking for program sessions and speakers who can inform their constituents of the latest requirements and opportunities. In some cases, sending people to a vendor's user conference can boost understanding and appreciation of the product that's at the heart of the solution being implemented. An excellent buy-in activity is visiting other states or districts that are implementing a similar project.

A professionally produced video might reach a wide audience and make a lasting impression. Don't discount the impact of brochures, videos, and logo items. The legitimacy and institutional endorsement of a new project can be established through the judicious spreading of freebees. Educators have looked down on these tactics in the past, but part of that has been the in-fighting over funds and the poor quality of the marketing items produced. There's no substitute for local wisdom and judgment in these cases.

Q: How much should I set aside for my budget?

Ask around to people within your own agency or a similar one. Regional differences and differences across types of technology projects are too great to balance in a single answer. The budget for buy-in should match the importance of the project. However, the table below provides a sample budget that anyone can take and argue with, edit heavily, or merely tweak.

Budget Item	Cost	Breakout
Pilot	$150,000	Staff Travel & expenses Training Support
Training	$250,000	200 LEAs Travel for 2 for each to 2 meetings Facilities, food, & drinks Substitutes or temporary workers Facilitators, speakers, staff
Sponsored Conference	$100,000	Facilities, food, & drinks Facilitators, speakers, staff Travel & expenses
Other Conferences	$50,000	Staff preparation & presentations Travel & Expenses Sponsorship & Freebees
Visitations to Other Sites	$50,000	On-site visitation to other SEAs or LEAs with similar implementations
Materials	$100,000	Brochures Videos Freebees Printed Guides Staff
Stakeholder Meetings	$50,000	Travel for 25 to 2 meetings Facilities, food, & drinks Substitutes or temporary workers Facilitators, speakers, staff
Support	$250,000	Year 2 on-line, telephone On-site assistance for struggling participants
TOTAL	**$1,000,000**	**Assumes 200 LEAs participating in a statewide implementation**

Measuring Success

Even though this is the last subject in our Optimal Reference Guide, it should be one of the first things discussed.

Q: How do I know if my marketing plan was successful?

A project manager needs to set expectations about what kind of overall effect they desire from this effort – is it a buy-in percentage? Is it maintaining a high level of communication with the audience? Once these questions are answered, the team can decide what metrics will be used to measure them.

Q: If my goals weren't met, what do I do next?

There still might be an opportunity to market a project after it's launched. First, assess why your plan didn't produce the expected results and start over.

Conclusion

Attention education agencies! You cannot assume that people will flock to your project simply because you think it's a good idea. An effort must be made early on to obtain buy-in from administration, stakeholders, users, etc. Simply launching a technology project does not constitute its success. Success would be launching a project that people are well informed of and excited about.

All it takes is a little marketing know-how to boost your project. We've provided some ideas for you to use in this Optimal Reference Guide. Furthermore, you should start the dialogue with colleagues and other education agencies. Ask them about marketing techniques they've used and what did/didn't work for them. Listen for this topic at conferences. Ask the question of those that have completed similar projects. Some may call it a buy-in plan or a communication plan, but we'll know what they are really talking about—Marketing.

Appendix A: An Iowa Case Study

When the Iowa Department of Education undertook a project to collect data directly from the student information systems of school districts they realized that they had as many communication and political challenges ahead of them as they had technology challenges. The initiative, named Project EASIER (Electronic Access System for Iowa Education Records), was designed to leverage the technology of student information systems by having districts send individual student records directly to the department and eventually link those records with other information through the use of a unique student identifier. Although districts had used their student information systems for tasks such as scheduling, grade reporting, providing transcripts, etc., sending individual student records directly to the State to fulfill reporting requirements was a concept that was not only new to staff in many districts but also an idea about which district staff and others had reservations.

From the onset of the project, an advisory group consisting of three committees was created. The three committees focused on technology, policy, and content with representatives from the public and private schools, principals, superintendents, information technology staff, higher education, and representatives from the associations such as teachers, school boards, administrators, and parents.

Although the advisory committee was not formed to "sell" the project, the individual committee members became ambassadors for the project. The advisory committee, in addition to providing advice, also gave assurance to districts and others that the department was listening.

The advisory group was essential to the project but not sufficient to move the project from vision to reality across the state. Several strategies were actually used to sell the project. Awareness and support through accurate and consistent communications to a variety of audiences were determined to be essential for statewide project success. The department decided that they needed to describe details, demonstrating what the project was all about and what it was not. They also determined that they needed to demonstrate support for the project with selected endorsements. And they needed a consistent message.

One part of the selling strategy was preparing a short (eight minute) video for use by department staff and committee members to describe the project and its purpose/goals and to provide a brochure that would be a ready and consistent reference. The video provided a clear and consistent message through graphics and statements from key individuals. The video was a mix of talking heads and a demonstration of what project EASIER would accomplish. The video included a series of interviews with district staff directly involved with student information systems, district administrators, higher education registrars and admission officers and the director of the department of education.

The project experienced initial success quickly moving from six pilot districts in year one to 19 districts in year two. To further expand the project to voluntary statewide adoption, a second video, again less than ten minutes, was produced restating the vision and purpose. The second video again used interviews with staff directly involved in the pilot districts and updated the graphics to reflect current technology and participation. The videos and a one page brochure were also used with legislators and executive branch staffs to describe the project, tell a story, and have it told by someone other than department staff.

Prior to NCLB, participation in Project EASIER was voluntary and limited by districts' interest in participating and by limits on state and local resources. There was also a time when growth had to be limited to districts that were ready. The department established criteria to determine if a district had information system, staff, and resources such that they could successfully participate in the initiative. The criteria became a means to communicate what districts needed to do and eventually prepare them for meeting the reporting requirements under NCLB. Reflecting back on project success, several key factors seem to have made a difference: good communication to a variety of audiences, strong department support to early innovators/adopters, strong endorsements by districts involved in the project, and transfer of project ownership from the department to participating districts.

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(512) 879-5300
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