

Go digital

Poppy and Jack's founder *Sarah Bellamy*, former head of digital for Guardian Media Group Radio, talks about the importance of digital – and why you need a strategy



Twenty years ago, if a nursery wanted to get parents through the door, it was a matter of word-of-mouth recommendations, advertising in the press, and maybe splashing out on a roadside banner once in a while. But the internet, and resulting growth of the worldwide web and social media, have changed the way we communicate for good.

Digital technology is just the latest step in the evolution of mass communication and selling. Think printing (1450s), radio advertising (1922), and the first TV advert (1941) – a grainy ten-second still for Bulova watches. But as well as being on the wrong side of history, not taking advantage of digital puts a business at risk of losing out to a savvier competitor.

As parents are spending more time on smartphones, tablets and computers, most nurseries are adapting to this new method of communication with some sort of online presence, often a Facebook page and website.

But are these platforms being used to maximum effect? If there is room for improvement, consider developing a digital strategy.

A digital strategy is part of your business strategy but only looks at new technology. It should be reviewed in exactly the same way as a business strategy, which is ultimately a plan of priorities that give you a competitive edge with an attached financial plan and a timed roll-out. Like any strategy, it is also important to be able to measure success.

The best place to start is by looking at where you are now. Ask your key stakeholders and potential customers what they would like to be able to do on their phones, tablets and mobiles through a questionnaire. Look at your competitors. Pull all the information together in



a SWOT analysis using headings of opportunities and challenges in order of business priority.

Think about what you want to achieve: this could be appealing to prospective parents, reassuring current parents, celebrating existing staff, or recruiting new staff. It will soon become clear which platforms (websites, social media) you need to invest in.

Aside from online, a digital strategy would also include web-based nursery management software, customer relationship management tools for new enquiries, or early years trackers, all technologies which can help you manage the business.

Let's look at the online element of a digital strategy, which is often the least understood:

Website

A website is your shop window – it reflects you and the nursery. It may be the first impression a parent, or

A nursery's website is its shop window, so while good imagery will draw parents in...

prospective employee, has. Leave light, punchy content for Facebook. Websites and email are home for in-depth information such as policies, biographies, weekly updates and blogs. That's not to say you can't have more celebratory items on there, but the style of the post will be different. A snap of children enjoying a day out is ideal for social media, whereas an Outstanding grade or a nursery makeover are good PR for your website (and can be accompanied by shorter social media posts to drive people there).

When setting up your website, it is important to consider:

1) The information that is going to be available (the content) and the need to put this into a site map (navigation).

2) The look and feel of the content (branding). This includes font, logos, images and tone of voice, which should have the same feel as the nursery itself. ▶

3) Who will own and update the website, including timeframes for roll-out (your digital guru).

4) The budget available both for the set-up and ongoing update and maintenance (financial plan).

5) How you are going to measure performance. Do you need Google Analytics (a tool to measure web traffic)? Where will contact forms go? What are your targets?

Different parents will want to use the website in different ways: for new parents, it will be about how to contact the nursery, what it looks like, how a child's first day went, and information on the staff team. An existing parent will be more interested in checking availability, reading a newsletter, checking the weekly diary, paying a bill or reading the weekly blog.

Designing a site in-house, using a straightforward content management tool such as WordPress, might seem like an enormous project, but it doesn't have to be and it does yield big benefits. If you have one of these template-style websites, you can update your own content and tag your articles with keywords. A confident staff member willing to have a go could probably create one fairly quickly and cheaply. Once you have a clearer idea of how people are using it, you can add or remove content easily.

More content online works in your favour. Google searches for keywords in your content to match it with words entered into its search engine. The more up-to-date and relevant your information, the more likely you are to appear at the top of the search engine and get a click through to your site.

It is important to put your website to the test. An easy method is to ask staff to find information on your website and watch them as they try to navigate through your pages. Their feedback will enable you to make sure that parents get to information as quickly as possible. If the main focus of your website is to get new parents, your home page should have 'contact us' and 'book a visit' buttons as a prominent feature.

Social media applications

Social media is just that: bite-size information consumed for social enjoyment. With that in mind, it should be fun, engaging and topical.

There are plenty of apps on the market and it should be clear from

your research where your parents, staff and prospective parents are chatting. The order of popularity is: WhatsApp, Messenger, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter.

WhatsApp and Messenger are private messaging apps that are great for providing 24/7 communication with parents and prospective parents. Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and Twitter are more about publishing a news feed of stories and pictures. Instead of posting just to Facebook, you should consider posting through Instagram, then the same post can appear on Facebook and Twitter – avoiding you having to manage multiple posts.

So what about content? The most popular social media posts – aside from videos of cute animals – contain inspirational or funny quotes. These are likely to be shared, which means they have a greater potential to reach a wide audience. You can even brand these quotes so that your nursery gets the recognition.

Social media is also a good place to celebrate children's achievements. A quick picture post of the children before lunch will allow parents to feel they are sharing something of the moment. Posts that contain more children will reach more parents, but make sure that permissions have been sought.

Staff also present a lot of opportunity to share celebrations. Award wins or life events can create a talking point online. Setting visits, visitors and fun activities are also interesting for parents. You can ask parents to engage with your posts on a variety of topics; for example, 'We're offering 30 hours free childcare. Tag your friends so they can get it too.'

While regularly updated profiles tend to have more users, the timing of updates is also important. It is better to post once every day before lunch than a frenzy of posts on a Friday night when parents are putting children to bed and looking forward to a well-earned glass of wine. Also, posting a picture at lunchtime allows time for reaction during the working day that will boost the post on the feed at night.

It is also possible to set out-of-office and automatic replies thank-



...poor images are likely to put them off

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ing parents for making contact and letting them know when you will get back to them.

Think about length: social media posts are more likely to be consumed on mobile devices than computers, so posts should be short; ideally around 40 characters for Facebook.

On social media apps, the most important thing to focus on is engagement. It is easy to see if people are enjoying your posts by likes, shares and comments. Content that comes from the heart always gets a much better response – and a better response means higher rankings in newsfeeds. A post liked and shared by friends of the nursery creates an exciting snowball of activity that new parents want to be a part of. If you try to communicate with a different tone or image, it will feel alien to your biggest fans and they simply won't promote it.

Facebook also has an insights page that allows you to measure engagement daily. From this you can see which posts your audience have enjoyed at which time of day. It is also important to know which posts don't work so you can concentrate on the posts that give the most reward. Don't forget to also watch other nurseries in your area; you can see their top-performing posts too.

It is also helpful to measure new enquires in detail within the nursery. Most nursery software has a customer management tool that enables you to log detailed information about the initial enquiry, which will give you valuable insight into how wide your content is reaching online and on social media. ■