

## **AMCIS Keynote – Tuesday 13 May 2025, Cotswolds Irfan H Latif (RHS)**

Good morning. It's wonderful to be with you in the Cotswolds - easily one of the few places where a brochure image and reality align perfectly.

Now, I know some of you may be wondering what on earth a Head is doing delivering the keynote at a marketing conference. But the truth is our worlds are now completely intertwined. As Heads, we used to think in years. You think in seconds. We were measured by league tables. You, by engagement rates. And yet, our goal is the same: reputation, relationships, and results. I've spent some 20 years working with brilliant school marketers, and more recently I've become something of a digital evangelist - not because it's trendy, but because it's essential. We are in the business of education, yes, but also of emotion, of storytelling, of trust. And right now, trust is forged online, often in 15 seconds or less.

I'm honoured to be here today, speaking to such a distinguished and dynamic audience - the unsung heroes of the independent education sector, the school marketers. people who, if I get this wrong, will already be live posting on social a quote on Insta with "Irfan Latif: #deeply forgettable." But in all seriousness, I am genuinely honoured to speak with you, not because I'm here to teach you about marketing, goodness knows you're already experts in your field, but because I believe we are all at the same turning point - a world that's gone from word-of-mouth to word-of-algorithm. A world where content is king, AI is your intern, and your prospective parents are more likely to scroll past your open day than stroll into it.

Marketing a school in 2025 is no longer a question of banners and brochures. It's not just a logo, a Latin motto, or a fly-through video featuring drone shots of suspiciously empty sports pitches. It's about meaning. Belonging. Clarity. Emotion. It's about cutting through the digital fog with something real. And the challenge is: how do we do that in a world powered by artificial intelligence, governed by algorithms, and allergic to anything that smells like spin?

Let's be honest: marketing a school in 2025 is not for the faint-hearted. It is equal parts storytelling, diplomacy, analytics, and a touch of theatrical sorcery. You manage not just the public face of your school, but its heartbeat - and often under the immense pressure of parent expectations, competitive landscapes, and yes, sometimes, a Head who still thinks a "hashtag" is something you order with eggs.

Let me take you back just ten years. Most parents would begin their school search via Google, pick up a glossy prospectus, maybe arrange a visit after a phone call.

Fast forward to 2025, and the whole journey has changed.

Today, one in four parents will first discover your school via social media, not search engines. According to the 2025 Global Social Media Trends Report, brand discovery officially starts on social. A remarkable 84% of marketers agree that consumers will search for brands on platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube this year. And that includes schools. We are no longer just Googled; we are researched, reviewed, and judged within 30 seconds of a reel.

This is not just a digital transformation. It's a cultural one. And here's what the latest 2024 Consumer Trends Report tells us about this audience we are trying to reach:

- 1 in 3 consumers now use AI chatbots to research and get inspiration.
- 59% prefer to conduct their own research before speaking to anyone.
- 53% are tightening their household budgets and seeking value over prestige.
- And 75% say data privacy is a human right.

That means your audiences are sceptical, savvy, and self-directed.

They're not just looking for schools. They're looking for alignment, for purpose, and for trust. Because here's the thing: the job of school marketing has changed - fundamentally, irrevocably, and gloriously. The old models - safe, printed, polished, no longer move the dial. Parents don't want prestige, they want purpose. Pupils don't want polish, they want personality. And the new generation of decision-makers, aren't coming through the admissions funnel the way they used to. They're arriving through Instagram stories, YouTube testimonials, WhatsApp parent groups, and TikTok algorithms. They've made up their minds long before they email your registrar.

We are not just marketing schools anymore. We are competing for attention in a landscape where a Year 9 student on TikTok with a cracked iPhone has more engagement than your professionally filmed open day highlights. Where prospective parents start their journey with an Instagram search rather than an enquiry form. Where the new metric of success is whether someone felt your school's values before they even knew your league table position. Where families, and future pupils, are now less interested in prestige and more interested in purpose.

Today, I want to talk to you about what it means to market with courage and clarity in the age of AI, algorithms, and authenticity. That last word is the one I want us to keep returning to - authenticity. It's not just a buzzword. It's the golden thread running through every successful campaign, every compelling story, every connection that makes someone say, "Yes. That's the school for my child." And as we'll explore together, it's never been more important, or more misunderstood.

We are living through a fundamental transformation in how people discover, trust, and choose the institutions they engage with, and schools are no exception. The shift isn't just digital - it's cultural, behavioural, and deeply personal. In a recent study, over 84% of consumers said they begin their discovery of a brand not through a website or even word of mouth, but through social media. Let's pause on that for a moment: social media is now the front door of your school. It's where first impressions are made. It's where your values are judged. It's where your story begins or doesn't.

Let's face it. Everything has changed. The buyer journey has been re-engineered. The prospectus has been replaced by the preview reel. The website is no longer the front door - the social feed is. You no longer have a few minutes to win someone over. You have a few seconds. And in those seconds, your audience will decide whether they trust you, like you, and want to know more. Or whether they'll scroll on to the school down the road with better lighting and a witty caption.

And let's not pretend this is an easy front door to manage. It's a revolving one, spinning at dizzying speed. Your audience is scrolling, not strolling. You've got milliseconds to stop

thumbs mid-swipe, and even less time to form a connection. But here's the thing: the schools that get this right aren't necessarily the ones with the biggest budgets, or the glossiest production values. They're the ones who feel real. Who sound like people, not prospectuses. Who show the joy, the grit, the quirks, and the character of school life in ways that resonate.

Yet, as much as the channels have evolved, the fundamentals haven't. Human beings still make decisions based on emotion. We still crave connection, community, and stories that reflect who we are and who we hope to become. The job of the school marketer - your job - is to bridge the emotional with the informational. To take the lived experience of a school and turn it into something that moves people, not just to act, but to care.

Now, let's focus on who these people are. The prospective parents of 2025 are largely Millennials and increasingly Gen Z. They grew up with the internet. These are digital natives, mobile-first decision-makers who trust peer reviews over prospectuses, who believe in values alignment, and who will research your school more thoroughly than you researched your last holiday. In fact, 59% of today's parents say they'd rather gather information online than speak to a representative directly. And 25% will make a purchase, or in our case, an application, directly through social platforms.

So, if your brand isn't communicating its commitments, not just academically, but ethically, you're going to feel increasingly out of step.

This isn't a prediction. It's already happening. I spoke with a parent recently who chose a school not because of its facilities or reputation, but because, and I quote, "it just felt more human." And I think that's the most important phrase we can hold onto today. More human.

Because we live in an age where automation, algorithms and AI are rewriting the way we produce and share information. And as brilliant as those tools are (and I'll come to them in a moment) they cannot replace human warmth. They can't replicate humour, empathy, authenticity, or soul.

Gone are the days when a glossy brochure and a handshake from the Head would seal the deal. Today, you're being judged on your tone of voice on Instagram, the warmth of your email nurture sequence, the authenticity of your YouTube testimonials, and, yes, the likelihood of your TikTok appearing on someone's "For You" page. It's brutal. It's bewildering. And it's also incredibly exciting.

Because here's the truth: in this sea of sameness, schools that understand their story, and are brave enough to tell it well, will always stand out.

So not only are Millennials and Gen Z being influenced by what is happening online, their kids are now making the decisions. These are our current Year 4s, Year 5s, etc all the way to current Y10s, my daughter Emma in fact. They are called Gen Alpha, and they are defined by technological devices like smartphones, tablets, video games, driverless trains, autonomous cars, and smart speakers. This technology has only been developed within their generation, and it is all they have ever known. It has also been taken up quicker than ever before. While radio took 38 years to reach 50m users, the TV took 13 years, the iPod just 4 years, the

internet three years, Facebook just one year, the Pokémon Go phenomenon took 19 days while Chat GPT took just 7 days to reach 50m users.

This relationship with technology has opened a whole new world of possibilities for these 'screenagers', including access to a wealth of knowledge, communication with people from all over the world, and new and innovative ways of learning and exploring. Whilst they are the youngest generation, they have brand influence and purchasing power beyond their years. They are the most materially endowed and empowered generation ever and have been shaped in an era of individualism and customisation. They are shaping the social media landscape through TikTok and Snapchat and are the popular cultural influencers and energy consumers.

However, this doesn't mean we should panic. It means we should adapt. It means we must move from control to curation, from broadcast to conversation, from prestige to personality. And yes, it means you may occasionally need to convince your SLT that a vertical TikTok video shot by a Year 10 pupil with shaky hands is actually better for brand trust than a £3,000 cinematic drone sweep of your sixth form centre. Good luck with that conversation.

I've seen it at my own school, the Royal Hospital School (RHS), a place steeped in naval tradition and historical prestige, but with a vibrant, progressive heart that pulses with creativity, diversity, and warmth. We recently overhauled our approach and began to embrace a storytelling approach - not just telling people what we do, but showing them who we are, through the voices of our pupils, staff, and wider community, and engagement transformed. Prospective families didn't just enquire; they began to feel something. These haven't just generated engagement - they've sparked emotion. And that's the game. Engagement is the metric; emotion is the goal.

But let's take a step back. Why are we here? Why this sudden urgency to reimagine school marketing? Why all the noise about AI and shifting parent expectations and the collapse of third-party chocolate cookies? Because, quite simply, we are in a new era of trust. We are no longer living in an information age. We are living in a discernment age. People don't just want facts, they want truth. They want alignment. They want to know whether your values match theirs before they even look at your results table.

Which brings me to AI - the acronym that now sits uninvited in every conversation, strategy, staff meeting, and occasionally, your dinner party. It's either the saviour of marketing or the destroyer of originality, depending on which blog you read. In truth, it's neither. AI is a tool. A powerful one. A game-changer, yes. But it's not the story, it's the spreadsheet.

So, what do we make of AI, as school marketers? Here's the good news: AI isn't the end of your job. It's the beginning of a new chapter. According to the 2025 State of Marketing, marketers using AI tools report a 143% increase in web traffic and a 99% rise in inbound leads. Used wisely, AI doesn't replace human connection yet - it enables more of it. It frees up time by doing the heavy lifting. It helps you write, edit, analyse, schedule, and optimise. It can write five versions of a caption in five seconds. AI is everywhere. AI can now generate captions, create campaign calendars, dub videos repurpose blogs into reels, create images, and analyse sentiment data, and all this before you've finished your morning flat white. It's useful, it's

powerful, and it's here to stay. But and this is important, it must be your co-pilot, not your compass. Let AI accelerate your process. Don't let it replace what you know in your gut. It can't replace your voice. It can't understand what it means when the Housemaster quietly tells you that a pupil has just achieved something remarkable, and you know - *you just know* - that's the story to lead with this week.

What AI does brilliantly is amplify. It accelerates. But it is the *soul* of your content that will always make the difference. And that soul, that spark, that essence, comes from your people. Your pupils, your staff, your parents. Use AI to support that, not substitute it. Some schools are already experimenting boldly. One I know used AI to identify the most engaging words in pupil blogs and used that language to inform their homepage redesign. Another trained an AI chatbot to answer admissions FAQs — freeing up their team to focus on meaningful conversations with high-intent families. It's about balance.

Because here's what the audience wants: Personality. Relevance. Clarity. They want to know what you believe in. And, increasingly, they want to see that through the lens of someone like them. That's why creator-led content - think pupil takeovers, parent videos, alumni reels - is outperforming institutional content across nearly every platform.

Now, if AI is the new toolkit, then authenticity is the new strategy.

Authenticity is, in fact, the new currency. Because in a world overrun by AI, the human will always win. Or rather, the human story will. 76% of marketers, according to recent research, say that authentic, scrappy, human content now outperforms high-end production. That's music to our ears, surely? You don't need a film crew. You need a smartphone, a story, and a sense of what matters. That teacher laughing uncontrollably during a school play rehearsal? Gold. That Year 8 student explaining what makes your school feel like home? Viral potential. That quiet, reflective moment after the Remembrance Day ceremony? A post that brings parents to tears.

Remember the days of "voice of the Head"? Now it's the voice of the pupil, the parent, the catering manager. That's not a downgrade; it's a deepening of trust. And when that content is raw, imperfect, even lightly chaotic, all the better. Because perfection is the enemy of authenticity. And remember, trust is the new prestige.

Some of the most successful campaigns I've seen recently came from small teams using AI to repurpose raw school content into multichannel campaigns: an open morning article turned into six Instagram tiles, three reels, a LinkedIn thought piece, and a parent email sequence. That's smart marketing. But the core of it still came from a real human moment, told well. AI didn't write the story. It simply helped it travel.

A great example comes from an international school in Hong Kong that I visited last month. The school gave its Year 12 students control of their TikTok account for a week under the theme "A Day in the Life." The brief was simple: show the school from your point of view. The results? Hundreds of thousands of views, a huge spike in enquiries, and, most notably, parents saying, "It just felt so real." That's the sweet spot: resonance, not reach. But authenticity doesn't mean amateur. It means intentional. It means knowing your voice, staying true to

your values, and building trust over time. It means showing the lived experience of your school, not just the brochure version. And yes, it means sometimes being a little braver than you're used to.

Speaking of bravery, let's talk about community.

Not just in the digital sense, but in the cultural sense. Because in 2025, community is not just a warm-and-fuzzy word. It is your most valuable asset. And it's not something you *build* once and forget about - it's something you *nurture* every day. That means empowering others to speak, share, amplify.

According to the 2025 Global Social Media Trends report, 85% of marketers say building an active online community is crucial to brand success and brand health. Why? Because communities create loyalty. They create credibility. And, most importantly, they create conversations that convert into action. This is especially true in education, where relationships and reputation travel through networks of parents, alumni, pupils, and local connections. Your community is your best marketer, your most trusted voice, and your greatest resource.

Your school's brand is not what you say it is. It's what other people say when you're not in the room, or when they are, and they're filming. And those people — your parents, your alumni, your pupils, are already telling your story. The question is: are you helping them do it well?

Parents trust other parents. Pupils trust other pupils. Alumni trust each other. So, let's empower them. Create platforms, invite contributions, celebrate user-generated content. Hand over the mic. Encourage pupil podcasts, parent blogs, staff diaries. Invite them to share. Because the schools that thrive will be the ones that co-create their brand with their communities, not just impose it on them. We had a boarding house parent who shared a short video about midnight snack traditions — it got more views than our professional welcome video. Why? Because it felt honest, joyful, and entirely human. One of the most effective campaigns I've seen recently was a crowdsourced "Why I Chose This School" campaign — parents recorded short, unscripted testimonials on their phones. No film crew. No scripts. Just honesty. And it worked. Because trust doesn't need a filter.

And here's something we don't say enough: the school marketer cannot, and should not, do this alone. Marketing needs to be a *whole-school culture*, not a silo, not just a department. Everyone in your school should feel like they own a piece of the brand. From the receptionist's welcome to the newsletter tone, from the caretaker's greeting to the Twitter post by the Head - it all adds up. They're not just part of the school. They are the brand. I once overheard a parent say that their decision to send their child to a particular school came down to how they were greeted on a rainy Tuesday morning by the security guard. Marketing isn't what you say about your school. It's what people feel about your school, and every interaction counts.

And Heads, we're not exempt! In fact, increasingly, we are the brand. Our visibility, our voice, our tone on social media, our willingness to be open and responsive - these things matter. If

the Head's LinkedIn profile is silent, the assumption is not neutrality, it's absence. We must lead with values. And we must be seen. Check out the following colleagues on LinkedIn and see how they are shaping the narrative – Melissa McBride, Tom Rogerson, Barry Copper, Guy Ayling and Christine Cunniffe.

So how do we create a culture of marketing in our schools?

Start with leadership. If the ELT sees marketing as “just social media” or “the people who design the open day banners,” then we've got work to do. Marketing is reputation. Marketing is recruitment. Marketing is retention. It is as strategic as finance and as critical as curriculum. Bring marketing into the heart of strategic planning. Give marketers a seat at the leadership table and trust their instincts. Let them shape not just the story, but the direction of travel. At RHS, and at DLD College London before that, the Directors of Marketing sat on ELT – there was no question about it. Their knowledge and insight are crucial in strategic decision making.

And to the marketers in the room: don't wait for permission. Speak up. Share your data. Tell your stories. Ask to present at SLT. Show how marketing impacts every corner of school life, from boarding numbers to staff recruitment to community partnerships.

Now, let's not ignore the big shadow looming over all of us: exhaustion and burn out. The pace of change is relentless - the endless content demands, the pressure to perform on platforms you didn't grow up using, it's a lot. You can't do it all. And you shouldn't. And if you're feeling exhausted, overwhelmed, or slightly tempted to throw your phone in the nearest water park, you're not alone. In fact, you're human. Instead, we need to move from more to meaningful. From chasing every trend to choosing what's true. From trying to be everywhere to being exactly where your audience needs you. You need to know which one's matter to your community. And most of all, you need to build a strategy that is *sustainable*. One that allows for experimentation, reflection, rest.

Take social scheduling, for example. Nearly two-thirds of marketers now post less frequently than they did two years ago, but with far greater impact. Why? Because they're focusing on quality, not quantity. They are sharing content that sparks conversation, not just applause.

A brilliant example comes from a girls' school in London that scrapped its daily Twitter schedule and instead focused on two powerful posts a week. One featured a student's personal reflection on overcoming public speaking fears; the other was a behind-the-scenes photo from the staff pantomime. Engagement tripled. Enquiries went up. The school felt more *\*alive\** online. Because the future of school marketing is not about more. It's about better. It's about deeper. It's about meaning.

And so, we come full circle, back to authenticity. Back to trust. Back to the idea that what we are really doing, every time we send a tweet, or edit a reel, or craft an admissions journey, is inviting someone into a story. A story of education, of transformation, of hope. And that is sacred work.

What does the future look like? What do we do with all this? How do we lead our schools through the noise? First, we must embrace the mess. Marketing in this age is not a linear

funnel. It's a web of micro-moments - someone sees a reel, forgets about it, then hears from a friend, then visits your website, then sees your Head speak on LinkedIn, then bumps into one of your pupils on a train. You cannot control the journey. You can only show up, consistently, in ways that build credibility.

That means strategy. That means training. That means creative bravery. And yes, that means saying no to some things so you can say a better yes elsewhere.

It also means looking outside education. Some of the best inspiration I've seen has come from hospitality, retail, and even sport. I believe that education can learn a great deal from the best marketing practice in other sectors — especially those that have undergone rapid digital transformation.

Let's take hospitality, for example. Hotels no longer win customers by describing amenities. They do it by curating experiences. They sell the feeling of walking into a quiet, well-lit room after a long journey. They understand that details matter - the speed of the check-in, the tone of the welcome email, the scent in the hallway.

Likewise, higher education institutions have pioneered the use of data-rich CRM journeys, dynamic video prospectuses, international alumni influencer campaigns, and virtual engagement platforms. These are transferable lessons. And schools are ripe for them.

Of course, the reality on the ground is that you're often doing all of this with limited time, resources, and, occasionally, leadership buy-in. I get that. I've worked in schools where the marketing office was next to the boiler room and shared a printer with the PE department. But even there, even in the mess and the multitasking, there is magic. Because every day, you see the story unfold. The child who learns to speak up. The teacher who stays behind. The parents who find a second home.

You are the ones who turn that magic into meaning. And in 2025, that's more than a job, it's a form of leadership.

So, to close, here's what I want to leave you with; some take aways.

First, stay curious. The landscape will keep shifting - platforms, tools, algorithms. You don't need to master them all. But you do need to stay open. Test. Tinker. Learn. And be okay with getting it wrong sometimes. I hope you'll remember that marketing is not about perfection. It's about connection. That people don't want polished, they want present. That your most powerful stories are not the ones that win awards, but the ones that win hearts.

Second, stay human. The pressure to automate, scale, optimise - it's real. But the joy, the laughter, the real stuff - that's what people remember. That's what makes them choose *you*. I hope you'll resist the urge to automate everything and remember the joy of storytelling. That moment when a pupil describes their favourite lesson. That teacher who stayed late to help with coursework. That quiet kindness in the lunch queue. Capture those moments. Celebrate them. Share them.

Third, stay strategic. Elevate your voice internally. Make the case. Show the impact. The schools that thrive in this era will be the ones that invest in marketing not as decoration, but as direction. I hope you'll work with your Heads and SLTs to build a culture where marketing is seen as central to school life, not just a decorative layer on top. Where budgets are respected, creativity is protected, and your role is seen not as promotional, but transformational.

And finally, stay proud. You are not just posting content. You are shaping perception. You are inviting families into something extraordinary. You are, quite literally, changing lives. And I hope you'll laugh too. This work is hard, yes. But it's also joyful. It's full of character and colour and community. And every now and then, you deserve to step back and say: "We did that. We told that story. We made that family feel something."

And you're doing it all while still being asked to fix the website menu, proof the Head's newsletter, and take photos at the summer concert. You are heroes. And you are very much seen. In the end, the future of school marketing won't belong to those with the biggest budgets or the most advanced tools. It will belong to those who remember what this is really about: trust, truth, and the transformative power of education.

And so, as we look to the future - a future filled with AI, algorithms, automation, and analytics, let us remember this:

We are not just marketers. We are memory-makers. We are not just filling places. We are opening doors. We are not just telling stories. We are shaping futures.

So, let's market with courage, with curiosity, with humanity, and with just enough chaos to keep it interesting.

Thank you and keep telling the story.

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