

Long-term support and success of a statewide longitudinal data system (SLDS) happen only when its stakeholders are familiar with what the system does, understand how it benefits them, and recognize the value of its outputs. This publication provides a starting point for state leaders seeking to create a brand for their SLDS and promote the system to stakeholders. It outlines several basic components of a branding and promotion strategy and offers additional resources that explore related communications topics in more depth.

Why Are Branding and Promotion Important?

Branding is not only about creating a logo or a memorable acronym: a brand is the cumulative system of visual, linguistic, and experiential elements that define the SLDS in a user’s mind. Therefore every interaction a user has with the system—from logging into a dashboard to taking part in a stakeholder meeting to reading a news article about the SLDS—contributes to the system’s brand. Likewise, promotional activities cannot be limited to one-way communications such as press releases. Promotion must be an ongoing effort to engage with stakeholders in ways that affirm the SLDS’s relevance and value to them. Taken together, branding and promotion allow stakeholders to recognize when they are interacting with the SLDS and provide them with a background of information to draw on when considering the system.

Although they are not exhaustive, the following six steps offer a framework for SLDS leaders as they undertake the branding and promotion of their SLDS.



Figure 1. SLDS Branding and Promotion

1. Develop a Visual Brand

Visual elements are some of the most recognizable features of a product brand and provide users an immediate cue that they are reading, using, or participating in something related to the SLDS. The visual brand creates a distinctive look and feel for SLDS products, tools, and communications. The visual brand might include

- the system’s formal name;
- the SLDS logo;
- color and typography schemes;
- product templates; and
- a slogan and mission statement.

For the highest impact, elements of the visual brand need to be applied consistently across all products and tools related to the SLDS. Create a branding and style guide that includes all of the visual elements; this will serve as an easy reference for those responsible for using and implementing the brand.

2. Create Thoughtful Messaging and Project Language

The words used to describe the SLDS are as important as the visual brand. Messaging goes beyond a single slogan and mission statement; it gives project leaders, stakeholders, and advocates a common language to understand and talk about the project. Messaging products might include

- “boilerplate” text describing the project for reports, websites, or other publications;
- elevator speeches to explain and promote the SLDS to various audiences; and
- talking points for answering common questions about the SLDS.

Think through the language that accurately describes the SLDS—is it a data warehouse, or a comprehensive education information resource? Also think through language to avoid when talking or writing about the system. For example, terms like “student tracking” or “data collection” can be politically sensitive and might not help the project.

3. Implement a Communications Plan

Consistent and effective communications are essential to successful promotion of the SLDS. A communications plan covers the array of communications products and media that will be employed to spread information about the SLDS and solicit input from a variety of stakeholder audiences. The communications plan helps leaders keep stakeholders informed about project milestones and new products while also controlling the release of public information about the system.

States have used a variety of internal and external communications strategies to keep stakeholders involved with the SLDS. These strategies might include news releases, regular newsletters, meetings with stakeholders, conferences and training sessions, webinars, websites, and social media. The communications plan will identify frequency, format, and target audiences for each strategy. Be aware that many public-facing communications activities, like social media accounts, invite ongoing public participation and create an expectation of regular updates. Before starting a communications activity, make sure the staff time, expertise, and content needed to keep up with it are available.

4. Think Outside the SLDS Box

Consider innovative ways to use the SLDS and its data. When properly managed, public initiatives with wide audiences present opportunities to increase awareness and involvement with the system outside the primary data users. Sometimes tying the SLDS to other efforts, such as prominent statewide educational initiatives, can also help increase visibility and understanding of how the system

supports the state’s education goals. It can also create a greater sense of transparency about the work being done.

5. Bring Partners on Board with Branding and Promotion Efforts

Make sure partner agencies, system users, and other stakeholders understand their role in the branding and promotion strategy. Share relevant templates, branding guidelines, elevator speeches, and talking points with appropriate stakeholders. Walk them through how to use each tool.

Also, keep an eye on what stakeholders and other groups are saying about the system, whether it supports or does not support the overall project message and brand. This will help gauge whether branding is being applied consistently or if new training resources or talking points are needed to clear up misunderstandings.

6. Keep Improving the Process

Is your system’s brand recognizable? What do people know and think about the system? It is important to evaluate which branding and promotion activities are working and how less effective activities can be altered or improved. Feedback can be gathered directly from users, through public comments, by examining online user metrics, or by employing other feedback sources. In some cases a more formal survey of stakeholders can provide more comprehensive and systematic information on brand recognition, awareness of the SLDS, and use of the system by specific audiences.

Above all, pay attention to whether the system itself performs as advertised and allows users to reach their goals. In addition to addressing technical problems that arise, consider how branding and promotion efforts shape stakeholder expectations for the system and whether they can or should be modified to better manage those expectations. Ultimately the system’s ability to live up to its promise will be the primary factor determining how stakeholders view the SLDS and how they engage with it.

Additional Resources

SLDS Issue Brief: Elevator Speeches

http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slds/pdf/Brief6_Elevator_Speeches.pdf

SLDS Sustainability Guide

http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slds/pdf/sustainability_guide.pdf

Stakeholder Communication: Tips from the States

http://nces.ed.gov/programs/slds/pdf/best_practices.pdf

Traveling Through Time: The Forum Guide to Longitudinal Data Systems

Book II: Planning and Developing an LDS

<http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2011/2011804.pdf>

For more information on the IES SLDS Grant Program or for support with system development, please visit <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/SLDS>.