

Supporting Student Success Through Industry Outreach

Sheilamary Koch

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Student Chandler Norton working on his award-winning gaming chair. (Image courtesy Mark Smith/Reed-Custer High School)

“I learned early in my career that I alone did not bring enough to the table to ensure the success of my students,” explains Mark Smith, an industrial arts teacher at Reed-Custer High School in Illinois. “I needed to develop relationships with people outside the education system that are passionate about educating the next generation of skilled employees.” In addition to the six classes he teaches, Smith actively markets the work his students do — successfully bridging the gap between the classroom and industry. Over 20 years of consistent outreach has certainly paid off. Smith gets regular media exposure and is now sought out to inspire other educators to market their own programs. The impact of such recognition is quite tangible. People from industry have generously given technical advice, career guidance, mentoring, equipment donations, financial support as well as internship and career opportunities. In addition, classes have enjoyed a wide variety of field trips and site visits, attended trade show and participated in webinars thanks to these connections. For example, students virtually attended a [Careers in the School](#) event in late February and are looking forward to a virtual fieldtrip to the Egg Collective in New York. All this input from industry has helped launch many of his students into

successful careers. As one former student who majored in computer-aided drafting and design (CADD) in college puts it, “Without Mark Smith, I would have never made it past high school. He’s opened doors to many opportunities for me.”

Encouraging students to build a professional presence online

Smith not only models networking for his students through his own outreach, which includes weekly posting on several social media [platforms](#), email newsletters and press releases, he makes online marketing mandatory for students. As freshmen in their Orientation to Technology class, each student sets up an ePortfolio that involves creating five pages with text and photos and adds a new page in each subsequent class. By the time they’re close to graduation and preparing to interview for internships and jobs, they have [substantial ePortfolio](#) that demonstrates the scope of their experience, builds credibility and shows what they’re passionate about. Smith also encourages them to set up a LinkedIn profile to further develop a professional online presence. “More and more recruiters are turning to social media to support and aid recruiting efforts,” Smith explains. “It’s never too early to start networking. It matters who you know and who is aware of what you are doing.”

Keeping industry abreast of what’s happening in the classroom

Thanks to Smith’s efforts, not only do kids see what’s going on in various areas of industry, professionals get a glimpse at what students are doing in their high school industrial arts classes. “Typically, no one knows what is going on in the classroom/shop unless you have a son or daughter in the school system,” explains Smith. His reasoning for keeping industry informed is multifold. To begin with, many companies want to contribute to the education of their potential future workforce. Over the last 20+ years, his classroom/shop has received generous donations of tooling, woodworking equipment, power tools, finish, abrasives, spray equipment, stains, training materials and spray room materials. Secondly, industry connections can also validate that skills students are learning are directly relevant to what’s currently taking place in their businesses. Smith shared that he recently had to complete a Career and Technical Education Comprehensive Local Needs Assessment for the state that required him to show industry support for what he’s teaching. Within 72 hours of putting out the call to his industry supporters, 14 had submitted letters. Finally, based on the fact that companies are constantly on the lookout for competent interns and employees, updating those contacts regularly on student undertakings and successes builds their confidence in the level of students and graduates coming from a particular high school program. For example, Smith now has a list of over 40 local and national companies calling for his students as interns and employees. Some current high school students have even landed paid after-school and summer work in their field of interest — a far cry from the typical fast food or retail job.

Marketing your program as an educator

If you’re embarking on the process of building an online presence for your program, Smith recommends starting out with one thing, such as developing an email to your contact list, a small press release once a month, or setting up an account on one social media channel. For him, LinkedIn has brought the best results overall. It will take an initial investment of time thinking about what you want to say and what hashtags to use. But once you’ve got the ball rolling and have established your method, pattern, contacts and information it’s easier, explains Smith, who reports that he now spends less than 10

minutes a week posting on social media. “You can set up LinkedIn to post to your Facebook page or Instagram so you have multiple avenues you’re posting to without really doing much more work.” Anything that involves more time like a press release or written interview, he saves. All this effort goes to building up resources that he can tweak a bit and reuse in the future. As for the secret sauce in Smith’s successful marketing efforts — thanking anyone and everyone who’s ever lifted a finger to help the program or the students. Among the methods he employs for doing that are Thank You videos and Thank You certificates. As he tells educators in his presentations, “No one is ever thanked too much in our culture!”

About the Author



Sheilamary Koch has written professionally for over 20 years and is increasingly fascinated by the striving and accomplishment of people from diverse walks of life. Through her articles and blogs, she highlights their positive contributions with the intention of connecting and inspiring people from down the hall and around the world.

For nearly 15 years, she immersed herself in a hands-on learning experience as an English and art teacher in Mexico. Along with writing, she leads yoga classes and practices art. Connect with Sheilamary on Twitter @sheilamary67.