

what's working

building an online connection



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Match.com may have the corner on web-based romance, but Albertans in the K-12 education system looking to connect with professionals who share a passion for organizational health and wellness are finding another site they love: The Sandbox.

The Alberta School Employee Benefit Plan (ASEBP) launched The Sandbox in October 2015 as a collaborative space that brings together wellness champions to discover resources, share ideas and discuss best practices.

Participants in The Sandbox include school jurisdictions, partner groups, associations and anyone who has a stake in comprehensive school health in Alberta, said Gillian Woroniuk, communications program manager at ASEBP.

“The only caveat is that it’s not a place to sell or promote products,” she added. “The big draws for registering in The Sandbox are being able to comment on blogs and participate in the forum. But anyone can view, read and download resources and participate that way.”

The site continues to add new registrants every month, and it helped ASEBP win an award of excellence from the International Association of Business Communicators.

Through planning, communication, research and data-driven analyses, ASEBP is bringing together players from across the province to help them make vital professional contacts and strengthen working relationships in a collaborative environment. Following are five rules to live by for organizations looking to build an online connection.

1. Pop the Question

As with most relationships, it’s important to start by asking questions. In the summer of

2014, ASEBP surveyed partners and a sample of school jurisdictions to find out what they wanted and valued.

“The process by which we developed The Sandbox was as important as the actual product, because these were new partners,” said Shandy Reed, director of health strategies and stakeholder engagement at ASEBP. “Folks hadn’t been looking at a health and benefits company as a regular player in the area of comprehensive school health. We had to prove we were going to be a good partner to these groups.”

Reed added that asking partners to work on the project from the beginning was important in laying the foundation for longer term success.

“We discovered a high amount of value placed on the opportunity to collaborate and network,” Reed said. “We also asked about features that would encourage participation and found the same top three or four answers. Those were used as the basis to help build this site.”

2. Follow a Splashy Intro With Strong Communication

The Sandbox launched in October 2015, and ASEBP was ready to attract registrants. Ever Active Schools, an ASEBP partner, runs Shaping the Future, an annual event promoting healthy school communities. The 2016 event took place in January, and that timing created an enticing opportunity.

“If you registered for The Sandbox in the first month, you were eligible to win a free registration to Shaping the Future. This was a big initial draw,” Woroniuk said. “Our target for The Sandbox was to get 300 registrants by the end of year one. We surpassed that in the first six weeks.”

ASEBP continued to communicate about The

Sandbox from different angles. It was important to get buy-in and make sure school jurisdictions viewed The Sandbox as a valuable tool, Woroniuk noted.

New registrants would receive a letter, a shareable link to The Sandbox that could be used for intranet ads, and an e-card invitation that made it easy to invite others to join.

“We were communicating with the school jurisdictions and trying to integrate it into the top levels,” Woroniuk said. “We provided them with information on who the players were, who the partners were and how their wellness staff could integrate with the site.”

Reed also noted the importance of promoting from within. “A really important step was making sure our own staff took ownership for The Sandbox and its success,” she said. “We needed them to continue to contribute, to refer people to it, to use it as part of their day-to-day work. Gillian launched a big party where staff had a chance to play in The Sandbox and work through all the functionality. We created tent cards for their office spaces to remind them of what they could find in The Sandbox and who might be interested in it.”

3. Be Resourceful

After drawing initial interest, organizations need to have the right resources to keep people coming back. The Sandbox resource section is organized around steps a health promotion support person might take to create comprehensive wellness strategies for a school jurisdiction—securing leadership support, organizing resources and staff, creating committees to guide the work, assessing the health state or interests of school employees, and creating an action plan.

A blog, updated weekly, covers topics like mental health, leadership resilience, physical activity, nutrition and how to build social connections.

The site also presents sample activities and promotional ideas, including posters, manuals, video tutorials and pre-populated templates; ways to evaluate and report on efforts; and how to keep committee members engaged.



Sample magnet from ASEBP communications.

4. Celebrate Success

An online platform can create internal and external success. Both are worth noting for the organizational value they bring.

“The Sandbox has become a really important tool for our health promotion staff, a group of five or six people who work with school jurisdictions across the province,” Reed said. “The Sandbox allows them to reach out, share information and resources, and connect people to one another without having to be on site for every event. It has succeeded in giving us a bigger virtual reach and expanding the impact of those five or six people working in a rather large geographic area.

“We also had an example where a school jurisdiction had posted in The Sandbox forum about a full-day event focused on staff and workplace wellness, some of the speakers they had, what the feedback was and how they arranged it,” Reed added. “That post generated interest from other wellness champions in the province, and then they reached out for details on the planning committee, leadership support and funding ideas. As a result, we’ve seen staff wellness days spread to other school jurisdictions across the province.”

5. Take a Look at Yourself

“Every month, our communications team generates a list of meaningful statistics to help us identify site engagement, potential patterns and the most popular resources and blogs,” Reed said. “The number of registrants every month continues to climb. Matching that is the number of e-news subscribers. Our session duration continues to be really healthy, and we have almost an equal mix of new and returning visitors each month.”

This information allows ASEBP to identify what's working and plan for future directions. “What we're learning is

that people seem to really like ASEBP-created resources. For the 11th month in a row, our poster templates continue to be the most popular resource accessed,” Reed said. “It hints that school jurisdictions are looking to us as a credible resource of helpful, thoughtfully designed products. And that's what we're aspiring to every day.”

Conclusion: Remain Open to New Developments

Judging by a variety of metrics, ASEBP is finding success with The Sandbox. Internally, the organization is expanding its reach and impact across Alberta and beyond. Externally, comprehensive school health professionals across the province are finding a space to connect, share and learn.

However, as Woroniuk noted, success can come in different forms—and it may not match what you first envision.

“Often, you're wading into uncharted territory,” Woroniuk said. “Look at how people use the site, instead of being too prescriptive about what you think success should look like. In the beginning, people weren't connecting with the forum the way I had anticipated. But we started looking at the statistics. People are reading The Sandbox and connecting with it. Our forums are promoted through our monthly e-newsletter, and those are being read in huge numbers. We're not seeing drop-offs. That feedback—to see those numbers and statistics—has always been a key driver for me. Be open to where the audience takes you and to changing those success markers.”



Sample magnet from ASEBP communications.