

Creating a Marketing Plan

It is no secret that marketing offers some very difficult and tricky tasks. Part of the difficulty stems from the unpublished fact all departments within a school are in a sense part of marketing. Everything that touches a family member is marketing or to phrase it another way, marketing is everything that a family member thinks about your school. When marketing a Catholic school, the best marketing plan creates positive word-of-mouth from students, parents, and alumni. It encourages prospective students to learn more about your school and it better supports your retention efforts.

Talking about Marketing

Talking about marketing is easy. You can easily engage in conversation about marketing with anyone by asking these four simple questions:

1. What type of student does your school target or who is the ideal student you want to attract?
2. What do you do for that student?
3. How do you do it?
4. Why do you do it better than other schools?

You will be amazed at the answers you receive. Although these seem like simple questions, the answers can be difficult to articulate to other people.

Two Popular Marketing Buzz Words: Strategic and Tactical

You will also come across a few people who like to throw around marketing buzz terms. "Strategic" and "Tactical" are two terms that pop up often. The difference between the two terms is simple. Example: You decide to throw the party of the year. You decide you want plenty of food, beverages, and live music. This is an oversimplified example of strategic marketing. You then start thinking about the work involved with making this party come to life and the thoughts overwhelm you. You decide that all you want to do is show up at your party and have fun. Because of this, you must hire someone to cook the food, buy the beverages, book the bands, and clean your house. The people who do these tasks are considered tactical marketing people. They are the soldiers responsible for implementing the general's plan.

Marketing Planning

You would be surprised by the number of schools that do not have a marketing plan. If you do not have a marketing plan, it is very difficult to measure your success or failure over any given period. Not having a marketing plan also limits your ability to maximize your return on investment of your marketing dollars spent, which are used to increase enrollment and awareness for your school.

Who is Responsible for Creating the Marketing Plan?

Typically, the marketing plan is developed by a team of people including the Principal, Director of Admissions and Director of Communications. Because most primary schools do not have a Director of Communications, the responsibility usually falls on someone from the Management Team and the Principal. Please note that it is always good to ask advice from board members and other professionals outside of the school to gain a different perspective.

Marketing Plans are Nothing More than Good Common Sense

Although much ado has been made about writing marketing plans, there is really nothing to it except good common sense. A marketing plan is merely a written summary of your marketing goals, objectives, obstacles, and strategies.

Establishing Goals

First, your marketing plan should support the goals and objectives of your school. It is important that you review your school's business plan before writing your marketing plan. When defining the goals, objectives, obstacles, and strategy of your marketing plan, it is important for you to keep the following points in mind. A goal can be considered broad and qualitative in nature. An example of a goal could state the following: to be the largest Catholic School in Houston.

Establishing Objectives

After you have finished writing your goals, you define your objectives. An objective can be considered more specific, quantitative, and measurable in nature. An example of an objective could be to increase school enrollment by 10% from August 1, 2006 to May 31, 2007. This objective is measurable. Please note that if your objective is not measurable it is not a good objective.

Identifying Obstacles

Following the definition of your objectives, it is important to make a list of all the obstacles that will prevent you from accomplishing your objectives. An example of an obstacle could be a slowing economy or recent layoff from a major employer in Houston.

Determining Strategy

When you have listed all of your obstacles, it is time to determine your strategy for overcoming these barriers. At this point, you will want to use the information you have prepared from your Family Touch Point Analysis (explained below). An example of one strategy could use marketing dollars to invest in a radio commercial to increase awareness about why it is still important to invest in a Catholic education for your children during a sluggish economy. Remember, if you have identified all of the obstacles that stand in your way for achieving your objectives, and you have written a strategy to overcome these obstacles, you have a good marketing plan.

Family Touch Points Analysis

If you have never written a marketing plan before it is imperative that you conduct a family touch points analysis. A family touch point is defined as a point of potential contact with a family member that can be used to communicate and persuade. A family touch points analysis is a listing of all the ways in which your school and families interact. As previously stated above, all departments within your school are in a sense part of marketing. The monthly statement a family receives from the Business Office is in effect marketing because it touches the family. The tuition statement can leave a positive impression, negative impression, or no impression at all. At all times, remember that marketing is everything a family member thinks about your school.

Making a List of Family Touch Points

You need a list of family touch points to determine which marketing activities you want to include in your marketing plan. The purpose of your marketing plan is to use all these points of contact in a coordinated, strategic manner to gain and retain

students. Activities such as print advertising, direct mail, special events, outdoor advertising, promotional giveaways, open houses, radio, and television ads are just a few examples of family touch points for consideration. It is important for you to know which of these marketing activities touch your family the most and then coordinate all of these activities based on the order of importance into a coordinated plan of action. This becomes your marketing plan.

Marketing Communications

Communication is what good marketing is all about. How families perceive your school defines your reality.

Writing a clear positioning statement for your school: It is important that your school have a clear positioning statement that families easily relate to and understand. A positioning statement is a clear description of who your families are and how you want families to see your school's offering. Everything you do in marketing should work to convince families of the points your positioning statement contains.

Any marketing message that fails to explain what your school does that is special, and to give sufficient evidence to prove this point, is failing to position your school properly.

Writing a positioning statement is simple. First, you must review:

- What type of family you target
- What you do for that family
- How you do it
- Why you do it better than other schools

Next, complete the following with your own words:

Our school offers the following benefits: _____

To the following families (describe your targeted family): Our offering is better than other schools in the following way: _____

We can prove we are the best because of (proof/differentiation): _____

Proof / Differentiation:

When creating your school's marketing message, please keep in mind the top 10 reasons why parents select Catholic Schools for their children.

Catholic Schools:

Assist parents with the faith formation of their children

- Believe that all children can succeed
- Set high expectations with a challenging curriculum
- Hold a proven record of academic excellence
- Promote self-discipline with moral values
- Have caring and effective teachers
- Teach respect of self and others
- Instill the value of service to the community
- Prepare students to be productive citizens
- Provide a safe environment

The list of reasons above is based from research among parents of students who attend Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston. At the primary school level, our research shows that parents are the decision makers for their child's education. Once the child reaches fifth-sixth grade, they start exerting greater influence on where they want to go to school, particularly on the secondary level. Please keep in mind when developing marketing activities for a primary school; the audience is the parents while middle to upper school levels must appeal to both parents and students.

Focus Your Marketing Plan in Three Core Areas

Marketing your school consists of three functions:

- Recruiting new students
- Retaining existing students
- Maintaining relationships with alumni & friends

With few exceptions, every "customer" goes through the process of being a prospective student, a student, and then a graduate of your school. On the other hand, you have prospective parents, current parents, and parents of graduates. Older schools can have current parents who are also alumni of the school. All communication efforts (annual funds, capital campaigns, advertising, open houses, and parent/alumni publications) are subsets of these three functions.

Recruiting New Students

Your marketing efforts should attract appropriate students who will be best suited to grow and develop at the school. Strategies and action plans are designed to identify potential students and their families, and to institute activities that will cause them to apply and enroll, if accepted.

Retaining Existing Students

Your marketing efforts should focus on communicating how well the school is providing the environment and the program parents and students are seeking.

Maintaining Relationships with Alumni & Friends

Your marketing efforts keep this constituency well informed of what is going on with their alma mater. Strategies and action plans will include publications, fundraising and annual appeals.

Final Thoughts on Recruitment and Retention

Always review your recruitment and retention statistics and look for trends. Be sure to drill down to the grade level on retention. Compare your statistics with your peers at other schools to see how you are doing. Are there areas where you can improve?

Review the entire process of when you first contact a prospective student and how they inquire about your school — to the day the student begins to attend classes. Are things running smoothly or are there areas where you can improve? How are the conversion rates from one step to another?

Final Words on Marketing — Always Look from the Outside In

Without doubt, a good marketing plan along with properly crafted messages will compel families to spread positive words about your school within the community. In order to achieve such success you should always approach marketing from an outside in perspective. In other words, look through the eyes of families before rolling out a program, writing a letter, placing an ad in a paper, delivering a presentation at an open house, sending an email, etc. Never assume families will ever feel, understand, find value, take action, or remember anything you are offering. And if you consistently reduce complex subjects to their simplest terms while applying value in the mind of a family member — it will carry you a long way in your marketing efforts.