

12

STRATEGIES

to Keep Current Families Enrolled
and Grow Your School





CATALYST PROGRAM

Private schools that fail to think strategically about their enrollment goals often find themselves struggling with shrinking operating budgets, image confusion, sporadic marketing results, and numerous other issues. As enrollment shrinks, so does school morale and the critical word-of-mouth referral base. School administrators in this situation need more than a few good ideas—they need a coach with a plan to help them implement proven enrollment initiatives.

The Enrollment Catalyst program includes:

- › **A comprehensive assessment**
of existing enrollment and marketing efforts.
- › **Ongoing coaching and accountability**
conference calls with your Admissions Director, Marketing Director, and Head of School. In most cases, the conference calls will last 60 minutes and occur at least three times a month.
- › **Recommended best practice solutions**
for admissions, retention, internal marketing, external marketing, and web-based marketing.
- › **An online parent survey**
to measure parent satisfaction and explore key marketing and enrollment issues.
- › **Availability via phone or email between calls**

The coaching sessions cover:

ADMISSIONS • Goal setting, accountability, reporting, inquiry generation and follow-up, application generation and follow-up, yield strategies

RETENTION • Strategies, re-enrollment, customer service, transition grades, communications

MARKETING • Internal, external, web-based marketing strategies



About Rick Newberry

Rick Newberry, Ph.D., is the President of Enrollment Catalyst. Rick partners with school administrators to provide coaching and consulting in enrollment management and marketing systems, strategies, and solutions needed to reach their goals. The goal is to provide school leaders with effective marketing and enrollment strategies as well as staff accountability, direction and results needed to grow their enrollment.

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The Mark of a Great School

If a good school is measured in large part by its growth, what is the mark of a great school?

Great schools are known by engaged, committed families: the ones who come for the promise of an exceptional educational community and stay because they can't imagine finding anything better.

Satisfied parents won't leave, and they'll tell others about the superior experience they've had at your school. The result is healthy, sustained growth through a dedicated parent base and positive word-of-mouth — the best form of advertising you can never buy.

The twelve strategies outlined in this ebook will help you kick-start the word-of-mouth engine and create a coherent school marketing strategy. To provide some context for these strategies, however, let's begin with three R's of current families: *retention*, *re-enrollment* and *re-recruitment*.

- › **Retention** is the rate in which you are able to keep your current families enrolled.
- › **Re-enrollment** is the process of recommitting your families for next year.
- › **Re-recruitment** is the strategy, or strategies, that you put in place to influence and impact your retention rate. This is where the Twelve Strategies come into play.

When combined with a sustained, focused effort to recruit new families as well, these three "R's" work together to create a comprehensive enrollment strategy.

Retention is the rate at which you are able to keep your current families enrolled.

Retention: Shining the Spotlight on Success

One of the best ways to measure parental satisfaction is to track your **retention rate**, or the number of families who return each year. Because of this, what happens during **re-enrollment** is critical to the cumulative success of your school in the subsequent years.

Retention is the rate at which you are able to keep your current families enrolled. Ultimately, your goal should be an overall retention rate of 90% or higher, which indicates an exceptional level of loyalty, commitment, and satisfaction from your parent base.

How do you determine your retention rate?

A school's retention rate is the measurement of the relationship between the students eligible to re-enroll for the next year and those that actually enrolled.

Essentially, you should take the total number of students enrolled, less your graduates, to determine the number eligible to re-enroll. This is your available pool of students to return for another year. You could refine this further by using the number of student contracts offered for re-enrollment. Then, simply divide this total number by those students that actually enrolled:

$$\text{Retention} = \frac{\text{Returning Students}}{\text{Students Eligible to Return}}$$

Once you compute your retention rate, make sure you have this historical data available for your enrollment management strategy. Not only should you figure your overall retention rate, you can also take a look at retention by grade level or school division. If you know these trends, you will know better how to adjust your strategies in order to improve your retention rate so that you will have a great school with satisfied parents.

Re-enrollment: You Can't Afford to Lose a Student at Your School

A high retention rate at re-enrollment time is also a good way to forecast financial health in the coming year and an effective measure of how well your school fulfills its mission. Private schools exist to educate students. It's obvious, then, that without students, the mission of the school can't be fulfilled.

As you think about retaining your students and families for another year, have you ever considered the value of the students enrolled at your school?

Let's consider a parent with a Kindergarten student enrolled in your school. What does this family represent?

- › A potential student for your class next year
- › A future student for every grade level through your highest grade
- › A potential parent and future alumnus to tell others in the community about your school
- › More opportunity to accomplish your mission
- › An opportunity to make a difference in the life of a child during their key formative years
- › An opportunity to gain tuition revenue not only for this year but for the entire span of your school grades

Obviously, if this student leaves your school, significant revenue will be lost.

Consider the following illustration as it relates to this Kindergarten student enrolling in a K12 school:

If tuition is \$10,000 at your school, this child's enrollment will result in \$130,000 in tuition revenue (not including annual tuition increases and fees), from Kindergarten through 12th grade.

If the student leaves after Kindergarten, your school will have lost \$120,000 in tuition revenue. If the student leaves after 5th grade, \$70,000 is lost to your school. And, if your tuition is double or triple this illustrated amount, you can double or triple the revenue lost.

The bottom line is that your current families and students are essential to the mission of your school and to the needed revenue to accomplish this mission. If they leave, you will not only have lost a family and a student, you will have lost the reason for your mission and critical revenue that will be difficult to replace.

This is an important message to share with all of your faculty and staff. Everyone employed at your school must realize the value of a current student and then do everything they can to re-recruit them back for another year.

Re-recruitment:

Re-recruitment is the direct, intentional and proactive pursuit of your current families to re-enroll for another year through meaningful engagement. It is the activity that leads to retention and includes communication, programming, data collection and other internal marketing strategies.

Where can you start with “re-recruitment marketing” at your school? It is critical to begin with the foundation of a high quality school. A strong academic program and high parent satisfaction will lead to the retention of your families. Without this foundation in place, it will be difficult to influence retention at your school.

The following is my top twelve list of re-recruitment strategies to stop attrition and increase your retention rate.

Re-recruitment is the direct, intentional and proactive pursuit of your current families to re-enroll for another year through meaningful engagement.

PART 1 REORIENTING

Reorienting Your School Community Around Retention





1

ENLIST A RETENTION CHAMPION & INCLUDE EVERYONE IN THE EFFORT

While everyone has a responsibility for re-recruiting families back for another year, it is important to have a retention champion. The champion should lead the efforts as well as challenge and encourage everyone's involvement in the plan.

In most cases, this retention champion will and should be the Director of Enrollment. Notice that I use the title Director of Enrollment instead of Admissions. I believe that this is a more appropriate title as admissions focuses only on new families while enrollment includes both new and current families.

In the case of a large school, you might want to consider a full-time Director of Retention. When I was the executive director of enrollment management at Cornerstone University, one of my key positions was the Director of Retention. She was my retention champion as we worked together to lead the university towards a strong retention rate.

It's also critical for all faculty and staff members to realize their role in the re-recruitment effort. What they do for students day in and day out has the power to transform lives, and excellent faculty can be your best “advertisement” to your parents. In fact, most seasoned teachers will tell you that marketing for a school is a no-brainer. All it requires is the best classroom practices:

- › **Serve with excellence in your area of responsibility** – The best way to market your school is to ensure that everyone is doing the best job that they can in their area. From the custodian to the classroom teacher, everyone should focus on delivering excellence. The brand on the outside will only be as strong as the brand experience on the inside.
- › **Turn negative conversations into positive moments** – Your faculty and staff are on the front lines and will come in contact with parents and students on a daily basis. When negative conversations and situations arise, take time to listen, redirect, and provide solutions. In some cases, these negative conversations will need to be redirected to the administrative team.
- › **Tell stories about your school** – Every faculty and staff member can be an effective storyteller for your school—stories that communicate the successes in the lives of faculty, students and alumni. As these stories become a regular part of conversations, word-of-mouth will accelerate.
- › **Celebrate successes** – In a school environment, everyone likes to be acknowledged for their accomplishments. When you notice something that stands out in a colleague, parent or student, take the time to celebrate their success. A simple note, phone call or email could go a long way in creating a positive culture at your school. And, when the faculty and staff come together for their regular meetings, take time to celebrate with one another.

- **Welcome families and visitors** – The warmth of a smile, a friendly hello and a handshake can go a long way in providing a welcoming atmosphere on your campus. When a prospective family visits your classroom or walks by your area, take a moment and introduce yourself to them. Remember, without students and families, your school wouldn't exist!
- **Provide outstanding service** – The way we serve our parents and students can make a huge difference. Make it your goal to deliver outstanding service to your parents and students. It doesn't always mean that they are right; it does mean that we will be proactive and take initiative in serving our parents and students with excellence.
- **Make positive, personal connections** – Most of the time when a parent receives a call or email from a teacher or administrator, an issue regarding their child needs to be addressed. However, positive, personal connections can make a difference throughout the year. In fact, parents want to know how their child is doing at the school. From sending birthday cards to handwriting personal notes, faculty and staff can create a positive connection and memorable impression.
- **Work together** – The faculty and staff should work together as a team. When the team is unified, this effort is evident among the parents and students. When the lower school succeeds, the entire school wins. When the middle school succeeds, the lower school wins. The school team that is unified will make a difference in the enrollment and marketing efforts.





2

FOCUS ON THE TRANSITION GRADES

Families typically leave in the transition years between lower and middle and between middle and upper. You should make every effort to reach out to these families and to “sell” them on the next level.

Your re-enrollment strategy should focus on these transition grades. Some of the strategies that work well for schools include:

- › **Home Dessert Meetings** – Ask parents to hold a dessert “briefing” in their home to discuss the transition to the next level at your school. All parents in a transition grade would be invited to attend an event in the home of a current parent (preferably a parent from the next level). The Head of School and appropriate leadership to that level should provide an overview of the next level and allow for questions and concerns to be expressed.

- > **Next Year and Beyond or Fast Forward Meetings** – Hold informational meetings for parents at your school to gain an overview of the next grade level. This time should be used to sell the parents on the next year and beyond. Temple Beth Shalom Schools in Sarasota, Fla., refers to their meetings as “Next Year and Beyond” while Covenant Classical School in Fort Worth, Texas, refers to their meetings as “Fast Forward Meetings.”
- > **Step-up Days** – Hold “step-up” days for students in transition grades to experience what it will be like at the next level. You will want to give students an opportunity to hear from teachers, staff, coaches and students. You should also combine this with a fun activity (special cookout, basketball game, etc.) that is specific to the next level.
- > **Infographics** – Develop an info-graphic to highlight the “stats” for the next level in the school. Santa Fe Christian Schools recently designed an **infographic** to highlight their upper school experience and the result of the SFCS experience.

In all of these strategies, it is recommended that the implementation occur during October/November or January in order to maximize the impact of your effort.





3

INTERNAL MARKETING DURING RE-ENROLLMENT

Re-enrollment is more than a process; it is also a time to internally market the school. From the letter that is sent to introduce re-enrollment to key video messages, testimonials and banners, consideration should be placed on using this process to market your school and to focus on the parent's return on investment.

January and February is re-enrollment time for most schools. As you consider your re-enrollment efforts, the following strategies can help you re-enroll your families for another year:

Re-enrollment is more than a process; it is also a time to internally market the school.

- › **Packet** — Make sure the re-enrollment packet you send out sells your parents on why they should continue their enrollment at your school. Consider including a special printed newsletter that provides a state-of-the-school report, exciting news about the next school year and stories of students and alumni who represent your educational product. Also, consider sending your re-enrollment packet in a special envelope that stands out in the mailbox.
- › **Letter** — Most letters I have reviewed only communicate the deadlines and process for re-enrollment. Your letter should be from the head of school and provide a rationale for re-enrollment in a creative and interesting way. Consider writing a two to three page letter that creates some urgency and excitement about your school while sharing some stories about your alumni or faculty.
- › **Form** — If you aren't set up for online re-enrollment, which is the ideal, you should attempt to send a preprinted re-enrollment form or contract. By eliminating the hassle factor in completing a form with information you already know about the family, you will be able to make the process as easy as possible for your families.
- › **Meetings** — Reach out to current families that are “on the fence” regarding their re-enrollment decision by meeting with them or contacting them by phone. Your personal contact can be used to probe their satisfaction with your school as well as to deal with any issues that the parent has regarding continued enrollment.
- › **Calls** — In most cases, parents receive calls from a person at the school to either convey bad news about their child or to ask for money. Why not use the re-enrollment period to call your parents to encourage them to re-enroll? Even better, use a current parent to make this peer-to-peer connection.
- › **Thank you** — After a family enrolls, send them a personalized, handwritten note. This could be from the head of school, principal and/or admissions director. I highly recommend that the head of school make this personal touch to let the parent know how important they are as a member of the school community.
- › **Gift** — As an additional way to say thank you, give or send each parent and student a personal school-branded gift. Some ideas for this gift are a branded T-shirt, coffee mug, or car magnet, or a refrigerator magnet with next year's school calendar on it.



Automatic or Continuous Enrollment

Isn't it ironic that we ask our parents every year to tell us if they will be enrolling for the next school year?

Why do we ask all of our parents to re-enroll when most of them already plan to return?

Instead of an annual re-enrollment campaign, consider a new message: "once enrolled, always enrolled." Re-enrollment should be automatic.

Immanuel Christian School in Springfield, Va., takes this approach.

Diane Carnahan, Admissions Coordinator, outlines their strategy:

"Because about 85% of our families do re-enroll, we assume students will be returning and ask parents to let us know if they will NOT be re-enrolling or if they want to delay their decision. They are motivated by the fact that money will automatically be deducted if they do not respond. We have set up a web form for parents to respond electronically, so no paper exchanges hands and no checks need to be sent in to the office. They have a deadline to respond if they wish to opt out."

We set up the new year in our FACTS system for online payments and include all families. FACTS lets the parents know by mail or email (whatever method they have selected for the previous year) that a new year has been set up and they inform them of the date and amount of the automatic withdrawal. At the same time, we set up our database and automatically re-enroll all students for the next year. The system notifies us if people are not re-enrolling automatically because they anticipate a change, or if they are withdrawing."

If your retention rate is high, your school is a great candidate for this strategy.

PART 2 COLLECTING THE DATA

Measuring Parent Satisfaction for Better Engagement





4

GRADE YOUR FAMILIES

It helps to know which parents to target in your re-recruitment effort. By grading them on their likelihood to return, you can focus on those that are in question. The retention champion should lead this effort with your administration and faculty. Families that are graded as “on the fence” should be the focus in your re-recruitment effort.

Our schools run on grades. We grade our students on their homework, exams and report cards. While we constantly grade our students, have you ever thought about giving your parents a grade?

One grading system that has worked really well is the FMS system. One of my former supervisors while I was the Director of Enrollment Management at Cornerstone University in Michigan, Dr. Jack Powell, is credited with this system.

The following grades can be used to get a snapshot of your parents and their likelihood to re-enroll:

F = Firm

Based on everything you know, the family will return for another year.

M = Moderate

There are some concerns about this family returning to your school; they are “on the fence” and could go either way.

S = Shaky

It doesn't look good for this family to return to your school; every indicator leads you to conclude that they won't be returning next year.

Using this simple model, you should give every family in your school a grade of “F, M or S” based on their likelihood to re-enroll and return for another year. By doing this, you will be able to focus your efforts on retaining those families that you graded “M” in this process.

I recommend that you give your first grade to your parents in October or November. By doing this early, you will be able to identify the families “on the fence” that you should target in your personal contact. Then, you will want to grade your families on a monthly basis as you continue to review their situation and the results of your effort.

By taking this simple step, you will know better where to target your retention efforts and you can hit the ground running re-enrolling your families in the New Year.



5

CONDUCT AN ANNUAL SATISFACTION SURVEY

Measuring parent satisfaction on an annual basis should be an important component of your re-recruitment plan. This will help you pinpoint areas of satisfaction and dissatisfaction so that you can improve the experience and ultimately impact retention.

Because of this, I believe it is critical to conduct an **annual parent satisfaction** survey. As a school administrator, you need to know what parents think about their experience. This will help you better understand the current satisfaction level and any issues that you may need to address.

This parent satisfaction survey should include a combination of qualitative and quantitative questions.

The following are some examples of each question type.

Quantitative questions allow for a specific choice. This is usually measured numerically through a set of response options on a Likert scale. The following is an example of two quantitative questions:

I would recommend your school to friends in my community:

Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree

Please indicate your overall level of satisfaction with your child(ren)'s educational experience at your School:

Very Satisfied | Satisfied | Somewhat Satisfied | Neutral | Somewhat Dissatisfied | Dissatisfied | Very Dissatisfied

The first question uses a 5-point scale, and the second uses a 7-point scale. Based on the responses, a mean score for each question is computed.

I also use another question that asks the parents to rate their level of satisfaction with every area of the school (academics, faculty, technology, etc.). This is helpful to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the school, which can be ranked from highest to lowest.

Qualitative questions provide an open-ended format that allow the parent to freely express their thoughts and perspectives about the particular area you are addressing. These questions provide the “thick description” behind some of the quantitative questions. Instead of a mean, numerical score, you will receive sentences and paragraphs of thoughts from your parents.

The following are some examples of qualitative questions to ask:

- › What do you like best about your School?
- › What do you like least about your School?
- › As of today, do you plan for your child to graduate from your School? Please provide the reason(s) for your response.
- › Based on your experience, how could the leadership improve your School?

It is important to remember that open-ended questions provide an opportunity for the parent to respond in detail. Thus, the analysis of these responses becomes very important in order to understand patterns and themes rather than isolated comments from renegade parents. Unless the concern is truly a pattern, a random comment should be dismissed. For example, if 20 parents talk about the poor food choices available during lunch and only one parent complains about the carpool line, then the issue you need to address is the lunch program.

As you consider launching your parent survey, consider the following guiding thoughts:

Survey Timing – Parent surveys can be launched any time throughout the year. However, I've found that this type of survey works best either during the fall months of October and early November or late January through early March. By choosing one of these time periods, you will avoid the holidays, the end of the school year months and summer vacation—all of which will negatively affect your response rate. Once you decide on the timing of your survey, you should make this a part of your annual effort at this same time every year. An annual survey will enable you to compare satisfaction levels—your improvements and challenges—from year to year.

The Expected Response – I have found that a response rate at or around 40% is a great rate of return. Since parents are invested in your school, they are most likely to complete the survey, and the results will provide you with an excellent snapshot of your school's parent satisfaction level.

Online Delivery Options – You have two primary options for how you can conduct your survey (assuming that all surveys should be conducted online today!). First, you can certainly do this on your own. You can use an online program, such as Survey Monkey, to design and deliver your survey. The downside to this approach is that you are the one conducting the survey and parents may question its confidentiality and their anonymity.

Secondly, you can hire a company or use a standardized survey from [NAIS](#) or some other group to conduct your survey. In addition, you could also consider a survey that I have designed and regularly use with schools to measure parent satisfaction ([click here for more information](#)).

Regardless of the approach you take, an annual parent satisfaction survey should be an essential component of your retention plan.

Communicating Survey Results – Finally, you should communicate the survey results to your school board, faculty and staff, and parents. Unfortunately, this is one of the most overlooked steps that administrators fail to take. While the results are usually communicated to the board in a summary format, school leaders often fail to discuss the results with the faculty, staff and parents.

Parents are the most important group in which to communicate the results. Parents need to know that the effort they put into completing the survey has led to action. They want to know that they have been heard. It is also a great way to reinforce the overall, positive satisfaction level at your school back to your parents.

I typically recommend the following communication strategies:

- › Develop a summary document of the parent survey results for distribution to the parents, faculty, staff and board. This summary document should include the main findings, both positive and negative, as well as an action plan for moving forward.
- › Present the findings to the faculty, staff and board prior to reporting to the parents. This can be accomplished in a special faculty/staff meeting.
- › Mail the summary document with a personal letter to the parents and, if possible, present the findings in a parent meeting.
- › Communicate key findings and positive quotes on your school's website, on Facebook and during the re-enrollment effort. The results from the parent satisfaction survey should provide you with some great statistics and anonymous quotes to use on your website and in your Facebook updates.

PART 3 BUILDING BRIDGES

Reaching At-risk Families and Resolving Issues





6

REACH OUT “ONE FAMILY AT A TIME”

Through the exercise of grading your families (see #4), you now have a target list of those that are on the fence. You can reach out “one family at a time” to this target list of families to discuss their situations and to deal with any issues that might impact their future enrollment.

A practical and simple approach is to focus on one family at a time. I call this the “One Family at a Time” strategy. I know, it’s very original! The goal is to meet with your families in one-on-one, personal, individual meetings. Your administrative staff, board and other key members of your marketing and enrollment team should participate in this effort in order to distribute the meetings.

The following is a list of how you should prioritize your meetings:

- › Begin with families in your transition grades. These grades are where you will most likely lose students.
- › Focus on other families that your staff has identified as being on the fence.
- › During the meetings, you should seek to discuss the following issues:
 - › Overall satisfaction level at the school
 - › Perceived strengths and weaknesses of the school
 - › Plans for continuing next year
 - › Issues that might affect continued enrollment

This approach is really that simple. It will take time and personnel, but it will be well worth it in the end as you reach out one family at a time to make a difference in your school's retention effort.

One more thing: The best time to conduct these one-on-one meetings is anytime. Don't wait until it is too late. By meeting now, you will have more time to work on some of the issues raised and re-recruit these families back for another year.

The best time to conduct one-on-one meetings is anytime. Don't wait until it is too late. By meeting now, you will have more time to work on some of the issues raised and re-recruit these families back for another year.



7

ROLL OUT THE RED CARPET

Let's face it, the school market is very competitive. Parents have many choices when it comes to selecting a school for their child.

While it is essential to communicate and showcase your school's strengths and unique benefits, it is also critical for your school to stand out.

Exceptional customer service can help your school stand out in a crowded marketplace.



From the secretary to the faculty member to the administrator, everyone should serve your parents with excellence. One of the best resources on the topic of customer service is Donna Cutting's book, *The Celebrity Experience*, where she discusses how to roll out the red carpet for your customers — in our case, our parents.

In your context, you need to roll out the red carpet for your parents and students as the most important customers in your schools. You must do everything you can to provide outstanding service and create a memorable experience for them.

How can you do this? Consider these ideas:

- › Challenge faculty to send positive notes to parents about their child, rather than just sending out messages when the child is in trouble or is not doing well academically.
- › Treat everyone that walks through your door or calls your office with immediate priority and service. The way you respond and how you treat them will go a long way in how they feel about your school.
- › The Head of School can personally deliver birthday cards to students on their special day. Also, the Head of School should send a birthday card to parents. After all, everyone wants to be treated in a special way on their special day!
- › Send a personal note to a parent after they re-enroll thanking them for their continued commitment to the school and communicate how important they are to the community.
- › Include a thank-you gift, like a school-branded magnet for the car or refrigerator.
- › Change your voice message daily or weekly to say something like: “Thank you for your call. Today is Thursday, February 3rd, and I have several meetings on my schedule. However, your call is very important to me and I will get back to you today or before noon tomorrow.”
- › Do something unexpected and special for your students on Valentine's Day. The administration could personally deliver chocolate hearts to the students with a special message that says, “We love having you as a student at our school.”



- › While we are on the subject of chocolate, give your faculty and staff a “Pay Day” candy bar on payday with a card thanking them for investing in the mission of the school through their dedicated service.
- › Greet your parents in the carpool line and give them a school-branded mug with a special note inviting them to one of your upcoming small group coffee events.

This list barely scratches the surface for what you can do to roll out the red carpet for your parents and students. Go ahead, brainstorm your own list and work on implementing your ideas.

When you serve your current and prospective parents in an exceptional way or do something that is memorable, this creates an experience that will be talked about and passed on to others.

This is your best form of marketing—when you get your parents talking about your school based on what they actually experienced.

Take a moment and consider the overall experience and service that you give to your current and prospective parents. The following are some important questions:

- › Is your service exceptional?
- › Do you have service expectations for your faculty and staff?
- › Do you have a customer service creed?
- › Are you creating memorable moments for your parents and students?
- › What is the first impression of your school that a parent receives?

When you serve your current and prospective parents in an exceptional way or do something that is memorable, this creates an experience that will be talked about and passed on to others.



8

SEND PERSONAL NOTES

Everyone likes to receive a personal note acknowledging something positive.

In 2011, I had the opportunity to spend two days at Northside Christian Academy in Charlotte, N.C.

During one of my focus group meetings with the faculty and staff, they mentioned that they sent out personal, handwritten notes to parents at the end of the school year to communicate positive and encouraging things to parents about their children.

The result? An overflow of positive comments made from parents about the impact of these notes.

I remember back to my days as the Director of Admissions at Cornerstone University. One of the things that stood out about the president was the time he often took to write personal notes to the faculty and staff. Knowing that he would take time out of his busy schedule to write a personal note went a long way to encourage those around him. He also effectively used this strategy to write notes to donors and other key friends of the university.

Personal notes can and still do make a difference.

Today it is easy to crank out an email, text message or some other form of instant message. While these methods are a very important part of our communication strategy, I believe it is memorable to send personal notes.

Personal, handwritten notes can stand out. And, if everyone at your school is taking this approach, the multiplying impact can be exponential.

Let's say that you have seven members on your administrative team. What if each administrator wrote five personal note cards every week? This would result in 35 personal notes each week and 1,820 for the year for the team.

What if you expanded this initiative to your entire faculty and staff? Let's say that your school has 100 faculty and staff members writing five personal notes every week. This would result in 500 personal notes each week and 26,000 for the year.

What an exponential effect!

It's a rather simple and old-fashioned communication strategy. Yet, it is one that has profound impact and is not out-of-date.

And, it doesn't cost that much besides a few minutes, hand cramps, stamps and cards for every person at your school.

Think about the buzz this would create on your campus and in your community.

Think about the positive vibes from your current parents.

Think about a real word-of-mouth marketing strategy that can work at your school.

The power of a thank you can go a long way with your parents.



9

TELL REAL STORIES

Your first marketing priority is to tell your story to families internally. As you tell stories of your students, parents, faculty, coaches and alumni, you will reinforce the reason why parents should continue to invest in your school.

Recently, I had the opportunity to conduct several parent focus groups at an independent school.

During my focus groups, I typically ask parents the following questions:

- › What words or phrases best come to mind to describe the school?
- › What are the strengths of the school?
- › What are the weaknesses of the school?
- › What are the top three or four messages that you would communicate to a prospective parent to encourage them to consider this school?
- › What changes should be made to make this a better school?

In addition, I also like to ask the question, “What should the leadership do to better market the school in the community?”

While all of the responses to these questions are very important in this marketing research process, the response to this last question jumped out to me.

Can you guess how the parents answered this question?

Their response had nothing to do with the placement of ads, the school’s website or specific marketing strategies.

Their response focused on the need to communicate real statistics and real stories about the school.

Let me elaborate.

These parents suggested that the best approach to marketing the school is to communicate real statistics about the success of the school’s graduates wrapped around stories of real alumni going to the next level and beyond.

Think about this for a moment.

What these parents really think prospective parents want to hear are specific statistics and stories on the product—the result of the educational experience at that school.

I believe these parents are correct.

Prospective parents need to hear real stories of your graduates and how your school prepared them for success at the next level and in life. They need to hear the real statistics of your academic success and entrance rates into the next educational level. This is why the Santa Fe Christian Schools info-graphic mentioned earlier is such a powerful internal marketing tool.

Parents are looking for the return on their tuition investment at your school. What better way to communicate this potential return than through the real-life stories of your graduates! As these parents hear stories of your graduates, they will be able to better see the future impact that the school can have on their son or daughter.

Real stats and real stories need to be the focus of your school's re-recruitment effort.





10

COFFEE AND CONVERSATION

I love coffee. Starbucks is my favorite.

In fact, I wrote my dissertation in Starbucks. I would spend about three to four hours at a time writing in Starbucks alongside of my drink of choice—a quad grande Americano!

Your parents love coffee, too.

When I was head of school, I enjoyed meeting and connecting with parents at Starbucks and Panera (yes, I even ventured from my favorite). This setting provided an opportunity to get to know the parents on a more personal basis outside of the school walls.



Besides one-on-one conversations, I also scheduled regular coffee meetings with parents. During one period I put together a schedule of meetings that were held first thing in the morning, during lunch, and in the afternoon and evening. My goal was to provide varied meeting times for parents to sign up to meet with me. The conversations gave me an opportunity to update the parents on the school and to interact with their questions or issues.

It's important for a school's leadership, including the head and principals, to hold these meetings on a regular basis. You have to determine what works best for you at your school—whether monthly, quarterly or some other time interval. The key is that you provide an opportunity for parents to connect with the school.

By providing regular coffee and conversation meetings with parents you will have the opportunity to update them on the school and interact with their questions. In turn, this will create positive internal word-of-mouth as they connect with other parents in the school.



11

STATE OF THE SCHOOL ADDRESS

Communication about the state of the school is an important component to the retention effort.

Parents need to hear about what has been accomplished and the vision for the future.

Some school heads will present a “state of the school” address to parents as a way to update them on the school and to present a vision for the future. This event can be a powerful time of internal marketing.

In order to increase parent attendance, some schools have included a dinner with the event.



For example, one school included a chili cook-off as a way to encourage participation. Other schools have used this meeting as a way to distribute re-enrollment packets.

While it isn't likely that every parent will attend, it is also important to consider other ways to communicate this address. The presentation can be videotaped and made available to parents on the school's website or YouTube channel. It could also be delivered in a webinar format online. In addition, a summary document, perhaps a two to four page flier, could be put together and mailed out to all parents. I know of one school that would send out a mid-year report.

The key strategy to keep in mind is that parents need to be reminded of the accomplishments at the school and to look forward to the future. This can help keep the parents connected to the school, its vision and the leadership.



12

CREATE COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Vincent Tinto, a guru of retention studies for higher education, argues in his book, *Leaving College*, that college students are more apt to remain enrolled when they are connected in community at a college.

While our environment is different from a college or university, this argument can also be applied to an independent school. As parents and students are connected in a community, the family is more likely to remain enrolled at your school.

These community connections can and will occur naturally, as well as through intentional events and activities that you design.



Let's consider the natural connections first.

Students will connect with other students in the classroom, on an athletic team, in a club or on the stage. Through these groups, students have the opportunity to connect with other students with like interests. The more connected and involved a student is at the school, the less likely he/she will be to leave the school.

Parents will also connect naturally. They will connect with other parents that they know from your school. They will meet other parents in the car-line, at your back-to-school nights, at parent association meetings, at athletic events, and a myriad of other places.

Connections in your parent and student community can also be planned and coordinated intentionally. The following is a summary of some of these connections that I have seen in other schools.

- › **Buddy Programs** – Many schools have successful buddy programs that pair students in different ways. For example, Saint Stephen's Episcopal School in Bradenton, Fla., has their "Falcon's Friends" program. Every year, a senior is paired with a Kindergarten student. Throughout the year, they spend time together reading together and connecting at events. At some other schools, new students are assigned a current student buddy in the same grade. These buddies help the new student get adjusted to life at a new school.
- › **Parent Ambassadors** – One of the roles of a parent ambassador is to connect with new families after they are admitted to your school. The parent ambassador can help the new family navigate the school community. During the spring and summer months before school begins, the parent ambassador can get together with the new family and/or schedule an activity. Then, when school begins, the parent ambassador continues to keep in contact with the new family. The key to this connection is to help the new family get connected to the school community.

The more connected and involved a student (and parent) is at the school, the less likely he/she will be to leave the school.

- House System** – If you have watched the Harry Potter movies, then you are familiar with the British school’s house system. At Academy at the Lakes in Lutz, Fla., they have a similar program. Their website highlights this program: “From the moment a student enrolls at Academy, the student and his family become members of one of four houses. Academy’s houses are named after Florida birds of prey: Peregrine, Osprey, Nighthawk, and Kestrel. Younger students, older students, parents and faculty come together multiple times a year, whether to bake cakes, read together or cheer on their house-mates at pep rallies or the annual House Day.”

Palm Beach Day Academy in Palm Beach, FL, has a similar program. Every student becomes part of one of two groups—the Pelicans or the Flamingos. In fact, every student from the same family becomes part of the same group for life. Alumni and faculty are also involved in this annual tradition that culminates in the Field Day.

Connections to your school’s community can play an important role in the retention of your families. While families will connect naturally, it is critical for you to strategize how you intentionally create these connections.

19 Palm Beach Day Academy
 “The annual Field Day event has been a tradition for eighty years and celebrated by generations of families. Alumni still come back each year to march the field.” – Palm Beach Day Parent

proud*

Teddy bears, Pelicans and Flamingos Kindergarten students are “all ears” at the annual Teddy Bear Picnic, a project that combines learning, fun and a memorable event that includes parents—one of many special events like the Pelican vs. Flamingo Knowledge Bowl (above right) that make a Palm Beach Day education unique.

A family school, rich in tradition
 Florida’s oldest incorporated independent day school, Palm Beach Day Academy is that rare educational institution where children follow in the footsteps of their parents, teachers embody the hallmarks of achievement and the scholars, inventors and artists of today become the leaders of tomorrow.
 The Parent School Council offers a wide range of opportunities for parents to become involved in the life of the school as a volunteer for events that include the Speakers Forum, Annual Dinner and Auction, Book Fair, and Teacher Appreciation.
 The close relationship that our faculty, parents and students share is the reason that Palm Beach Day Academy is regarded as a true family school. More than a slogan, it is a warmly and richly lived tradition cherished by the generations of families, faculty and alumni for whom Palm Beach Day is a touchstone.

***spirited
 honorable
 grounded**

Having a Field Day Upon enrollment at Palm Beach Day Academy, all students are designated as Pelicans or Flamingos and remain so throughout their student lives and beyond. Indeed, the monikers are passed down within our families from generation to generation. Student teams of Pelicans and Flamingos engage in a friendly rivalry with both academic and athletic competitions throughout the year, including the Jeopardy-style Knowledge Bowl and the annual Walter H. Butler Field Day.

CONCLUSION

In the final analysis, your current students and parents are the foundation of your school's potential for healthy growth and the key for your word of mouth marketing effort.

It is a principle that cuts across all organizations, industries and disciplines, including education, and remains the fundamental basis of all marketing efforts: Serve your committed community first. They are the ones who know you. They are the ones who experience your service every day. They are the ones with the longest reach. Structure your marketing around them and let them tell the story of your exceptional school to their friends. It works!

For further school marketing tips and strategies, check out the Enrollment Catalyst blog at www.enrollmentcatalyst.com/blog.

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RESOURCES AND LINKS

Webinars:

[Developing your School's Word of Mouth Marketing Plan](#) – Presented by Rick Newberry in December 2012 for SSATB

[Using the WEB to Inspire WOM for Your School](#) – Presented by Rick Newberry in September 2012 for EdSocialMedia

[Effective Retention Strategies to Keep Your Families Enrolled](#) – Sponsored by SSATB and presented in May 2012.

Helpful Articles and Links:

www.WordofMouth.org

[Word of Mouth Marketing Association](#) (WOMMA)

For Further Reading:

Cutting, Donna. *The Celebrity Experience: Insider Secrets to Delivering Red Carpet Customer Service*. Wiley, 2008.

“The Celebrity Experience combines the best practices of the business world with those of the celebrity world to create a practical and proactive guide for anyone who wants to bring their business’s internal and external customer service to the level of star treatment. Based on the unique ways celebrities are treated, the book shares techniques you can use to treat your customers to a red-carpet experience, guaranteeing repeat business and stellar word of mouth.” (source: Amazon.com)

Godin, Seth. *The Purple Cow, New Edition: Transform Your Business By Being Remarkable*. Portfolio Hardcover, 2009.

“Learn how to stand out in a crowd (like a purple cow in a field of brown ones) with Seth Godin, New York Times bestselling author and marketing guru. Godin introduces readers to the ‘Purple Cow’ principle do something remarkable and you, your organization and your product will be noticed.” (source: Amazon.com)

Hanson, Kathleen. *The NAIS Handbook on Marketing Independent Schools*. NAIS, 2011.

Hanson’s book “offers an overview of what marketing is (and isn’t), as well as detailed advice in every important area of marketing, including:

- › developing a marketing plan;
- › boosting development efforts through marketing;
- › marketing through social media;
- › marketing to internal audiences; and
- › involving parents, students, and your board.

You’ll also find case studies that show you marketing in action at independent schools.

“Whether you’re a school head, an advancement professional, or a trustee... whether you’re trying to convince others of marketing’s crucial role at your school or you have a strong program in place and would like to achieve even greater results, this book is for you. From start to finish, it offers advice specifically geared to independent schools — advice you won’t find anywhere else.” (source: NAIS.org).

Sernovitz, Andy. **Word of Mouth Marketing: How Smart Companies Get People Talking**. Greenleaf Book Group Press, 2012.

“With straightforward advice and humor, word of mouth expert Andy Sernovitz will show you how the world’s most respected and profitable companies get their best customers for free through the power of word of mouth.

Learn the five essential steps that make word of mouth work and everything you need to get started. Understand how easy it is to work with social media, viral marketing, evangelists, and buzz.” (source: Amazon.com)

Tinto, Vincent. **Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition**. University of Chicago Press, 2012.

“In this 1994 classic work on student retention, Vincent Tinto synthesizes far-ranging research on student attrition and on actions institutions can and should take to reduce it. The key to effective retention, Tinto demonstrates, is in a strong commitment to quality education and the building of a strong sense of inclusive educational and social community on campus. He applies his theory of student departure to the experiences of minority, adult, and graduate students, and to the situation facing commuting institutions and two-year colleges. Especially critical to Tinto’s model is the central importance of the classroom experience and the role of multiple college communities.” (source: Amazon.com)

Request A Strategic Consultation

Is your school growing like it should? Do you need help identifying and implementing the enrollment and marketing strategies needed to take your school to the next level? Find out more by contacting Rick Newberry today.

[Click Here](#) To Begin Your School’s Strategic Transition Now!





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