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A MISSION THAT RESONATES IN A SOFT ADMISSIONS MARKET

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This consultant has worked with hundreds of schools on marketing. Marketing begins with mission. Most mission statements are worthless as marketing tools. They may no longer be connected in reality to the practice of education in the school.

When I ask trustees and heads in unrehearsed settings to describe their mission in five words or less, what occurs is a scramble for all forms of "motherhood and apple pie" words such as: "individual attention", university preparation, small class size, faculty/student relationships, the whole or well rounded child, integrity, character building, academic rigor, and/or a nurturing environment.

Most schools will use some if not all of the above words that are essentially similar. As part of Littleford & Associates' work with schools worldwide, our Firm sees literally thousands of mission statements of independent schools. They are poor marketing tools because there is little differentiation of mission among them, and one might even say that some schools' mission and vision statements are practically interchangeable. A school's goal should be to create a powerful mission statement, not one that sounds like so many others, and all of which begin to sound like platitudes.

1. Formulating the Mission

To ensure that the existing mission has relevance to the present and future as well as the past, schools can review their missions and modify them slightly while still retaining the integrity of the School's founding values. They should not be allowed to become "stale", and they can and SHOULD mold the mission to the needs of families and students today and yet speak to the future.

It is important to reduce a wordy overblown set of mission statements to strong memorable phrases that can evoke emotion and memory and which can be used to measure the purpose and success of programs offered and the philosophy by which teachers are recruited and retained.



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Littleford & Associates has conducted workshops in conjunction with strategic planning or on marketing alone which have included a motivating exercise on mission statement brainstorming and development. Board members and administrators find this to be an enjoyable activity that kick starts long-range planning and marketing efforts.

For one girls' School, the motto is: "Courage, Humility, and Largeness of Heart".*

The School states that "Each teacher has the **courage** to be innovative while honoring the values and traditions of the School; the **humility** to seek the best in themselves, their peers, and the students; the **largeness of heart** to nurture each girl's social, emotional, and intellectual growth." What is interesting here is that these key words influence the core language and behavioral patterns of the Head, Faculty and particularly the older students. The School measures itself by how well it carries out these thoughts.

This motto is consistently the theme of this School's internal and external communications and marketing materials. For example, it is the focus of the School's website, and the students say in their own words what it means to each of them.

Such phrases are a highly effective and inexpensive marketing tool when communicated well and frequently both internally and externally. The most successful consumer marketing companies are proof of this.

In visiting a K-6 elementary school not long ago, I asked the Head about a sign on the wall behind his desk: "Knowing How to Make the Right Choices." He said it is the School's mission "writ short," which is also on the wall of each classroom and which every parent, student, child in the School can recite. If asked, they can all give me a personal example or one of another child showing exactly how the school environment fosters within its children an ability to make the appropriate choices. The statement means much more than choosing to use drugs or not; go to prep school or not; be "nice" or not; work hard or not; respect others or not; to serve others or not.

"Knowing How to Make the Right Choices" is seven words, five without the articles. More powerfully, when asked what the mission really means in the daily life of the children in and outside of school, I was given ample evidence that the constituents knew its exact meaning and that a "values" centered education underpinned every aspect of academic, social, and extra curricular life. One sixth grade student said: "Hurting another student's feelings is a choice you make. I try never to make that particular choice."

The mission of another school, this one a boarding school, was reflected in a CD. In the seven minute presentation, no narrator spoke. All comments came from the students and there was



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no mention of the mission at all. But the last shot and the tone, demeanor and banter throughout the film left one with the overpowering sense of the mission: Integrity. It was as clear as a bell.

At another boarding school, teachers go way beyond the normal "duty" of teachers and dorm counselors but truly act as surrogate parents (firm and even stern ones), but always with a sense of compassion. Letters have been shared with me by parents of students who attend and have attended this School. This consultant was and is amazed at the detail, structure and rules of the game by which all students at the School are expected to abide, AND by the sheer rejection of those values which involve using drugs, abusing the rules, sexually misbehaving or in any way flouting the core mission of the School.

The mission is, in essence, to provide the traditional home and structure in an academically rigorous, character building setting. Athletics and fine arts are all a part of this culture, but the real test and taste of it are in the admiration in which it is held by BOTH current and former students and in the awe and admiration that parents feel and convey.

Many schools using this approach to mission development and refinement have seen 10% to 15% increases in admission inquiries and applications. There is a "buzz" in the market about them.

Demand is up in most New York City day schools, but nationwide the market is definitely softening. The schools that can make their mission statements distinctive, understood and memorable, including conveying brevity in the expression of it, are more likely to achieve a top position in their market. Structure AND freedom to choose, emotional AND physical security and safety, as well as rigor AND nurturing with a focus on a few key values may win this admissions struggle long term.

One School makes a point of not falling into the trap of the usual "nurture" words, but in Latin conveys the mission message (and logo) everywhere on campus and consistently in all written communications and marketing materials: "Not to Be Served But To Serve."** That is as categorical as it gets. It is direct, blunt and in this School environment, it is honored and admired according to many students, parents and faculty as well as alumni. The School is over 100 years old, yet this is an "out of the box" statement which has withstood the test of time.

2. Selling and Telling the Mission

At one School, the Head's annual opening remarks to the parents are always a powerful reflection of the School's mission in specifics. Those remarks are mailed in hard copy to every parent in the School to ensure all have "heard" the message. The head is always the primary



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"vision keeper" and "visionary" and must articulate the mission in a way that finds resonance within the community of staff, and outside the community with parents. The mission must have integrity and be consistently adhered to, or it will lose any power other than as a set of words required by an accrediting organization.

At another day school, 75 parents have been mobilized to help the School's Admissions Office reach out to the community at large to assist in conveying the mission internally; marketing the school externally; helping to ensure reduced attrition, and in supporting a smoother and more personalized admissions process. The entire volunteer effort is chaired by trustees who oversee groups of parent volunteers focusing on specific areas of marketing the mission to the internal and external communities. This can be as, or more powerful than, any set of glossy materials or elaborate campaign developed by an outside PR firm.

For this School, Littleford & Associates conducted several workshops with board members, a cross-section of faculty and a cross-section of current parents. Phone interviews were also conducted with parents who had chosen and not chosen to enroll their child in the School. Our Firm provided specific written recommendations.

After laying this groundwork, parents were chosen to chair six committees: Internal Marketing; External Marketing; Admission Process; Retention Strategies; Centers of Excellence; and Parent Opinion Survey. These Committees are enthusiastically working and pleased to be engaged in productive work on behalf of the School to which they deeply committed. The Administration appropriately directs and oversees their work and will acknowledge their volunteer contributions. In addition, the School has tripled its Parent Ambassador Group which conducts individual tours for prospective parents and follows up with personal phone calls and thank you notes.

As part of its mission, after its efforts to diversify met with much skepticism, one school without a single African American student, began a process of reaching out to that community by buying advertisements in local news media targeted to the African American community. That included a radio station which then invited the School's head to be on a talk show. From that forum and his adept answering of some tough questions came invitations to speak at a number of African American churches and to meet with Sunday School groups of students and parents.

Within five years, this School went from having literally no African American students to being a much more diverse environment with almost 12% of the student body from this community. The African American community and current families have become a marketing arm of the School, marketing initially undertaken by the Head alone with one other staff person. As a



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further signal of the School's significant commitment to diversity and as well as outreach, it gave birth to an academy for young African American boys from grades 3-12, an academy that has grown over the years to serve public school boys. The Academy offers summer and weekend programs that help to develop academic skills, leadership skills and provides mentoring relationships with male leaders in the African American business and professional community. It was featured on Oprah Winfrey recently. ***

At another school, there were no students of Chinese or Japanese background at all, (but in a larger community where such populations were growing). This school claimed a strong mission commitment to international education and moved aggressively to prove it by building direct student and faculty exchange relationships with some of the best known schools in Japan and China. This effort began over 15 years ago. Further outreach was achieved by renting the School's facilities on Saturdays and Sundays to the local Chinese and Japanese language schools. This took careful negotiation and subtle moves in determining fair rental values over time. The net result was substantial earnings for the School in additional profit center income as well as a new influx of students of Chinese and Japanese descent whose parents were now familiar and more comfortable with the School through the rental arrangements. The international focus of the School, through its stated mission, now began to bear concrete fruit in community reputation and a growing admissions demand for entry. It developed a known "center of excellence". Every school needs at least three or four that are known to the internal and external community.

Mission and marketing are intimately related. The head can TELL THE MISSION through the vision by using ACTUAL STORIES OF REAL STUDENTS. The mission can also be revealed in practice through the staff's actions and words that become the benchmarks by which all parents, students and graduates will judge the integrity and success of the school.

* Oldfields School, Glencoe, MD

** The Taft School, Watertown, CT

*** Episcopal High School, Baton Rouge, LA

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