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# MARKETING THE MISSION IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER

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"Harnessing the Brain Power and Enthusiasm of Our School's Parents to Sell a Product We All Believe in is Simple. And Brilliant" So wrote prominent independent school Parent who was a leader in creating a parent ambassador program that recruited, motivated and trained about 150 ambassadors/advocates. This Parent and her Husband are top media personalities for 60 years combined. The program was transformational.

Independent and international schools are always talking about marketing strategies, especially now when enrollment is a key strategic issue. However, nothing has ever beaten the positive comments and the endorsements that parents say about a school to one another and to outsiders. These are crucial to a healthy enrollment no matter what your social media presence. Bad publicity from current or former parents can sink enrollment. Passionate support can boost applicants and enrollment as well as retention.

Usually current parents are reasonably happy overall, and they also have mostly minor gripes. In these unusual and uncertain times, however, they may have more than the normal amount of complaints. They are anxious and exhausted, especially if they have children in the lower and/or middle school, where either it is the perception or the reality that remote learning (or some combination of on-line or in-person learning) is not meeting their needs relative to the cost. It IS possible to turn this anxiety into an opportunity through positive messaging.

Parents always want their school to listen attentively to their concerns in some way. If the school knows how to do that effectively, it can turn the complaint side to the good news side.

In my first month as young Head of School, I gathered all my parents in Chapel and asked them on a scale of 1 to 10 how satisfied they were with the School. They gave me an 8. Then I asked how many of them proactively (without first being asked) marketed the school to their friends and neighbors? The answer was a 4. When I asked why, I received four answers:

1. The School had never asked them to do this.
2. They did not have a "soundbite" and were not sure how to go about communicating it.



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3. Since the School charged a competitive tuition, they felt awkward advocating to their friends in case their friends could not afford it.
4. There was almost an unspoken rule of not broadcasting too widely that your children went to an elite independent school.

Today when I ask parents in marketing or strategic planning focus groups the same question, I often receive the same answers. How to turn parents from passive consumers into passionate advocates?

First, the school leadership must LISTEN to a cross-section of parents representing all age groups in these focus group settings. A skilled facilitator, who knows how to probe for answers, politically shut down excessive complainers focused on their own narrow issues, and encourage all to participate, should lead these groups. Schools are now conducting them in Zoom meetings, and parents are flattered to be asked and pleased to be included. Then as soon as possible, invite them to hear feedback on what the facilitator heard, both the positives and the negatives. When parents feel that the school leadership has validated their compliments and concerns, they are much more receptive to being advocates for the school both internally and externally. We call this boosting the “parent passion index”.

It is important to seize upon this momentum immediately and ask parents if they are willing to be formally trained to do the following: talk up the school to their neighbors and in the community about the very advantages they are receiving from the school; and keep up the positive messages about the school’s mission and vision in order to ensure that families stay. The latter internal marketing piece is key. No school should EVER take current families for granted, and especially now when some of our schools have seen an influx of public school families. We need them to stay.

Littleford & Associates has a proven template for training “parent ambassadors”. Depending upon the size of the school, there may be as many as 100 or more of them. With the commitment of the head of school and reporting to the Director of Admissions and Marketing, the ambassadors are organized into three main committees; international marketing, external marketing and the admissions process.

The internal marketing committee is often short-lived but its role is to ensure that the mission tagline is everywhere, known to everyone and spoken about frequently. There also should be ongoing follow up with every family new to the school this year to ask about their experience thus far and if anything can be done to improve it.

The external marketing group is typically the largest. These are parents who become advocates/ambassadors wherever they work, live, play or pray, and these folks are ebullient,



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consistent and passionate marketers for the School. This can be done creatively even in these times.

They can assist the Director of Admissions and Marketing in reaching out to traditional media such as radio as well as promoting the school on all social media platforms. Let's not forget the power of the printed media as well. A parent of a client school whose upper school enrollment is suffering recently told me that his household receives a piece of mail from a competing school weekly as well as invitations to their virtual events. This competitor is effectively luring away students from this client school. The only caveat for this committee is that the ambassadors are there to help, not micromanage or go off on their own.

The admissions process committee has parent tour guides who were matched to interested parents by the child of the same gender, interests and age. If a school is not holding in-person tours, this can be done virtually. Members of this committee can do all of their other work from home. As soon as an inquiry comes in from any source, the ambassador (who is again matched to inquiring family) can write or call the prospective family to say that they are school parents and available to answer any questions. These outreach parents stay with the new family throughout the entire application process and offer mentoring for the first six months of enrollment.

While parents may feel overwhelmed at home, they are also craving more and new connections. A program of outreach parents is a great way to foster those contacts AND market the school. One of our marketing clients has introduced a wonderful idea. Thirty current parents (both Moms and Dads) have a picture and a brief, but fun and upbeat profile of themselves and their family under the Admission section of the website. Each lists their children's names and grades at the School, their own interests and that of their children and the activities that they enjoy. They invite perspective parents to send a secure message if they would like to learn more about the School. A prospective parent looks for a current parent(s) with whom they have commonality. This is a simple and potential win-win for current and prospective parents and the School. This program obviously runs through the Admissions Office.

Done well and consistently, parent ambassador programs are nearly always successful in retaining current students and in boosting inquiries, applications and enrollment. This eventually leads to wait lists.

The same parent quoted above also said, "I was content to think of our School as one of the best kept secrets in education. But I'm persuaded. It is important for the future of the School that we all do a better job of telling our story. "

Parents need to hear more about what their Schools are doing WELL now.