

Marketing, Student Recruitment, and Retention

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Background

When I arrived at St. Paul as head of school in summer of 2013, school enrollment was 228 students. In the last four years, I have witnessed the decline in enrollment all the way to 205. Part of the reason I wanted to focus on enrollment was because I am driven by the desire for more students to hear the Gospel message and receive an outstanding Christian education. Truth be told, I am downright fearful of any further decline and what that would do to the effectiveness of our mission and how we operate.

St. Paul Lutheran School (SPLS) has always had a strong academic program. SPLS is a 2008 nationally recognized Blue Ribbon school, but over the last 10 years has seen a decline in student attendance and certainly a decline in the retention rate of middle school students. St. Paul has worked diligently over the last few years to renovate facilities, improve instruction, and enhance the middle school program. That work will continue as we also begin to be very focused and intentional in marketing efforts.

In the summer of 2017, just before beginning the Van Lunen Fellows program, I hired a new part-time Marketing Director, Peyton Lauderdale. This new position was made possible due to financial support from our Senior Pastor. Peyton's initial job task was to help us analyze our current marketing efforts. That was followed by creating a strategic marketing plan that would give us the greatest return on investment.

Previously, marketing efforts were handled by our part-time admissions director, Sarah Daniel. The marketing efforts were under-staffed and under-resourced. Sarah did everything I asked her to do, given the time and resources allocated to her. Sarah serves on our current marketing team and does a great job in the admissions department. It is a true team, made up of the three of us and other staff and volunteers who join in as needed.

After learning from the Van Lunen program, Jim McKenzie and other resources, we identified several areas we wanted to address. They included:

- Mission Statement
- Profile of a Graduate
- Social Media
- Logo uniformity
- Leveraging our Location
- New Website
- Awareness in the Community

In under nine months, I am thrilled with how far our school has come in its marketing efforts. I know it's only the beginning, but the first year was very successful in beginning to clearly identify our brand and attempt new endeavors to connect with our community.

Mission Statement

Our group realized that messaging and words are important. Words that are chosen carefully and deliberately helped set the tone and direction of our marketing message. Committees made up of parents, teachers, board members, and faculty re-wrote the school mission statement and created a “Profile of a Graduate”.

The old mission statement had been around for over 10 years and did not seem to accurately and succinctly convey what our school feels called by God to do. It read:

St. Paul Lutheran School strives to provide a superior Christ-centered education to children from pre-kindergarten through eighth grade. Our fundamental mission is to support parents seeking to instill in their children the spiritual values that will equip them for a life of service. We promote responsibility, self-confidence, and academic excellence in a loving, Christian environment.

Creating a new mission statement at our school meant involving key leaders as well as getting the approval of our church leaders. The new mission statement is now more succinct and clearly identifies the main reason our school exists.

St. Paul Lutheran School provides a Biblically-integrated, academically excellent education for students. St. Paul partners with families to equip children to boldly reflect the character of Jesus Christ.

Profile of a Graduate

The teachers and the school board also created a “Profile of a Graduate”. This takes our mission statement and puts into tangible terms what a graduate of St. Paul looks like in body, soul, heart, and mind.

A St. Paul Lutheran Graduate Is...

Prepared Academically for High School and Beyond

- Standing on an excellent academic base
- Ready for challenging honors curriculum in high school and college
- Pursued by many area high schools

Educated in Christian Foundations

- Guided by a moral compass rooted in Jesus
- Biblically literate
- Able to make good decisions based on scripture

Equipped with a Heart for Service

- Mindful of neighbors in need, both locally and globally
- Prepared to serve others in the classroom and in the local community
- Qualified for leadership opportunities at school, at home, and in the community

A Confident Citizen

- Willing to be a team player and work with others
- Using God-given talents through academics, art, music, drama, and sports
- Growing in responsibility and maturity

Social Media

Our new marketing director led the effort on using Facebook and Instagram as a means to effectively begin to communicate the mission of our school. We completely erased the historical posts that were more used for internal communications and began a focused effort to use images and words to tell our story. The results have been positive. People who tour our building already know several “stories” about our mission. One of the highlight videos we posted has 15,000 views and has reached 15,000 people through organic and sponsored links. Our school Facebook Page likes increased from 467 to 612. Organic post reaches of 1,000-2,000 is now common, with paid reaches hitting 4,000. www.facebook.com/stpaul Lutheranschool

The reactions from our Facebook posts have been encouraging. Although I don’t have hard data to prove it, I believe, that by simply telling our story better and more often, current parents are more pleased, aware, and encouraged by what is taking place in their child’s grade and other grades. This positively affects our retention rate.

After we successfully launched our school’s new and improved Facebook page, we began using Instagram. It is still in its early stages.

We are also using Facebook to connect our admissions and marketing people from Lutherans schools across the country. Peyton created the Facebook group “Lutheran Schools Admissions and Marketing.” It now serves ninety members from across the country.

Logo Uniformity

Being consistent in branding was one of our marketing goals. Our school officially adopted a slightly modified version of the church’s logo to replace an older school logo.



Old School Logo



New School Logo



Church Logo

Our school logo was created/adopted late summer and we became consistent in using that logo in our print materials. Letterhead, business card, and email signature lines were all coordinated using the new style guidelines. There is more work to be done in this area, but we are on the right track.

School Sign and Location Video

One of our greatest strengths (and possibly biggest challenge) is our location. St. Paul is city-center, at the crossroads of major highways in Fort Worth, on the edge of downtown and adjacent to the medical district. Tens of thousands of people drive by daily, but few are aware a school exists because of the current building structure and the topography of the land.

In order to take advantage of our location, we chose to install a very large, illuminated sign that faces I-30, one of the busiest interstates in the region. Due to an error at the city permit office, the project was delayed. Our school had to file for a Permit of Appropriateness (a variance). I had to present in front of the Downtown Fort Worth Inc. Review Board and make my case at an official public hearing. The end result was that God allowed us to have a sign 50%

larger than the regulations allow! It fits in well with our landscape and our surroundings. It shines as a beacon to the thousands of vehicles that drive by daily. We invested \$15,000 into the project and expect a return on that investment in less than two years.



One of our goals was to give people in our community a sense of where we are in relation to our immediate surroundings. We also wanted to show that school is a lot bigger and offers more than what is visible from the highway. We hired a professional to video our campus with a drone. The results were well-received by our current families and is useful to our external audience. That video is viewable on our school's Facebook page and website. www.sharingnewlifespls.com/eagle-insights

New Website

We created a second website, just for prospective parents. It is specifically designed using some of the principles described by Jim McKenzie, which encourages people to take the next step- to call or click or do some sort of other actionable to learn more about our school. We are working with Jim McKenzie and are in the early stages of trying to increase our Search Engine Optimization. www.sharingnewlifespls.com

Awareness

St. Paul used some event marketing to help people get to know us better. Using our brand new \$300,000 renovated playground, we invited people from the community for a "playdate". We had a local trendy business supply the coffee and baked goods. Our school is located in an area of town that values the trendy, niche shops. It's nice to partner a niche school with some of the local businesses. Another way we partnered with our community is through a custom designed donut at Funky Town Donuts. This craft donut shop is in the heart of the medical district, a key recruitment area for our school. For a whole week, our school information and signature donut was featured in their store.

Twice our school hosted the Tarrant County Independent School Consortium, a group of admission counselors from over 30 private schools within a 20 mile radius of St. Paul. This group shares ideas and helps one another. It also brings in people from all over the community and educates them that a school exists on this location.

Fort Worth is a large metropolitan area, with over 1,000,000 people. While this brings the potential for students, it also makes it very challenging to stand out and be noticed. Our school is becoming active in the Fort Worth Chamber of Commerce. We are exploring options

to participate in Downtown Fort Worth Inc., an organization that promotes living and serving the downtown Fort Worth residents and employees.

St. Paul began a Parent Ambassadors group, but is still in the early stages of development and growth. There is much more potential here, and I am looking forward to seeing how that develops and grows.

Results

The overall satisfaction of our school parents is very strong. The current school parents are now more aware of what other grade levels are doing. This is helping increase awareness and boost morale (which was already high).

New student inquiries have increased from the previous year. Preschool inquiries increased from 29 to 47. Kindergarten inquiries increased from 18 to 39. The retention rate from spring 2016 to spring 2017 has increased from 87% to 92%. We already have 24 inquiries for the 2018-2019 school year, mostly in preschool and kindergarten. These are very encouraging signs that our new efforts are working.

Enrollment for next year is projected to be slightly higher than this year. It's not a significant increase, but any movement in a positive direction will be welcomed. We know this marketing effort is like building a snowball. We just got it rolling, and it will take some time to build in strength and momentum.

Takeaways

Marketing, to me, is like being a surgeon. It takes a lot of time, skill, and patience. Every move matters and choosing to do something or choosing to not do something can make a difference. I am incredibly thankful for Peyton and Sarah, who have worked diligently and thoughtfully in our marketing efforts this year. As lead administrator, I do not have the time to commit to such endeavors. Without these two people, we would never have made such progress.

I have learned that marketing can be expensive, with sometimes no immediate return on investment. Many of our efforts this year were brand-new, so I am trying to be patient with results. If marketing was compared to creating a stone statue, I would say that this year, we took off all the major chunks and are starting to form the main features of the figure. We are still a long way from the fine-tuning and detailed work. As I look back on the last 9-months, I am pleased with the effort. I am encouraged by the initial results. I look optimistically and anxiously to the future.

What difference is it making in our school?

Our current families have certainly been positively affected by our marketing efforts. There is a wonderful buzz around campus and in the social media aspect. Parents are sharing stories, liking posts, and our community is more aware of us than the previous year. There are new students attending St. Paul Lutheran School next year. Several of those families were impacted by our new efforts. I am thankful and look forward to serving the children.