

REIMAGINING MARKETING & ENROLLMENT Van Lunen Project, Maroon Platoon, 2016-2017

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PROJECT OVERVIEW

Christ Community Lutheran School in Kirkwood, Missouri, is a thriving Lutheran school in the first-ring suburbs of St. Louis. CCLS enrolls more than 630 students in the '16-'17 school year, an all-time peak enrollment. It was named a Blue Ribbon School of Excellence by the U.S. Department of Education in 2009, as well as an Exemplary School by the National Lutheran School Accreditation commission in 2014. The sense of school community is strong, the faculty is excellent, a culture of continuous improvement exists, the students are involved outside of the classroom, they are connecting kids and families to Christ and His church, and the school is known and well-respected in the communities it serves.

However, the educational landscape is constantly changing. Enrollment in private and parochial schools across the country is declining, particularly in conservative Christian schools such as Lutheran schools. Families face many reasonable choices of where they can send their children, and the numbers show that many of them are not choosing to invest their money in the cost of Lutheran school tuition. Seemingly, gone are the days of Lutheran families choosing to enroll their students in the local Lutheran school simply because it exists.



Even after being armed with this knowledge, it is easy for Lutheran schools to get stuck doing things the same way they have always done them. While the saving message of the Gospel will never fade or lose significance, intentional efforts must be made in order to attract and retain families. Therefore, marketing and enrollment strategies, customer service approaches, and the methods that a school employs to get appropriate messaging to its greater community must continuously evolve and improve. Parochial schools must realize that they are obliged to continuously innovate to meet the needs of their prospective families if they are to remain relevant in a highly competitive market.

PROJECT SUMMARY

Despite our recent success at CCLS, we realize that we can easily slip into a rut, rest on our laurels, and simply serve families who happen to choose our school. Thanks in part to Jim McKenzie's presentation at Van Lunen in July, I was motivated to do whatever we can at CCLS to ensure that our Lutheran school remains relevant, engaging, attractive, and effective. It became apparent that my first objective upon returning to school was to ignite a passion for the topic among my Leadership Team members. I was successful in motivating our team to believe that while things were going well for us, it doesn't mean that it will continue to go well nor does it mean that we are currently doing things in the most effective way.



After sharing what I learned from Jim McKenzie and his presentations, we agreed that we would invest in bringing the superhero to our campus. (I did have to also convince my team members that while it sounded like more fun to go visit Jim in Gainesville, FL, it probably wasn't feasible for the ten of us!) Therefore, Jim visited our campus for two days in September, 2016, and facilitated a two-day workshop for our Leadership Team. He led us on a deep dive through a number of topics, including:

- Visioning
- Messaging
- Customer Service
- Online Marketing
- Word of Mouth Marketing
- Enrollment & Retention

Our initial goal was to begin to implement new strategies prior to peak enrollment season in February of this year, such as creating a new website focused on recruitment, a drip campaign to grow our database of contacts, better closure on enrollment leads, have fresh ideas for advertising outlets, and create more active promoters within our school community. Then, we hoped that by the end of the 2016-2017 school year, we will have added at least one new strategy in each of the areas to improve our current efforts. What we were reminded of is that change can be a process that takes time. While we did not meet resistance on any new best practices that we wanted to implement, many things just took much longer than we expected. We had to go through a triage process of sorts, and figure out just how much we could do and how quickly we could do it. We have been successful in a number of areas and have already reaped some benefits; other improvements are still in the developing stage as of the end of the school year. The good news is that the school year will start all over in August, giving us another chance to implement new ideas!

VISIONING

Our introspective journey with Jim began with the challenge to think about why we do what we do as a school. We reviewed the Simon Sinek video entitled, "Start With Why," and began to ask ourselves how often we share with our community *why* we do what we do. What we found is that we tend to focus much more on *what* we do. We also realized that we are a very mission-minded organization, focused on our mission-minded organization. What we were led to discern, however, is that we need to be more of a vision-driven organization that is student-focused.

We are finishing our fourth year of our five-year strategic planning cycle. During the upcoming year as we develop a new strategic plan, we will be unpacking what it looks like to be a vision-driven school as well as a mission-minded organization. In doing so, we will have a newly created "Profile of a Graduate" to keep in the forefront of our work. As I met with each staff member throughout the year, I gathered the thoughts of what each person believes our graduates need to look like, how they need to behave, and what they will be able to achieve as they leave our halls. With a clear vision of *why* we exist, our mission of *how* we will make that vision a reality will follow. Through the process, our core values of *with what* will develop as we create the new strategic plan.

MESSAGING

One of the most intriguing ongoing exercises for our Leadership Team has been to figure out how to best tell our story. What we came to realize after being enlightened by Jim's leadership is that all too often we find ourselves telling a story where our school is the hero. We now more fully understand that when our vision is clear and we know what our end product will look like, the real heroes of our story are our students.

The focus on telling stories with students and their families as the heroes has already made a significant impact. This past February, we held our school's biennial dinner auction. As the Executive Director, I have the privilege of leading the portion of the evening where we ask for financial support of our tuition assistance fund. After being reminded about the power of telling stories where the students are the heroes, I highlighted two family situations

and emphasized the power of changed student lives in our school environment. As a result, at least in part, the amount of money raised was almost three times the quantity that we have ever been given at such an event.



Another hot topic for our team all year as we retool our messaging is how we must stop thinking of ourselves as a commodity and more like a unique service. We realize that while we are similar to every other school in many ways, there are characteristics, programs, and services at our school that make us distinctive. It can be easy to focus on keeping up with the school down the street and employ "me-too branding." But, making ourselves just like every other school does not give us an advantage attracting families. Rather, we are learning the art of flanking marketing where we can set ourselves apart from our competition by serving students and their families where they cannot duplicate our efforts.

We have spent some time as a staff and have formally asked our school community about what it is that makes our school unique. We know that if we can identify things that are truly different about our school, we can reallocate efforts to accentuate and reconsider how we message those things to our greater community. Our constituents have identified a number of such areas, including our sense of community, co-curricular programming and subsequent student involvement, flexible early childhood programming options, the constant pursuit of finding more and better ways our students can serve our community and world, our culture of continuous improvement and innovation, home visits, and our ongoing global partnership in CCLS-Uganda. They have given us things to take to the front lines as we tell our story to the community!

CUSTOMER SERVICE

Sometimes teachers fail to remember that they are in the customer service business. The customer service-focused industries are obvious: Southwest Airlines, Chick-fil-A, Nordstroms, etc. Keeping our staff mindful that we are, indeed, in the business of customer service is a high priority. As a result, we have had discussions as a staff about hallmarks of excellent customer service, the importance of customer service, and the problems that arise when customer service is not a high priority. We know that all of the data pours back into the satisfaction with the teacher. If the relationship is positive

between parents and the teacher, the parents are more likely to speak positively in the community and stay at our school. That reality reinforces for us the need to keep excellent customer service in the forefront of what we do.



Since Jim's session with us, the issue of "efficient vs. effective" has come up a number of times in our day-to-day operations. What's easiest and quickest for us is not necessarily what's best for our customers. For instance, we can point down the hall to the other side of the building when directing a visitor to a meeting room and be efficient, but taking the time to walk him down to the room and chatting while building a relationship along the way is much more effective. Time and time again we discuss what we can do as educators to be more effective in terms of servicing our students and their families.

ONLINE MARKETING

It will take us many more months to feel like we have a good grasp on all of Jim's thoughts on how to more effectively market our school using the power of the internet using our website, email, social media, and other online tools. While the sky's the limit, the realistic limitations seem to be time and personnel. As a result, when we employed a new office manager this year, we hired a younger mom whom we stole from a local university's marketing department so that she can help us build a more robust online presence. Among a number of things we learned from Jim in this area, we're focusing on the following:

CREATING A NEW WEBSITE

There should be a difference between an internal website and an external marketing website. We constantly get praised for the depth and breadth of our current website, and we frequently hear comments how people can find everything they need to know on it. In fact, we typically well direct a number of prospective families to our site. However, what we didn't fully realize is that we don't know how many prospects go to our website and choose another school without our knowledge! We learned that we cannot give prospective families a reason to say no to us, and we cannot give them a reason to stay at home by putting everything on our site. We want them to come and visit our school and meet us! We are in the midst of building a brand new website that will cater to the shopping parent using much of the messaging mentioned earlier. It will be stripped down of much of the information that currently gives them a reason to say no or stay at home, and it will include a password-protected portal for our current parents. We used Peek UserTesting to get some real time feedback from unobjective sources to diagnose our current site and get tips for creating a new one.

CCLS "GLAD LIBS"

We want to be able to tell the story of changed lives where the students are the heroes. Playing off of the old Mad Libs, we are gathering fill-in-the-blank stories where our families can tell about their changed life from their experience at our school. The fillable .pdf stories will be located on our website for people to create their own customized story, and we will use them to market to our community.

FOCUS ON THE DISSATISFIED PARENTS

We realized that we spend most of our time focusing on marketing to the Christian school parents who will likely attend our school anyway. However, we need to spend our time and energy connecting with the dissatisfied parents -- the much larger pool of prospective families -- who are looking for a solution to their problem.

RETOOLING SOCIAL MEDIA

Our teachers are doing a fantastic job posting pictures on Twitter multiple times per week about ongoings in their classrooms. It has been a great way to keep parents connected to the classrooms during the day, the teachers to each other, and for giving parents an idea of what they can look forward to in the future. We have also embedded Twitter feeds onto every teacher's webpage as well as on our new website. Our next step is to do a better job of using Facebook to help tell our story by selecting a couple Tweets a day, spotlights faculty members on Friday, or by using Facebook Live to stream lessons from classrooms.



DRIP MARKETING CAMPAIGN

Jim McKenzie tuned us into the power behind using Constant Contact and a drip marketing campaign strategy. While we use Constant Contact for some other purposes, we did not consider creating pre-written messages that we can send to prospective families every few days or weeks with information about our school. It is a great way to use flanking and messaging techniques that tell stories of heroes whose lives have been changed.

WORD-OF-MOUTH MARKETING

We have taken the opportunity a couple times this year to help equip the promoters of our school to recruit other families. In our weekly newsletter we offer tips and suggestions of things to look for, questions to ask, and prepared comments to connect prospects to our school. We are just completing the Parent Satisfaction & Referral Survey (PSRS) through GraceWorks Ministries, and one of the results will be the identification of specific promoters. Our plan is to host a promoter reception in late summer or early fall and ensure that they are equipped to be ambassadors in our community.

ENROLLMENT & RETENTION

Despite our ongoing success in enrollment and retention, Jim's experience and expertise further strengthened our efforts as we implemented some new practices that are producing results, including:

- ❑ We learned that there is significance in using the term “visit” as opposed to “tour” with prospective families. We have slowly but surely morphed our language to accentuate the fact that we want to meet with prospective families, build relationships with them, customize their experience, and help them envision beginning their child's story on our campus. Gone are the days of us leading them on a tour where our buildings and our school are the heroes.
- ❑ One of the most important tools of our Director of Enrollment (DOE) is her cell phone. That phone number is the only one that we publicize and promote, and we transfer all calls to it when they are received at school. We know if we can get a family to talk to our DOE, it's almost as good as enrolling them. However, what we learned as we dug deeper into our practices is that depending on who answered the phone, the caller may get different information. Beyond that, we realized that when we do transfer calls to the cell phone, many people may hang up before the call is answered, or maybe may not leave a message at all and then they are lost for good. To combat this, we have created a script for answering the phone and trained every staff member and volunteer who may answer the phone with how to respond. We now use a Google Form that is edited with the caller's information and automatically sent to our DOE, and people who answer the phone may even try to get an appointment on the calendar before transferring the call. Now that anybody but our DOE will refrain from giving out enrollment information, we have streamlined the process and have scheduled more campus visits than ever before.
- ❑ The idea of SPIN selling gave us words to go along with an effective strategy that we have successfully employed for some time. Our DOE and principals are conscious about listening to the concerns that prospective families have and figure out how to show them how our school can be a solution to their problems. Getting them to begin a new story in their head and imagine what their family will look like at our school is an effective and proven strategy.
- ❑ History shows us that our most effective retention strategy is to intentionally create a culture that we call a “Third Place Community”. In short, the idea is that the First Place is the home. That's where our families are, where we most closely connect. The Second Place is usually work, where we form friendships, socialize, and spend a considerable chunk of the week. However, sometimes home and work are not enough. Humans need a Third Place. Humans long for the connection into a community that's not just a family and a place that is not work. Starbucks is built on the principle that it's not about the coffee, it's about the connection. We have intentionally given our families more and more opportunities to connect with each other, giving them no other choice but to continue in community. In fact, we will be investing extra funds to make our DOE a full-time role next year with a added focus on assimilation of our new students and their families into our school community.

