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Marketing and PR for student recruitment

How we got to this point:

To understand why the project was chosen it is important to understand Lutheran High School of San Antonio's (LHS) situation and make up. LHS is a high school that is "owned" by 6 association congregations. These congregations are Concordia, Messiah, Crown of Life, Shepherd of the Hills, Mt Calvary and Redeemer. These 6 congregations are spread throughout the San Antonio area and are very diverse in their make-up. These 6 congregations were part of the original membership that began the high school.

In 1993 it was decided to start a Lutheran high school in San Antonio. The 6 congregations came together and began the process to open a Lutheran high school in this area. The financial arrangements and the governance policies and procedures were established and agreed upon. The school began with 40 ninth graders in August of 1995. The school did not have its own land or campus so Concordia Lutheran Church and School let the high school share the campus and the classrooms. Each year from 1995 to 1999 a new class level was added. The first graduating class was 1999.

The original campus on the Concordia Lutheran church and school property was located more towards the middle of San Antonio on Basse Road. This location was more centrally located for the majority of the association congregations at the beginning stages. In 1998 Concordia sold the campus to LHS while they moved to a new location on the very north side of San Antonio. This would be the first year that LHS would stand on its own with its own school building and campus.

The original LHS strategic plan recognized that the high school ministry would eventually need to follow the migration of most Lutheran families to San Antonio's north side. The community was declining and the buildings were becoming more than LHS could maintain. By the year 2001 the 2 Lutheran feeder grade schools were graduating 75 eighth graders each but very few of those families were willing to make the commute to the Basse Road campus. In 2001 the Board's strategic planning committee announces the "Vision 2006" with its goal of relocating the ministry by the year 2006.

The Board of Directors formally confirmed this goal in 2002 with a full Relocation Feasibility Study performed by Capital Funding Services confirmed several parts of the Board's Strategic Plan. First, an overwhelming majority of local Lutheran school 8th graders still desired a Lutheran high school education. Secondly, a location in north central San Antonio would be preferred. According to this information the Basse Road campus was sold, temporary location at the Methodist Mission Home of San Antonio was used and the process of identifying a suitable long-term home for LHS began.

August 2006 LHS has called 18104 Babcock Road its permanent home. It is a 54 acre plot of land that is strategically located in west North central San Antonio. The 54 acres has plenty of room to expand facilities. At current time there is an administrative building which is the converted club house from the previous owners of the golf academy. Two modular educational buildings were moved on to the property from the temporary location. In 2009 a 35,000 square foot gym building was constructed. It also included a cafeteria, biology lab, physics/chemistry lab, art room, music/band room and 4 locker rooms. The process has begun in 2012 of platting the back acres for athletic fields. This construction of the athletic fields is a \$4 million project of which \$3 million has been raised.

With all of this movement over the last 12 years it is easy to see how LHS association congregation members have lost track of us and certainly how the community of San Antonio has lost any connection to us. The challenges are to communicate to the Lutheran feeder schools about the great education at LHS while getting the word out into the community that LHS is a very viable option for Christian education.

Planning Process and Steps:

For my time at LHS the marketing and PR work has fallen on my desk with very little help from anyone else. There certainly were suggestions from parents and other stakeholders what could and should be done to get our name out to the community. Many different options were used in the last 6 years. Some of those strategies are listed below.

- Street banners hung over selected city intersections
- ½ page ads in Home Owner Association monthly news letter
- Monthly principal report to association pastors
- Website
- SA Women's magazine
- Brochure mailing to neighborhood addresses
- Post card mailings to neighborhood addresses
- Radio advertisement
- TV advertisement
- Open Houses

The previous 4 years we have seen an increase in enrollment to the point LHS had 105 students for the 2011-12 school year. The 2012-13 school year saw a drop in enrollment to 92 students and the 2013-14 school year looks like another potential drop in enrollment. This has brought concern by a handful of parents that were willing to put “money where their mouth is”.

LHS has an excited and passionate person for the school willing to do the leg work on any and all projects. Also, a Board member was added that has marketing background and works at a TV station selling spots. From these two individuals we met to strategize what we wanted to do this year. Once the list of marketing tools/media was decided, a budget was put into place. Since Marketing was a hot button for many families it was easy to raise the \$8000 needed to execute the plan.

The plan included a post card mailing to 4700 addresses within a 7 mile radius of the school 3 times a year, a one year subscription for a ½ page advertisement on sanantonioprivateschools.com, a ½ page advertisement in San Antonio Women magazine for January - December, SA Living from Channel 4 came out to do a story on LHS and it aired in January, Pre-produced segment for Daytime@Nine for the months of March and April.

While that plan was being executed I continued dialogue with Dan Krause from Graceworks Ministries. His information and direction was centered more around our website. Two phrases that he continued to talk with me about were “Calls to action” and “Educational Success Consultation”.

“Calls to action” is about how we present material on our website. He discouraged us from putting all of our school information on the website for parents to see. The thought was that LHS would not have any knowledge of a person that looked at our website if they didn’t call us. There may be something on the website, like tuition amount, that a parent would see and self-disqualify them without giving us a chance to talk with them about financial aid or scholarship opportunities. He wanted us to give them enough information about exciting things going on at LHS that would make them want to call and talk with me to gather more information.

Dan also looked at other areas that needed to be easier viewing for those inquiring parents. A few of those areas were how much financial aid we gave away each year, where did our graduates go to college, what were our students ACT/SAT scores, what help does LHS give to families trying to secure college scholarships and how much do each of our students receive in college scholarship each year. These items were to be encouragers for parents to find out more information about LHS and how exciting it might be for them to be a part of LHS.

Dan Krause also pointed out that our website was trying to accomplish too much to a broad range of people. He encouraged us to take a large number of the items on our website like Supporting LHS, Calendars, Daily announcements, menus, etc. and put them behind “protected” or parent log in security. The idea was that giving information to new perspective families is different than putting information out there to our own school families. Keep it simple and concise to the new families with the “teaser” of them call to ask more questions.

“Educational Success Consultations” was the next big item Dan suggested that we implement. With taking care of the website to have enough information on it but not too much that it would cause a family to call the school for more information. When this would happen my goal would be to get them to come in for an Educational Success Consultation. The belief was that if we could get them on campus to visit with us and see the school we would be able to “close the deal” and get them to fill out an application. The phrasing of educational success consultation was intentional and certainly was not being used but the many other private Christian schools in San Antonio.

It was determined from our conversations with Dan Krause that we needed to have something that was unique to LHS and that others were not doing. We couldn’t be the “me too” school trying to compare our education, teachers, facilities, etc. to other private Christian schools. We needed to show something that was different about us. This came through having the Educational Success Consultations with parents. No other school was doing this. This gave me the opportunity to talk face to face with the families about a 4 year plan for high school, what our education would do for them to be ready for college, what level of financial assistance LHS could provide, what LHS guidance department would do to help students with college applications, with FAFSA forms and securing college scholarships.

The last component that was suggested to us by Dan Krause at Graceworks Ministries was word of mouth. LHS needed to be more intentional about word of mouth. Don’t just assume that everyone is talking about us. If they are, what are they saying? If they are talking to an interested family how are they connecting them to me for the Educational Success Consultation. His suggestion was to have an Open House breakfast for our own families and let them hear from our students and other parents about how exciting LHS is. Then have me give them some information they can share with new people and how to connect them to me.

What we have learned during this project:

One thing we learned about our parents is that not many are willing to put the time and energy in to make it work but are very quick to give ways to market. With this being said some of this is because we/I have not told them how they can help or how to do it. On the other hand we have found that there are always a few parents that are willing to put in the time and effort to market the school. Getting them a plan and potential resources they can be tremendous advocates for a school and provided needed help to the principal with limited staffing.

There is not the magic bullet out there that if you do this, whatever this is, that you will see enrollment spike every year. Being consistent in what you do over the course of time will be more beneficial and more productive.

Word of mouth and website are still 2 of the most powerful ways to recruit students. Changing just a few items on the website and phrasing some of the wording a little bit can go a very long

way to attracting families to call the school for more information. Also, we cannot assume that when we talk about word of mouth that everyone knows how to do that and what to say. Being intentional about teaching them how to do it needs to be a big focus.

Finally we learned that you cannot underestimate the actual product that you produce. This ties very closely to the word of mouth. If you don't take care of the business in the classroom and communicate with the parents, the positive word of mouth will just not be there.

What has changed in our school:

- We will be scaling back on the marketing items that cost us a lot of money to produce or put into outlets like magazines and TV/Radio spots.
- We are engaging our passionate parents in the word of mouth campaign
- LHS will have a Word of Mouth dinner for school families to come and hear about all the great things going on at LHS, while providing tools for them to be more effective at word of mouth
- The website is getting a major overhaul with what we put out for the public to see vs. our own families.
- Website will have more "Call to Actions"
- Principal is perfecting the Educational Success Consultation meeting agenda to increase opportunity to "close the deal" of enrollment.
- During the Word of Mouth dinners the mission and vision of LHS will be more clearly articulated
- Open Houses will have the component of trying to secure Educational Success Consultations

Both Positive changes and challenges encountered along the way:

Positive side of things this project has gotten me more focused on our mission and ministry and how to articulate that to the public. It has gotten my staff to focus more in their classroom to produce a better product. The challenges come with time. This is will be a slow process and it will take time to see consistent results in growth in enrollment. The flip side of this is that it is sustainable and can be used over and over again. With lack of good results from the traditional marketing venues we are excited to try something new that has worked for us before, word of mouth, without really tapping into it. Now we will be intentional and tap into it. This should be exciting.