

Maintaining Lutheran Education for the Next Generation:
How to stop the growing trend of schools closing their doors

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Purpose of the Project:

The economic strain and ever-changing goals of today's culture present unique challenges for marketing a tuition-based education. There are some startling statistics when I look around the state of Kansas. Three Lutheran schools have closed in the past three years in Kansas. Only two percent of the children in Wichita attend a Christ-centered school. The Christian foundation taught to the students at Holy Cross and excellent academics are priceless, but not seen as a high priority for the community. I need to discover new ways to share the importance of this foundation with the community members.

My goal was to develop a new marketing plan that would help me capture the strengths of the school and help the community understand the importance of the Christ-centered education. Marketing a school requires funds to support the new avenues. I would like to incorporate third-source funding options as a part of the marketing plan.

Project in Action:

I was blessed with an amazing consultant, Bob Rogalski, who shared a variety of ideas and tools that have helped other Christian schools sustain a healthy enrollment. I focused on a few key marketing ideas to build a stronger enrollment for the 2013-14 school year.

Our school website had a wealth of information, but didn't have a professional look and focused too much on the past. We spent the first part of the school year designing a new website and changing how we told our story. We have been blessed with a long rich history, but decided to focus on the importance of leaving a lasting legacy with the next generation. We also added an online enrollment form and payment option to make it easy and convenient to enroll in our school. I still meet with each family and give a tour, but wanted to focus on reserving a spot in our school.

New marketing materials were needed to accompany the new website. Mr. Rogalski encouraged me to make the investment in printed folders. I spent time researching options. Our school ordered new folders with our school name and logo in the fall. The folders give us a more professional look as we compete with other Christian schools in the area. Testimonies were also added at key transitions in our school. I have testimonies for our preschool, kindergarten & middle school. I asked three families to share their story about why they chose Holy Cross for their family. A letter from the principal was added to give it a personal touch from me. Our marketing materials have a professional look and a powerful story to grab a prospective family's attention.

Restructuring our open houses was the second focus of my project. I worked on organizing our Wichita Area Christian Schools Open House, which allowed us to use radio ads and newspaper ads since we pooled our resources with other local

Christian schools. Weekly open houses also became part of our normal routine. We offered “Welcoming Wednesdays” where families could stop by anytime during the school day for a tour and receive information. We advertised these on our website, church bulletin, and digital sign. I also ordered new vertical signs that said “School Open House”. These were placed at both entrances along the street to advertise the open house with parents driving by our school during school hours.

Maintaining contact with alumni is difficult for elementary schools. Most adults stay in contact with their colleges and high schools and typically forget their elementary schools. I advertised a “Wall of Distinction” with my annual newsletter, which is sent to all stakeholders. I attached a form for them to complete.

Stakeholder meetings have been poorly attended in the past. I wanted to highlight important information to all stakeholders in order to equip them to spread the good news about our school. I changed the name of the meeting to “Town Hall Meeting.” It is my goal to increase the participation of our stakeholders as we prepare for our accreditation site visit.

Step-up days were added to our school calendar this year. In the past we have had students transfer out of our school after preschool and after fifth grade. The students will transfer to the local public school. The idea was to create excitement and anticipation for the next school year. The students left chapel with next year’s teacher. The teachers led the students in an activity that they will do next year.

Second semester I focused on posting daily highlights on our school’s Facebook page. I’m blessed with being able to see our school in action every day. I love seeing the excitement created by the teachers in the classrooms. The goal was to post pictures and descriptions every day to increase our online exposure.

Results of the Project:

The new website has increased our activity level. We ran a press release within our community to encourage everyone to check out our new look. We had a larger number of families outside of Wichita contact us through our website. More community families completed the application online. The new look and layout has made it a user-friendly tool for prospective families.

The new marketing materials were worth the financial investment. Our main competitors have professional printed materials. The professional printed folders, testimonies & letter from the principal were necessary in order to compete with other Christian schools.

The Wichita Area Christian Schools Open Houses gave us a deeper level of exposure in the community. We were able to utilize more expensive marketing approaches since we pooled our resources. Our goal is to increase the awareness of the importance of Christian education. In order to sustain Christian education in

Wichita, we need to have more than 2% of children attending our schools. Our open house numbers were higher this year with the “Welcoming Wednesdays.” It also created an active touring environment, which showed parents that our school is a top choice in the community for Christian education. We are blessed with a large campus, but it is hard to maintain a high level of energy when it isn’t full of children. Moving the open houses to the school day helped us maintain an energetic environment since the hallways were full of students and staff.

We currently have four alumni highlighted on our “Wall of Distinction.” Each alumnus mentioned the strong education they received from Holy Cross and the importance of a strong faith foundation as an adult. My goal is to add new alumni each school year to keep the interest up with reading their success stories. Current Holy Cross families enjoyed reading the success stories of our alumni. This reminded them of the importance of a strong Christian education. Our families do have to make sacrifices and it is important to highlight how our school impacts the lives of the next generation.

The stakeholder meetings are a critical method of communicating or mission, vision, goals and strategic planning. Last year I only had five people attend the stakeholder meeting. The attendance went up fifty people this year with the Town Hall Meeting. I was very pleased with the high interest level. I also had a number of people request information from the meeting. I created a document which was email blasted out to all stakeholders to recap the important information.

The highlight of this entire project was observing the excitement level on step-up day. I made a few brief announcements and then dismissed the students by grade with the teacher they will have next year. The students were so excited! They cheered as I called out their class. I walked through the school during the activities and could feel the excitement. The students went home talking about what they would get to do next year. The teachers also enjoyed spending time with next year’s class and laying a foundation for the new relationships. I had the eighth grade students assist in the lower grades. This gave them an opportunity to step up as leaders of our school.

Daily posting on our school’s Facebook page took a higher level of time commitment than I had anticipated. I had to constantly remind the teachers to take pictures or invite me into their classrooms when an exciting learning opportunity took place in their classrooms. I also had to keep track of how many postings I did for each grade level. I wanted to make sure I gave equal exposure to all grade levels. Once we got into a rhythm, the postings were a great free marketing tool. We averaged 300 viewings for each posting. Parents and congregational members posted positive comments about the learning activities. I had parents and grandparents tell me how much they enjoyed seeing our school in action. Due to the success of the postings, we added a Facebook link on our school website to encourage prospective families to check us out. The biggest struggle with this project was constantly monitoring postings. If I received an email about a posting on our school’s Facebook page, I

would immediately read it to make sure it was a positive comment. I only had to delete one comment during second semester. I was pleased with the positive marketing exposure for this simple concept.

All praise and honor to God for our current enrollment numbers for next year. We have already reached our enrollment goal for K-8 with an increase of ten students. Our current enrollment for 2013-14 in grades K-8 has increased by thirteen students at this point. Our preschool enrollment is similar to enrollment numbers the past few years. We will continue to focus on marketing attention on preschool over the summer.

What I learned through this experience:

The Van Lunen Fellows program blessed the Holy Cross ministry and me. Bob Rogalski is a very talented consultant and he provided me with a wealth of ideas and materials to step up my marketing plan. I was tempted to try it all, but quickly found out that there aren't enough hours in the day to accomplish everything and do it well. I do not have an assistant or other staff member to assist with operating the school. This project showed me the importance of spending quality time on marketing and selecting a few key ideas each year to maintain a high quality level of implementation.

Christian education is at a critical phase for maintaining financial sustainability for the future. Administrators need to equip themselves with marketing and executive management tools to create a strong Christian education on a limited budget. It is easy for administrators to get caught up in the daily grind of the job and not spend quality time on marketing the school. I quickly realized that I must block out time each day to provide opportunities to market Holy Cross Lutheran School to the community.

I'm looking forward to improving the new marketing concepts that were initiated this past school year and adding a few new ideas this next school year. Constant exposure in the community will help us strengthen our reputation.