

Marketing South Christian High School

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What I did:

I chose to do my project in marketing because I thought it would be a way to make the greatest impact on the school. The first step I needed to take was to provide a rationale. I based the marketing project on the most fundamental idea on which South Christian High School is based. According to its constitution, SCHS "is dedicated to the proposition that all covenant children be instructed in the light of the Bible and reformed standards". (Constitution of the South Christian High School Association, May 2009) If we believe that all children of Christian parents are covenant children, we also believe that they should be instructed in the light of the Bible. It would naturally follow then that we commit ourselves to marketing the Christian education message to ALL Christian parents in the community.

SCHS began as an expression of faith by a group of people who were almost all CRC and who had many common expectations and traditions that made it, by default, a fairly exclusive institution--living in a small tent. SCHS was like a satellite of the CRC. Much has changed during the past 30 years. The student body represents many more denominations. The support of the traditional CRC base of people who will send their students to Christian school has diminished and has reduced enrollment. Parents think less in terms of commitment to Christian education and more like buyers in an education market.

While this competitive market atmosphere may create some anxieties and distractions from the task of educating, a denial of this reality will put a school on a path that has a dead end. A far more fruitful approach is to embrace the reality that parents behave more and more like buyers in a market and then to focus on the **opportunity** of that market. Rather than fear a competitive market, it is far more constructive to look at it as a huge opportunity for SCHS to act on the "proposition that all covenant children be instructed in the light of the Bible and reformed standards." It is time for SCHS to pitch a large tent and invite everyone in!

With this rationale, I proposed "that we implement a sustained, focused marketing strategy targeting parents of children who attend the various churches that do not have a Christian School tradition and are located in a four mile radius of SCHS." Without going into the details of the proposal--it was supported by the Marketing Committee, it was supported by the Finance Committee, and I had a donor committed to supporting half of the cost. Nevertheless, the Board would not support it and I have not fully understood why. To use a marketing term, this effort was going to be focused on acquiring leads--the weakest aspect of all of our marketing activities. I felt that not getting the Board to adopt this proposal was a huge failure. However, this failure was mitigated by other successful efforts.

In my second marketing effort (This one was successful) I reached out to parents of a local charter school. I spoke with the principal and was granted access to parents of the middle school students. He helped with extending an invitation to the parents to attend an event in which the SCHS story was presented along with moving testimonials from parents. Eight families attended the event and 9 students enrolled as a result (one family has triplets!) In this effort we acquired the leads, closed all but one family, and hope to retain them for four years.

A third marketing effort revolved around using the website as a marketing tool. While the website is an important tool for maintaining retention rates, the following efforts were focused on acquiring leads. We refreshed the website making it mobile friendly and adding two promotional videos which are highlighted on the homepage. We also established a practice of posting content on social media a minimum of three times per week. In order to apply more resources to creating content for social media and the website, I tapped the creativity and excellent writing skills of our Media Center Director. Her position has diminished over the past few years which made an opportunity for a natural shift in her duties and a change to her title, Director of Publication. To assist her, all staff has been enlisted to feed her ideas from what goes on in the daily life of the school. Overall, along with staff being enlisted to bring content ideas, there has been an increased sense of taking advantage of many more events and activities by communicating them to the community.

A fourth seemingly small strategy which turns out to be very effective is to clearly communicate to teachers when prospective families are coming to visit and, specifically, if a prospective student will be visiting their class. In this way teachers can be prepared to welcome visiting students. Historically, we have had good success in closing leads, but have redoubled efforts to enhance the school visit experience for new families. We have increased awareness among all staff and implemented an “all hands on deck” approach to visiting families.

Finally, I implemented a practice of sending a weekly teacher devotional to all of our parents. The intent is to contribute to the retention of students. If teachers are sharing their own spiritual journeys through this weekly communication, parents can know first hand that their children are in the hands of spiritual mentors who are faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. The result is that it solidifies the decision to have their kids in a Christian School. (Reduces buyers’ remorse.)

What I learned:

Marketing efforts engage many people in a variety of roles in the school. While staff needs to be hired to create quality content for publication everyone needs to be thinking about opportunities for creating the content and feeding them to those creating it.

Another very important concept that I have learned is that content is king on a few levels. Parents who spend a lot of money to have their kids in a Christian school need to be continually fed with affirmations that they are receiving a good value. So, work needs to be done to monitor the parents' values such as academics, safety and security, and faith development. They need to hear that what they value is happening from day to day.

Additionally, we need to increase the level of sophistication in how we use our website. The content needs to be structured in such a way as to optimize its standing in search engine results. Our Director of Publications is working on structuring content accordingly. We also need to create more data results from our Google Analytics reports. We have begun to set up page profiles to distinguish website visitors. Based on what we learn about how visitors are navigating the website, we will target our content more effectively.

Armed with the success of some of our marketing efforts, I plan to go back to the Board of Directors to pursue the concept of pitching a bigger tent and extending the reach of our marketing message. I believe that clarifying some marketing strategies and establishing some clear goals will bring them to a conclusion that the future sustainability of our enrolment requires that we build wider doors and open them up for everyone who desires a Christian education for their children.

The Difference

The most surprising difference that we have experienced is that the enrolment for 2014/15 was projected to be 605 with a freshman class of 150. Current numbers for 2014/15 are 627 with a freshman class of 174! While we cannot directly connect our marketing efforts to all of this increase, we clearly see a direct connection in two areas. First, our targeted efforts in the local charter school produced the clearest results. In the past we typically enrolled 2 or 3 students and we increased it to 9. Our presentation and conversations with these parents have confirmed that our efforts influenced their decisions. Second, we saw a connection between our increased enrolment and the improvements we made to the website. Based on conversations with some of our leads that researched our website, we have received anecdotal evidence that the improvements to the website have been noticed.

We are least certain about our marketing efforts and a connection to a 5 percent increase in the percentage of students coming from the feeder schools. While we can't directly link the increase to our marketing efforts, we will continue to reach out to the feeder school parents with our message.

Another difference that we have experienced is an increase in fundraising for the annual fund and for the one to one technology program. We are certain that part of this increase can be attributed to the increased messaging about the one to one program which supports our message of academic excellence.

Marketing efforts that involve the staff have made a difference in the culture of the school. An awareness has grown among all employees that there is no longer a presumption that parents of our traditional feeder schools will send their kids to SCHS. As a result, the collective awareness about how we communicate and how much we communicate with parents has taken on a marketing flavor. While the last 4-5 years have been characterized by concern about increased competition from local public

and charter high schools and decrease enrolment, the abrupt departure from this pattern brought a sense of relief and, more positively, a sense of strength and sustainability.