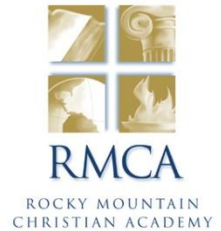


2010-11 Van Lunen Applied Project

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Family Recruitment and Retention a comprehensive marketing strategy



Project Overview: The aim of this project was to better understand the factors behind a 20% decline in enrollment over the past 3 years (500 to 400 students), and initiate strategies that would:

1. stabilize enrollment in the short term by increasing retention rates
2. increase enrollment by “adding to our numbers.”

To achieve these goals, a five person team was assembled to study the issue (see commissioning document attached), then tasked with designing and implementing internal and external marketing strategies to reverse the downward trends.

As a result of this process, we gained a better understanding of our constituency, executed a comprehensive marketing plan, and realized increases in retention and enrollment rates.

What we did...

focused on growing enrollment

At its peak enrollment in 2007-08, Rocky Mountain Christian Academy (RMCA) served just over 500 students in its early childhood and K-8th grade programs. By the 2010-11 school year, enrollment had dropped to just under 400 students. This 20% decline in a few short years negatively impacted programs, staffing, and community perception. The focus of this project was to design and implement strategies to reverse these trends.

Key Strategies:

1. **market research:** competitive analysis was conducted by utilizing internal focus groups, and by completing Gracework's Parent Satisfaction and Referral Survey.
2. **branding analysis:** based on the market research, a new tag-line and "marketing message" was developed that highlighted three key market distinctives:
 - a. *building academic confidence*
 - b. *growing sincere faith*
 - c. *experiencing authentic community*
 - d. *Tag Line: connecting education, faith, and family*
3. **word-of-mouth referrals:** collateral print material was produced and techniques were developed for current parents to refer the school to their spheres of influence.
4. **print advertising:** the team designed fresh ads that incorporated our marketing messages and increased our advertising presence in local newspapers and magazines.
5. **internet, email, and social media advertising:** website domain was optimized for related searches. A FaceBook page and "Constant Contact" email newsletters were initiated.
6. **print materials update:** although a logo change was not necessary, a fresh and common look was designed. This included identifying common publication standards.
7. **website redesign:** the schools website was completely redesigned and refocused to center primarily on external student recruitment.
8. **admissions pipeline and process:** redesigned a clear process that takes a prospective parent from first contact to first day. This included assessing and realigning admission's personnel.
9. **reenrollment events:** specific information events aimed at current families were increased and redesigned to highlight our marketing message.
10. **communication and vision casting:** through print and electronic newsletters, short-term goals were highlighted related to our marketing message and long-term school expansion goals were announced .

How we did it...

engaged a marketing team

In early August, we assembled a five-person marketing team. As the head of school, I gave a small stipend to a parent who was both willing and able to lead a team effort to achieve the project goals. A team commissioning document was developed (see attached). Other than team leader, the team was made up of paid administrative staff who helped support the process.

We also utilized a consultant who had expertise in marketing at the higher education level. His knowledge in market research and help in looking at the systems in our admissions pipeline process was invaluable.

The results we experienced...

growth

1. **A recruitment and retention plan was developed.** Simply having a written plan in place with people identified to execute was half the battle. New systems and practices are in place for future years.
2. **Early childhood enrollment increased 20% by Christmas.** Primarily utilizing word-of-mouth strategies combined with some small financial incentives (waived enrolment fee), we were able to add new students at our youngest grade levels. This helped stabilize the budget.
3. **Year-to-year retention rates in K-8th grades were increased from 85% to 95%.** We experienced some of our best retention rates ever, especially at a historically problematic transition point: the elementary to middle school transition.
4. **Net enrollment for the subsequent school year increased by 3-5%.** There is no doubt that a stabilizing of the economy in our area was a major factor in this. But our outside inquiry's were increased over the previous two years.
5. **A sense of institutional momentum was gained.** Two years of rapid enrollment decline left teachers and parents wondering if the school was doing alright. By turning the momentum upward rather than downward, there was a greater sense of confidence in our constituency.

What we learned...

marketing is hard but fruitful work

- **Marketing is not a “four-letter-word.”** A school is made up of educators, not marketers. An institutional emphasis on marketing was not always appreciated. We had to work to help our staff and teachers see marketing as simply telling our story better to more people.
- **Map out a plan and delegate, delegate, delegate.** Although we had many “ideas” we didn’t have a clear process or timeline for implementing them. The head of school was too involved which resulted in the team deferring decisions and actions to him. This resulted in a lot of last minute projects that taxed our staff.
- **Word of Mouth marketing is the most effective tool.** Many of us viewed marketing as simply doing more advertising. But when we analyzed why families would call or come for a tour, it was because they had been referred. When families left the school, it was because someone had complained about the school or had an unresolved issue.
- **Recruitment and retention is everybody’s job.** Some viewed marketing as the job of a few. But we learned that some families left the school and others didn’t come because of their experience with teachers or staff. We wrestled with making “customer service” and school “buzz” an institutional mind set.
- **Focus more on keeping the students already enrolled.** Putting more effort and money into internal marketing vs. external marketing is more fruitful. We planned several “touch points” for families to learn more about the upcoming grades and ask questions. Surprisingly, many parents tended to make their decision to stay at the school an annual basis. They therefore needed to be reminded of the reason’s they chose the school again and again.
- **Enlist parent help.** The biggest mistake we made was making marketing effort the responsibility of a few paid staff. After we conducted the parent satisfaction and referral survey, over 40 parents volunteered to help with marketing.
- **Sharpen the message.** In our market, there are a lot of educational options—most of them free! We discovered that it was important to highlight our educational distinctives without being weird. In other words use common language to explain differences. Explaining how we are different more than how we are better seemed to resonate more.
- **Utilize electronic media well.** Our website is like a front door. It communicates a first impression. After redesigning our website, we received several comments from perspective parents on how attractive and useful it was. And although we started a Facebook page, we didn’t really use it well.
- **Offer generous financial aid.** Fifty percent of something is better than 100% of nothing. Because we had excess capacity, we offered generous aid to keep families who might otherwise leave due to finances.

Supplement: marketing team commissioning document

Commission:

The family recruitment and retention team is charged with developing and implementing a comprehensive family recruitment and retention strategy aimed at positioning the school for enrollment growth.

Team Outcomes:

- ◆ To develop a written report and plan that can be disseminated to school leadership and key influencers.
- ◆ To develop and implement systems and processes that address outward bound recruitment, admissions procedures, and assimilation practices.
- ◆ To develop a plan-implementation schedule with key events, tasks, and deadlines.
- ◆ To make recommendations to the RMCA administrative team on staffing and structural strategies that impact recruitment and retention.
- ◆ To analyze and understand historical attrition trends and make corresponding recommendations for increasing retention rates.
- ◆ To analyze and understand any market and demographic trends impacting enrollment and develop key messages and strategies for greater market penetration.
- ◆ To ensure that RMCA's materials, both print and electronic are properly developed and branded for message and harmonized for look.
- ◆ To develop a new website consistent with the above goal.
- ◆ To recommend internal and external marketing and communication strategies.
- ◆ To develop key messages, materials, and metrics for evaluation.
- ◆ To include an estimate of all costs associated with implementing the plan.

Team processes:

- ◆ The team will work in conjunction with Mike Morony and MMC consulting services.
- ◆ The team shall thoroughly review any data and prayerfully consider recommend strategies. The team must seek input from a variety of outside sources throughout the process, including at least one other Christian school's approach to marketing.
- ◆ The preparation of the report shall be a team effort.

Decision Making:

The team chair shall be responsible for initiating and facilitating all meetings and work of the team. The team report shall be adopted by the team by a simple majority vote of the members on the team. All strategies and marketing messages shall be approved by the headmaster.

Date of initial team meeting: TBA

Deadline to achieve all team outcomes: Develop and execute approved strategies as quickly as possible. Time line TBD

Budget: Initial consulting fees shall be negotiated by the RMCA headmaster. Budget for additional staffing and marketing strategies shall be proposed by the team.