

“Telling our Story for Growth and Impact”

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After the “Real Teal” week at the Franciscan Retreat Center in Phoenix, Arizona, I came down from Camelback Mountain re-energized for my Van Lunen project: to grow the Enrollment at Hunter Classical Christian School. Our school was still quite small at 21 students and was half-way through its sixth year. To our advantage, the classical, Christian methodology and mission statement were well-defined. We knew who we were and what we were striving to be and to do. It was clear, however, we needed to tell our story to more people through social media marketing; special events and other means; *and* we needed to share our message effectively against our competition. My goal was to increase enrollment for the 2018-19 school year by at least 10%, and to continue to sustain slow, steady growth for the next five years, in order to become tuition-driven and ultimately serve grades K-8th with solid, foundational learning “for the glory of God” and “for the health of the family.”

Richmond, VA has many independent schools. Recently, closer to the city center, another classical, Christian school has seen rapid growth over the past 5 years, and purchased and renovated historic buildings to the tune of millions of dollars. By contrast, our classical, Christian program is located in a lovely, rural setting, historic Dover Baptist Church, on the western edge of the city. The city continues to grow in this western direction. Our campus is well-located to highways to many points of the city, and is only about 4 miles from a 1200 student, well-established pre-K- 12th secular program which costs approximately \$22K per student per year. We are 1/3rd of that cost. We are also within 15 minutes of two other single sex independent schools of approximately 600 students each, expensive, pre-k-12, with loyal alumni

bases, but which have agendas which supplant traditional Biblical understanding. Several smaller Christian schools, which lack the rigor of classical, Christian curriculum, offer options in our region. Growing enrollment would require telling our story well, utilizing social media more effectively, creatively expanding our parent outreach, increasing our Board commitment to enrollment growth, and sharpening our message around our “Portrait of the Graduate.”

WHAT WE DID:

- 1) Added two new Board members, both of whom had school experience.
- 2) In August 2017, we gathered Stakeholders to form a “Social Media Task Force,” which began meeting in late summer and fall. This group was made up of the Board Chair, two Board members, a science teacher with marketing expertise, and our Accountant. They met, strategized, posted events and worked together with the Parents’ League Chair and another Faculty member to share events at school on Social Media. One Board Member’s daughter worked in Social Media Marketing. She consulted with us, underwritten by her father, to help divide all of our social media messaging into “Four Buckets.” Facebook, Instagram or Web-based marketing needed to fall into one of the four “buckets” or categories.
- 3) On August 7th, we held a “Promoter’s Reception” where we showcased our Mission, Vision, and Portrait of the Graduate. We gave attendees business cards with a “Jim Mackenzie phrase”: “Come see what makes us different.” We handed out a compelling piece on Classical, Christian Education. We showed a video on classical education. We shared Jim Mackenzie’s bar-graph about the various effectiveness of ways of Marketing: Print, Signage, Radio, Direct Mail, Online, Church and Word of Mouth, showing the clear advantage of Word of Mouth Marketing. We asked parents to talk to people at their churches, play groups, or neighborhoods.

- 4) We held a HCCS Spirit Night at Chick Fil A, on August 17th, 2017, for our Parent community and extended Family members. It was well-attended.
- 5) We improved our Print media messaging: Re-worked a print ad to include Jim Mackenzie's phrasing of our message in a more evocative, visionary way (less commodity-focused):
"Imagine your child...learning in a lovely, natural setting...growing strong in character and academics...led by passionate, caring teachers who inspire students to sustain excellence over time, being equipped to excel..." We created a Curriculum Scope and Sequence guide with the Mission and Vision included as well as key offerings, and Parent Testimonials.
- 6) We held other events: Christmas Reception for Lessons and Carols; John Rosemond, Parenting Expert, spoke to a full house on February 13th ("The Obedient Child in 3 Simple Steps."); and a "March Madness" Dad's Basketball Event, with "Pizza, Wings, and Cigars" at a Board Member's home. On April 14th, we held our spring fundraiser, re-naming it the "Spring Fling." This event was a barbecue dinner with blue grass music, a Silent Auction and a "Basket Bidding," that engaged almost all of our Stakeholders. It was a lovely evening, and we hope helped develop a culture of Giving. We implemented a reading initiative, called "Reading Pals", where our older students visited preschools and read to children and, left behind laminated bookmarks with "Readers are Leaders", our Mission statement, and contact info. We promoted our May 17th Spring Concert to potential donors and prospective parents through an invitation, and held a pre-concert at a local retirement community, as a community outreach and ministry.
- 7) We asked for a new playground from the church, with swings, tunnel and climbing wall, and it was installed by the Church just after Christmas, to the delight of our students and parents.
- 8) In February we hired Jim Mackenzie to help us launch a Drip Campaign to educate our community on the advantages of classical, Christian education. We began using Constant

Contact to invite people to the John Rosemond event, and expanded it for the Drip Campaign.

Following Jim's advice, we re-worked our School Profile, Mission, Vision and Values statements; and our Tuition structure sheet. We captured emails of those on our website and only provided tuition information if the viewer signed up to receive the "packet" of information.

9) To reach Homeschoolers, we created a unique "L.A.M.P.S." program for the Arts, an acronym for Latin, Art, Music, PE, and Science, which homeschoolers could apprise themselves of at a given price point for the Spring Quarter of 2018. The Board approved the program. We received positive feedback for including the Homeschool community for thinking of them, specifically.

10) Each Board Member received a copy of *Giving and Getting in the Kingdom* by R. Mark Dillon, referred to us by Van Lunen's Cathy VanderBrug.

11) We launched a 13 month, 90K targeted Go Fund Me Campaign for scholarships.

WHAT I LEARNED

I learned that the Van Lunen business management approach, readings, presentations and advice, as well as spiritual support, are invaluable to Heads of Schools, both personally and professionally. It has also become clear that many people pulling their "oar" in the same direction, has sparked energy and positive input from all constituents. Our Social Media Taskforce and in particular, Board member input, has enlivened our website and given us a more effective on-line media presence. Our website is vibrant and actively updated in a way that it was not: "pushing out" profiles of special academic offerings (science labs, guest speakers, history projects, field trips), and that resonates well with parents. Word-of-Mouth marketing has brought church friends and young parents to Open Houses. Those people, in turn, have referred people to us. This coordinated effort of leveraging the talents on our Board, faculty and community, has worked well.

I also learned that not every idea works equally well. We had no immediate “takers” of the LAMPS program for this quarter, but we do have a family excited to sign up for the Fall. I learned that serving in the Kingdom, and “feeding His sheep” is exhausting and exhilarating at the same time. Clearly, a “multi-pronged”, “all-hands-on-deck” approach brings results.

WHAT DIFFERENCE DID IT MAKE IN OUR SCHOOL

Admissions at this point, May of 2018, is already up significantly from last year. We have met our goal of 5 new students, and we still have 9 contracts in the pipeline and 3.5 months before the start of the school year. Our on-line presence in the community has improved significantly, and our Drip Campaign has begun educating the parent community about the advantages of Christian and specifically classical, Christian curriculum. We have profiled our “Portrait of the Graduate” — a student, Ashton Applewhite, who came to us a weak student and not confident academically, has, after 3 years, been transformed into an excellent student. On his last report card at a larger, secular school where his family has a heritage, he made “3 A’s and a2 A+s”. His father credits HCCS with turning him around academically and says, “HCCS is the best thing to ever happen to Ashton!” We will feature this story on our social media, latest print newsletter the *The Herald*, and in person. Our events, in particular the “Spring Fling,” have been wonderful from the community-engagement standpoint. Parents are excited about our school. That said, there are still mystifying anomalies, such as the two families who claim to love us but won’t return contracts until the gender distribution in their classrooms is optimal for their particular child. Overall, our school is healthier than a year ago. Although we have more funds to raise, I am pleased to report that we are sharing classical, Christian education in an expanded way. Best of all, our Mission and Vision are bearing fruit, and we have “a hope and a future. “ (Jer. 29:11)