

Van Lunen Project: Marketing the Message

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Emanuel Lutheran School serves grades Prek-8 and is located on a village main street in Patchogue, NY. Since 1957, Emanuel has seen many trends in enrollment. There was a time when no intentional marketing was required and students just came through the door filling our classrooms!! However, recently, our enrollment has been declining and our future was questionable. Through an internal review process, we discovered that we were known for the activities we offered, often being described as a “family school providing an excellent academic program”. Although positive, these characteristics also described many other schools in the area. The quest for finding our *unique* qualities began. It was determined that we would place an intentional focus on Christian character development, using the Fruits of the Spirit. In addition, we would use the Schools of Fish! by Strand, Christensen, and Halper to deliver this cultural change in a format that would increase morale and motivation. This focus would provide a foundation for our students to live a successful, joyful life!! Using measurable tools would prove its effect on academic, social, physical, and spiritual growth. As God directed our path, we became excited as we noticed the results of this cultural change. It was *urgent* that we begin to get the message to our current families, church members, and the community. So...with the assistance of my Van Lunen consultant, Courtney Lampen, we began my project “Marketing the Message” to the community. A focus to increase enrollment and retention, while providing donors/supporters a clear understanding of the value of an education at Emanuel Lutheran School, would be our goal.

Bringing awareness to the community was essential. Since Emanuel Lutheran School is solely an outreach ministry of Emanuel Lutheran Church, we do not have area congregations providing direct support. Therefore, contacting pastors in the area became a priority. I spent time visiting with other LCMS pastors during a circuit meeting held at Emanuel in October. In order for our new mission focus to be realized, I asked each pastor to complete an attribute survey indicating five characteristics they felt were important for the children in their congregation. Next, I discussed how we created an intentional plan to develop those attributes within the framework of the Fruits of the Spirit and the ideas presented in Schools of Fish!. A positive response was indicated as some of the pastors offered to lead Chapel services for our students, and others requested copies of the attribute survey to bring home. In addition, tours were given to other non-Lutheran pastors from neighboring churches. As they visited, teachers and students spoke about the difference the intentionality the Fruits of the Spirit mission focus was making in the classrooms and their lives.

As our enrollment numbers were also declining in our preschool, we established initiatives to create a Feeder-School program. Letters of introduction, including an invitation to tour our school, were sent. Follow up phone calls were made. Preschools in the area were sent Open House postcards and flyers to display. A free ticket to enjoy a session in the Bounce House was offered with an invitation to attend our first annual Harvest Fair & Trunk or Treat. Reusable bags with our school’s name and logo were distributed to all that attended. I also participated in a local Lutheran church’s Spring Fair. As I set up a display table, I brought Emanuel’s message to the community. Connections were made with the

pastor and preschool staff, as well. To increase our presence on Main Street, beautiful, eye catching banners were displayed on our front lawn advertising our Open House and Register Now opportunities. Postcards were also distributed to doctor's offices, dance studios, and diners inviting those interested to "Take One". Custom posters were displayed along Main Street in stores, business and churches supporting our school.

Our focus on Social Media included starting a Twitter account and increasing our postings on Facebook. A faculty member was given the responsibility to manage on our Facebook presence, and she did a fantastic job!! A stipend was offered for her time and daily commitment to this project.

With so many changes, it was also important for the faculty, school board, and our Parent Ambassadors to know WHAT to say! Time was spent discussing what they wanted families to know and elevator speeches were written by each of the groups.

Bringing awareness of the cultural changes to the members of Emanuel Lutheran Church was also important. Invitations were sent to the congregation to join us for our Veteran's Day celebrations, Thanksgiving Feast, and special pancake lunches at Christmas and Easter. Encouraging tours of the classrooms, we held an Open House immediately following Lutheran School's Sunday worship service where a curriculum fair was highlighted. Recently, our Art Show exhibit was left on display in the fellowship hall for church members to enjoy during the coffee hour. Finally, Colossians 1:10 was chosen as our school's Bible verse "*Live a life worthy of the Lord.....bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God.*"

A focus was placed on increasing the number of leads into registrations. An "Each One Reach One Campaign" encouraged families to prayerfully consider to whom they may share their story expressing the value of an education at Emanuel Lutheran. Staff discussed how to improve greeting new families that were touring. Thank you notes were sent to all visiting families which also highlighted the attributes parents indicated were important for their child to develop. Following this contact, a Parent Ambassador called the prospective family to offer an opportunity for a personal perspective and answer any additional questions.

Procedures and formalities were reviewed when taking a call from prospective families. An emphasis was to make a personal connection and encourage a tour to see the value in the cost of the tuition. An intake form was created for phone inquiries so that critical data would not be missed. Doing so removed the focus from just calling for price comparisons and provided an opportunity to share what was unique about Emanuel's programming.

Since Emanuel has also experienced issues with retention, efforts were also concentrated in this area. Showing our intentionality for change and partnering with families, a survey was sent just before parent /teacher conferences offering an opportunity to note growth in the attributes they indicated were important at the beginning at the year. Progress was discussed each trimester, and indicated on the report cards.

Parents representing different grades and length of relationship with the school, were invited for Parent Satisfaction Interviews. I discovered opportunities for ministry and enjoyed the 1:1 time with families not frequently in the building. We discussed what was working and what we could be doing better. I also asked for prayer requests and suggestions for how we could improve our support of their families.

Maintaining a slideshow with current pictures was kept running on a TV located in a prominent location on the Main Office counter. Parents and visitors enjoyed viewing how our mission was growing during the school year.

Innovative programs were also developed including “Smartie Visits” and the distribution of FISH TALES. We discovered that placing an emphasis on goals using the Fruits of the Spirit as a tool, increased the depth of our academic program. Each time a student achieved a milestone, they were sent to my office where we discussed which Fruit of the Spirit they used to reach this accomplishment. As a fun token reward, a roll of “Smartie” candies were given to emphasize the *smart choices* they made in order to reach their goal! In addition, special certificates were distributed on Fridays during our weekly Praise and Recognition. This teacher-created certificate was used to recognize students, teachers, and sometimes even parents, who demonstrated a component of the Schools of Fish! philosophy (Play, Make Their Day, Choose Your Attitude and Be There) and which Fruit of the Spirit was utilized. As the year progressed, we spent more and more time distributing these recognitions as students became excellent at recognizing who was choosing to live by showing their fruit.

Several challenges were encountered throughout this process. It took significant effort to work toward creating a culture defining Emanuel’s uniqueness AND let everyone know of the changes we were realizing at the same time. Creating the tools to capture, measure, and share the stories were also difficult since this process was new. It became clear that we needed to provide clarity and consistency in our program. We are looking forward to repeating those elements that proved successful.

There have been so many lessons learned!!! First, it was crystal clear that God was present during this entire process. He made it possible for the mission moments to create a sustainable enthusiasm. Second, it became incredibly obvious that relationships with all those vested in the school need to be intentionally cultivated during the school year. Parents appreciated the opportunity to meet with me and learn how much I value their input (one of my strengths). Next, as old habits die hard, I need to remember to speak about the specific mission focus at ALL events. This was a year of hit or miss. I have made notes in next year’s folders to not miss the opportunity!! Finally, I found it reassuring to see the enthusiasm and support from so many of the pastors that came to visit the school. I am eager to strengthen these relationships.

What difference has this project made to Emanuel Lutheran School? This process of marketing the message has brought clarity to our ministry. In so doing, steps have been taken to initialize the unity between Emanuel Lutheran Church and School. Additional congregational members have expressed an increase of appreciation and support for the ministry of the school by noting the intentionality in our mission focus. Several church members have volunteered their time by assisting for the year as a reading partner in our first grade class or volunteering at our annual banquet and golf outing. We have enjoyed our largest attendance at this year's banquet and raised the most money, in recent history, during our golf outing. As a result, we exceeded our budget line for fundraising by \$15,000!! In addition, our First annual Harvest Fair and Trunk or Treat could not have happened if not for the tremendous assistance of Emanuel's Evangelism Committee.

We have had numerous opportunities to state and restate who we are and what we do that is different from other schools in our community. As a result, we have heard numerous reports from prospective families noting that they have heard about the good reputation of our school. This positive Word of Mouth is significant to our growth, giving us hope for a sustainable future!

Additional initiatives are being developed to create a trend for increasing our enrollment and retention rate.

- Our Marketing Committee will be engaging volunteers to determine strategies for reaching the community with our message.
- Video clip messages inserted in our weekly newsletter will provide an avenue for delivering mission impact stories, as well as adding interest to our communications that parents will appreciate.
- A mobile app is being designed and will include features such as the ability to make donations and pay fees/tuition online. This convenient communication will allow us to promote events and fundraisers in addition to sharing mission moments.
- As we continue to review data collected through completed playbooks, our mission and vision statements will be updated and our core values highlighted.
- Our finance team is investigating an incentive bonus for all staff when enrollment benchmarks are met. It is a goal to share this with the staff when they return for "Welcome Back Days" in August.

- Partial funding was received through the Lutheran Crusader Fund to finance the cost of a commercial that will be aired locally during next year's registration period.
- Our programming committee is investigating methods of surveying families to evaluate parent satisfaction on a broad scale.
- A system for alerting families when their child visits my office for a "Smartie Visit" will increase awareness of the depth of our mission.
- Finally, we will continue to explore new ways to share with Emanuel's congregation the stories that result from the school ministry.

We are confident that these plans will continue to bring our message to current and prospective families, delivering our mission of intentional Christian character development to the community. In addition, we expect donors and supporters will embrace the transformation we are making in the lives of families resulting in continued growth of financial giving.

It is with heartfelt appreciation I thank *the entire* Van Lunen faculty and my consultant, Courtney Lampen, for their immeasurable patience and sharing of their expertise throughout this past year. I will remain forever grateful for all that I have learned, and the people I have met as a Van Lunen Fellow. I pray God will continue to bless each of you as you affect the lives of so many students and families in Christian schools by equipping their leaders with the necessary tools to serve.

Serving Him with a grateful heart... this report is respectfully submitted by,

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