



Promotion & Marketing 101

Maximizing Recruitment and Retention

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Description of Project Focus

Stated succinctly, Vernon Christian School was experiencing a significant downturn in enrolment (26% over 4 years) and we needed to understand the reasons for this decline and respond appropriately to them. We believe that our greatest responses were to actively promote the great school that we are and build support and affirmation within our school community. To that end, with significant input and advice from Bob Rogalski personally and through his exceptional and highly recommended resource, Marketing Christian Schools – The Definitive Guide, we examined all aspects of our brand, public presence, external and internal marketing and communication processes. What we found is that we were lacking, significantly, across the board. Subsequently, we spent the year analyzing, surveying parents, and augmenting anything and everything that could position Vernon Christian School more positively with prospective families and facilitate better retention of existing constituents. Here's what we accomplished:

Identifying our Differential Advantage

In the marketing world they say the 'trick' to 'selling' a product is twofold: Presenting a differential advantage (something that makes this product different and better than the competitors), and presenting a memorable, penetrating image of the product (the brand). It is very difficult to be all things to all people. Making the choice for Christian education is a personal choice. And yet the acceptance of the value of an education at Vernon Christian School – the very reason why the choice is ultimately made, needed to be identified. The 'reasons list' kept coming back to the fact that at VCS, we offer a complete education. We state on our website, "Vernon Christian School exists to prepare students for leadership and service by providing the best in spiritual, intellectual, practical and physical development within a Christian learning community." This is what sets VCS apart – academically, spiritually, and socially we provide a complete learning environment for students in the greater Vernon area. We can and do

hold our students to a higher level of standards because we have defined it by the one designed by our Creator, our Lord – not the world.

A. Create an Identifiable VCS Brand and Standards of Communication:

In the winter of 2011, the administration staff tendered the design of a new logo. Out of 300 submissions, one was chosen to represent VCS. The new logo design provides an updated professional look, plus a cleaner and more academic image. The new logo will be included on all promotional material for the school. Publication standards have been addressed and the staff is being educated in the importance of our 'brand' representing us to our own constituents as well as the external world.

B. Print Materials Update:

All print materials for the school were more than 5 years out of date. Rack cards, a promotional magazine, financial partnership postcards and recruitment postcards are among print materials that were developed and published. All business cards, school letterhead and school apparel will be updated to reflect our brand.

C. Website Design:

Our www.VCS.ca website is a powerful tool. It serves 2 distinct groups: current constituents and potential constituents. There is static information designed to provide the reader with the history, philosophies, handbooks and goals of VCS. There is also the news, calendar, class, and school updates. The latter, the 'News & Info' pages are designed to communicate about upcoming and past events. These pages take constant supervision and revision, are the most demanding of time, and have the potential to generate the most traffic – new & old – to our website.

Over the past 3 years, with a desire to project a professional appearance, the VCS website has undergone substantial change. During the past 6 months, 2 more changes occurred. To increase donor accessibility, 'Donate VCS' was added. Additionally, 'VCS Pulse' was added as the go to place for event and activity information and highlights.

We began to clarify and address the needs of current family users. A number of requests have been made regarding how current families would like to be kept informed. The website program we have subscribed to will ultimately provide the parameters by which these needs will be met. Great improvements were made to release timely information regarding upcoming events and capturing the highlights of past events. We recognize the enormous power and potential of our school's website to influence our own constituents and promote our school beyond our walls.

D. Recruitment: Word-of-Mouth, Website & Social / Local Media

Word-of-Mouth strategies, website and the use of social media are 3 areas VCS needs to be committed to keeping current and active.

To increase a 'local buzz' about VCS, efforts were made to increase contact with local media. Numerous articles were submitted and invites to attend VCS events were extended. We have been satisfied with the increased support of the local media this year.

We have also established a number of Recruitment Events offered to promote VCS. This year we hosted the following:

- **VCS Showcase** – Hosted by Administration, all Staff and students
- **Wednesday Open Houses** – Hosted by Administration
- **Saturday Fun Days** – Hosted by Elementary Campus Staff and Administration
- **Pre-K to K Jump Up** – Hosted by Elementary Campus Staff and Administration
- **Ready, Set, Learn** – Hosted by Elementary Campus Staff and Administration
- **Spring Drama Production** – Hosted by Secondary Campus Staff and Administration
- **Market Day** – Hosted by Elementary Campus Staff and students
- **Friends of VCS Appreciation Day** – Hosted by Staff and Administration

E. Community Building:

Through numerous focus group studies, formal and informal surveys, we realized that one of the most underutilized yet valuable promotion tools was our own VCS community. The shared belief in the value of a Christian education unites families and individuals from many Christian faith groups spanning generations and bridging local community members (families, staff, volunteers), businesses, churches, and organizations that ultimately create the VCS community. We recognize the need to facilitate growth to move our constituents beyond the role of 'education consumer' toward 'education partner'.

To that end we hosted a number of Community Events to promote VCS internally.

- **Back to school BBQ** – Hosted by Administration and Staff
- **New Parents Orientation** – Hosted by Administration
- **Christmas Celebration** – Hosted by Elementary Campus Staff and students
- **Saturday Fun Days** – Hosted by Elementary Campus Staff and Administration
- **Family Fun Day** – Hosted by VCS Board, Staff, Administration and students
- **Grandparents' Day** – Hosted by Staff, Administration and students

Additionally we hosted 3 key fundraising events that also serve as Community Building and Recruitment events.

- **Golf Tournament** – Hosted by VCS Board
- **3 on 3 Hockey Tournament** – Hosted by VCS Board
- **Spring Auction** – Hosted by VCS Board

F. Analysis & Commentary

Promotion and Marketing has never been an area of strength for Vernon Christian School. Over the years we have had many satisfied parents and have turned out an increasingly stellar product in our students. We have tried to develop a 'Heart for God and a Mind for Truth' and it shows. Our students do well academically and are well supported in our learning community. In some ways our school is the best-kept secret in Vernon. As demographics dictate lower enrolment at our primary entrance levels and as tighter economic factors create tensions that are causing some of our families to migrate, we are convinced that we offer a great service to families who would choose a complete, Christian education for their children and that we must advocate for role as an educational option for parents. We have a tremendous resource in our staff and educational program that forms the foundation of our school's success.

To promote VCS by building our Word-of-Mouth program is, hands down, our BEST form of advertising...both internally and externally. We MUST get our parents talking about what they love about their experience in our school community.

We recognize that in order to foster credibility in the outside world, we actually have to put effort, time and resources into creating and sustaining a legitimate 'brand' that captures who we are and will be the flag we carry in all our correspondence, publications, and promotional materials. We must market our school. We absolutely believe that God leads people to us...but we have a role and responsibility to celebrate and promote the good work HE is doing here and that is increasingly a drawing card for families who desire more and something different for their children. At the end of the day, despite economic challenges and demographic tensions, parents WILL continue to pursue and choose an educational program that supports their values and goals.

Knowing our intentions for Promotion and Marketing of our school would require significant time and resources, the VCS Board of Directors had the wisdom and vision to invest in a staff position called Communication & Marketing Coordinator. This role is key to our being intentional, strategic and effective in our promotion and marketing efforts now and in the future. We believe that as this role builds and capitalizes on relationships, a definite development arm will emerge. This is both exciting and faith stretching!

The support and investment of the Van Lunen Program has truly been the catalyst for Vernon Christian School to begin analyzing and strategizing how to communicate, promote and market the good work our school is doing in the area of Christian education. I am beyond grateful to have been blessed by this opportunity and know that our school community will be blessed for generations to come.