

Van Lunen Fellowship Cohort
2013-2014
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The decline in enrollment and closing of Christian schools across North America over the last decade is cause for great concern. Among the outcomes have been a proliferation in the advice from and an increase in the number of consultants willing to guide a school through a plan to increase enrollment. The articles, books, workshops, seminars, conferences, blogs, webinars, binders and columns of advice have inundated the inboxes and mailboxes of Christian school leaders across the continent. How could I help?

WHAT DID I DO?

Having been a recipient of much of this advice, most unsolicited, as well as a consumer of the work of two different consultants, it was my intention to attempt to discern the most effective methods of marketing or promoting a Christian school in such a manner as to bring in new families/students and thereby maintain the viability of a school.

Given the availability of the members of the cohort, along with the developing respect among them, the idea of a survey appeared initially simple. This simplicity quickly dissipated with the attempt to ask the questions in such a way as to produce meaningful answers. The advice and encouragement of Courtney Lampen the Admissions Director of Holland Christian School was most helpful in the process. My intent was to construct a survey that would take no more than 30 minutes and only minimal research on the part of the participants. In the end, I came up with nine questions, which, along with space for comments, revealed a strong indication that should help both veteran and beginning school leaders to know the most effective way to spend the often limited time and money that a Christian school has for the purpose of marketing. Knowing the enrollment at the schools of the 2013 cohort varied significantly, I attempted to

account for the differences of available staff time and money by asking for marketing budget in percentage of overall budget as well as in absolute dollars.

WHAT DID I LEARN?

The nine questions, without all the options are:

1. Approximately what percent of your total budget is spent on marketing efforts of any kind? This does include staff time.
2. Please rank the following print marketing in order of effectiveness.
3. Please rank the following digital marketing in order of effectiveness.
4. Please rank the following groups or relationships in order of effectiveness.
5. What marketing collateral have you found to be most appreciated/used/effective?
6. Have you ever used a referral reward/discount of any kind?
7. Please share your opinion regarding the top three tactics and/or concepts that have worked for your school.
8. Please share your opinion regarding marketing tactics or concepts you found to be the least useful and/or wasteful of time and money. "I'll never do this again!"
9. Is there any other advice you would offer regarding marketing?

Answers to the nine questions

1. Among the specific items learned is that most schools spend well under 2% of the overall budget on marketing. Of the 18 respondents who answered this question, six spend less than .5%, six between .5 and 1%, three between 1.0 and 1.5%, one between 1.5 and 2.0% and two spend more than 2% of their overall budget on marketing. While the enrollment in the schools varied from less than 30 to a maximum of 776, there appears to be no specific correlation between enrollment and percent of budget spend on marketing. It will be clear that a school with more than 700 students will have a much larger budget than a school of less than 30. That stated, the two schools that spent the largest percentage on marketing had between 201 and 300 students. A

worthwhile follow up point of research might be to survey these schools again with an inquiry regarding enrollment trends over time compared with percent of budget spent on this issue.

2. While print marketing was generally discouraged, the most effective methods of this category among the respondents were: Direct mail when used to promote an Open House, brochures to local churches, preschools, daycare centers and flyers to current families to promote word of mouth conversations.

3. The most effective methods of digital marketing were clearly: the school website (by far the leader), Facebook, and Email newsletters (like Constant Contact).

4. The most effective relationships worth the leaders or marketing staff time were: with local churches (pastors groups), feeder schools if they exist, local preschools.

5. Marketing collateral, aka tchotchkes, was found to be completely ineffective at bringing new families to the school. For the purpose of making current families feel good about belonging to the school, (internal branding) clothing items, pens/markers, and coffee mugs were the most popular.

6. The subject of referral discounts was similarly nearly unanimous in the effectiveness as a marketing tool. Ten schools do not use them, the nine that did, found them to be of little or no value whatsoever. The rewards offered ranged from a \$5 gift card to a \$500 tuition discount for the referring family. One school offered one semester of free tuition (effectively a 50% scholarship), but followed up with the statement that the receiving family could not afford the remaining semester and did not return the following year.

7. The top three most effective marketing tactics were strongly agreed to be:

- a) Word of Mouth (lots of ways to promote this and resources available)
- b) School Website (plethora of advice on how to be effective is available. Hummingbird, panda, and penguin are Google algorithms; your IT staff can help.)

- c) Online presence (this in addition to the website, social media, blogs, etc.)
8. The most ineffective marketing tactics were found to be:
- a) Newspaper ads
 - b) Print material in general
 - c) Billboards
9. Other advice, an open ended chance to share yielded the following statements.
- Word of mouth is the best
 - Ask parents to go out with brochures about the school, or sharing good news about the school with their friends, neighbors, and relatives.
 - EVERYONE on the staff needs to realize they are part of the marketing staff. When families tour the campus, our teachers know they are "on" and need to make a good impression. They also know they need to view our current families as "customers", because retention is hugely important to increasing enrollment. The BEST DECISION we made was to hire someone whose sole focus is marketing. It is extraordinarily difficult for the administrator to give marketing the attention it requires. When we started the search process, we were told to look for a person who knows how to throw a great party, and that was great advice. The marketing person needs to be personable, organized, creative, attentive, etc. Our admissions director is critical to our enrollment success.
 - It is relational so concentrate on word of mouth. People ask other people about doctors and mechanics and such, they will do the same about schools so make sure your school families know how to connect you to new perspective families and that they have the correct information about your school to share.
 - Simplify. Build a team of volunteers to represent the school at their respective churches: ministry fairs, leadership meetings, Christian school day, booths, etc. and cultivate them and empower them well to just speak to their own church families about the school

WHAT DIFFERENCE IS IT MAKING IN YOUR SCHOOL?

The marketing efforts at Milpitas Christian School have changed significantly as a result of this survey. After sharing the results with the leadership and marketing team, we decided to move a significant portion of our planned budget from print materials to allow more time for the development of relationships with local churches and preschools. Additionally, we halted a contract with an SEO firm and allocated those dollars to paid ads on Facebook. We have noted an increase in visits to our website and phone calls leading to inquiries and tours. Whether these

will result in an actual increase in enrollment remains to be seen as of the end of June 2014.

There have been other changes at Milpitas Christian School that may overshadow the increased effectiveness of how our marketing budget is allocated. That said, the lessons learned remain and provide hope for a more effective future enrollment.

Participation in the Van Lunen Fellowship has been an honor and privilege for which I am most grateful. The implementation of the vision by the leaders to provide a truly superlative, even transformative experience is deeply appreciated. The format of the program, the quality of instructors, the venues and most of all the fellowship of the saints has and will leave an indelible impression on the minds and hearts of all those privileged to participate. Thank you.