

AN EFFECTIVE MARKETING STRATEGY

The goal of this project was to develop a more focused and deliberate marketing strategy for Redeemer Lutheran School. The school has not been immune to the acute challenge that is facing most faith-based education ministries today – declining enrollment. Our school is a great family school. It was in dire need of an effective marketing strategy that would help get that message out to our immediate and surrounding communities.

Upon selecting a marketing team leader, the single question – “What do we market?” – ignited an unforgettable chain of events. Before creating a new effective marketing strategy, Redeemer had to realize what it had to market. To get an analysis of the school ministry, the church and school worked with the Lutheran Schools Association through its Educational Planning Process. To identify the strengths and weaknesses of the school, seven aspects were reviewed: Lutheran identity, facilities, community, governance, academic, finance, and marketing. The results of the self-study led to the development of an Action Plan for the school. The marketing committee put its phase of the plan in place. A 12-month marketing calendar was developed with strategies to begin July 2010. A new school logo, promotional brochure, and poster were designed. We have seen an attendance increase at the additional scheduled open houses due to more direct promotional efforts through “word of mouth” by parents, outside school signage, and inclusion on school website. The budget allocation for marketing tripled. The development of our marketing strategy saw other aspects of the school included for further review and future planning.

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Redeemer Lutheran School is a traditional, faith-based school located in western Queens, New York. It was established in 1955 by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Redeemer, (LCMS). Current enrollment is 157 students in grades Nursery through Grade 8. Meaningful enrollment of new students has not been replacing those of attrition through graduations and families moving. Annual decline has been at a rate of approximately 10%.

There was no marketing team. Marketing was relegated as an expected responsibility of the principal. There was no marketing strategy in place. The usual attempts to attract new families were being repeated year after year. Time for recruitment was shared with other responsibilities.

My project was to develop a more focused and deliberate marketing strategy for Redeemer.

It was evident that Redeemer needed a marketing team to take on this multi-faceted responsibility. More people had to get involved for this overwhelming task. I could no longer do it effectively alone. The team leader, who I had initially in mind as I selected my project, accepted my call. I was fortunate that this person was someone extremely knowledgeable of the school and its history and had a stake in the growth of the school. Mark Moss was a parent of two Redeemer students, one current and one graduate. His association with the school went beyond my twelve years with the school; he was also married to a Redeemer alumnus. He is a community business owner, a photography studio. He brought in two other community friends. One was a local realtor and the other was the executive director of a local Catholic high school. Two relatively new school parents also joined the team. It was Mark Moss' question – "What do we market?" – that started an unforgettable chain of events.

Before creating a new, effective marketing strategy, Redeemer had to first realize what it had to market. I approached my three governance bodies, Education Committee, Church Council, and Voters Assembly, to bring in the Lutheran Schools Association for guidance in conducting a self-study.

The church and school leaders took on ownership to participate in the LSA Educational Planning Process. In addition to the church and school leaders, the EPP process included faculty, parents, and school friends. To identify its strengths and weaknesses, seven aspects of the school were reviewed: Lutheran identity, facilities, community, governance, academic, finance, and marketing.

There was a study group for each area to be reviewed. A series of three study group meetings allowed new dialogue between the vested interested parties of the church and school. Each study group submitted a narrative of their discussions and recommendations for the school. Mail-in response surveys were provided to parents and faculty. A school site walk-thru was conducted by the LSA Planning Team. The result of the LSA Educational Planning Process was the development of an Action Plan for Redeemer.

The marketing team committee was one of the more productive groups. It had specific, ambitious recommendations that were for immediate and long-term impact for the school. The more immediate actions resulted in the design of a new school logo which began to appear on printed materials. A new school promotional brochure was their next goal. It included the new logo with updated, highlighted features of the school and pictures of students. A 12-month marketing calendar was developed with strategies to begin July 2010. One long-term goal is to expand the school's outreach efforts to include a direct appeal to school alumni. We are committing to put recruitment strategies in place.

The recommendations of some of the other groups were also impacted by those of the marketing, such as in their planning and implementation. For example, the facilities group became more focused in developing an aggressive plan for school improvement inside and outside the building. The church leadership approved seeking a Lutheran Church Extension Fund loan for extensive building renovations prayerfully to begin this summer 2010.

We had the privilege of having Bob Rogalski, Van Lunen Consultant and Director of Development Center for Christian Schools, come to the school to lead a "Redeemer Promotional Night" presentation for members of the school family.

Bob motivated the audience with strategies to help them understand their roles as being “Ambassadors” for Redeemer, and how to effectively promote the school inside and outside. He was instrumental in the design of a new promotional poster that was presented to the attendees. The poster has been distributed to the wider school family and has been appearing throughout the community. The attendance of the promotional night was small, but we did get a commitment of volunteers to explore developing a Redeemer Alumni database. Doing so would not only increase our school ambassador base, but also a potential donor base.

Over the course of the project as some of the marketing strategies were developing, we saw the marketing school expense allocation line triple above the fiscal year budgeted amount, from \$1500 to \$6000. The new fiscal year allocation for marketing was set at \$6000.

We scheduled additional open houses between March and June. We experienced an attendance increase at the events. The largest influences seemed to have been promotion through word of mouth, the addition of our outside building signage, and inclusion on the school website. Most of the interest was in the early grades. We committed to do follow-ups on all leads.

My goal of developing a more focused and deliberate marketing strategy has begun to have positive effects. Though, it is too early to realize if our overall enrollment will increase for the upcoming school year, I can report that our registration to date is 32 students ahead of where it was at this time last year.

We saw an interest to resurrect our Parent Teacher Association. Though taking small steps, a core of parents created a theme – “Building stronger relationships between our school families”. Two school family promotional events were held.

The seven EPP study groups will remain as standing committees for the school. Their recommendations from the Action Plan will be prioritized with benchmark dates. There will be a review of those groups where strengthening may be needed.

The development of an effective marketing strategy for Redeemer encouraged many members of the church and school family to come together to work for a stronger school. The process initiated many opportunities for dialogue and encouraged more parents, faculty, leaders, and friends to take ownership for school growth. We saw new and stronger relationships being created among the participants. The growth of our school has more of the school family seeing the bigger picture – marketing our Christian school is everyone’s responsibility. An effective marketing strategy has to be a team effort that is definitive, committed, and consistent.

The project also allowed me to grow professionally. Several administrative skills improved significantly for me, most notably – reaching out to involve others, delegating job tasks, and developing a stronger sense of trust in the assistance and capabilities of others.

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