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Understanding Generational Values and Preferences: Marketing and Enrollment Strategies for Today's Parents

Who are today's parents? If this question was posed today at a meeting of Catholic school administrators, it would likely generate endless discussion! The November 2005 issue of the *CSML* was entitled "Marketing the Catholic Elementary School to 'Generation X' Parents."

In 2018, some of these same Generation X parents remain in Catholic elementary schools, and many have moved on, or are moving on, to high school. In their footsteps comes a new generation of parents, sometimes called Echo Boomers or Generation Y, and quite commonly known as Millennials. The National Center for Health Statistics reported that 1.3 million Millennial women gave birth for the first time in 2015, accounting for about eight-in-ten (82%) of U.S. births. These children are now ready for early childhood education programs.

Generational theory puts forward the belief that with each generation come changes in history and social events, among other factors, that exert influence upon the collective consciousness of the members of a particular generation and are shown in their general values and preferences as a group. While parental values and preferences may be changing, the need for effective marketing of the Catholic school has not. In its continued work to secure a bright future for Catholic

The Generations Defined

The Millennial Generation

Born: After 1980

Age of adults in 2015: 18 to 34*

Share of adult population: 30%

Generation X

Born: 1965 to 1980

Age in 2015: 35 to 50

Share of adult population: 27%

The Baby Boom Generation

Born: 1946 to 1964

Age in 2015: 51 to 69

Share of adult population: 30%

The Silent Generation

Born: 1928 to 1945

Age in 2015: 70 to 87

Share of adult population: 11%

The Greatest Generation

Born: Before 1928

Age in 2015: 88 to 100

Share of adult population: 2%

* The youngest Millennials are in their teens. No chronological end point has been set for this group.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of Census Bureau population projections for 2015.

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schools, Catholic School Management has long supported a “marketing approach” that is grounded in mission yet seeks to understand the wants, needs, and expectations of those to whom the Catholic school is being marketed. Catholic school leaders are challenged today to understand the generational values and preferences of two distinct generations of parents, not to mention those of junior high and high school students who play an increasingly powerful role in the decision-making process as to attendance at a Catholic school.

What’s Important to Today’s Parents?

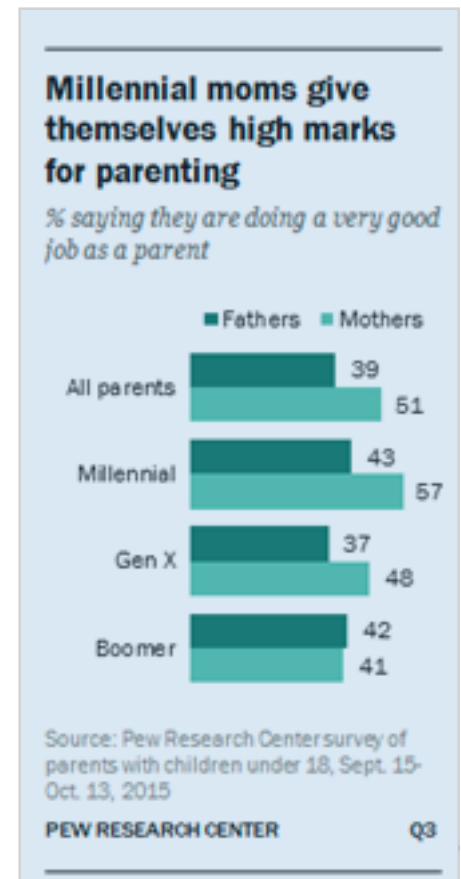
When comparing Gen X and Millennial parents, there are some ongoing similarities. The women who are the mothers in these generations represent the most educated generations to date in United States history. It continues to be the case that the choice for where a child will attend elementary school is a decision largely influenced by the child’s mother, yet Millennial Moms are significantly more social and turn to a broader network to gain insight into decision-making. Both generations place a high priority on education and see education as a contributor to overall success in life. There are strong expectations for the recognition of the individual gifts and talents inherent in their children, just as there is an expectation for individualized attention in the classroom. Interestingly, Millennial Moms give themselves higher marks for parenting than Gen X Moms, but both continue to be open to gaining skills and strategies to equip them to be the best parents they can be. There appears to be a higher percentage of Millennial Moms that are “stay-at-home moms” than among Gen X Moms, although the frequency of two-income families continues to be predominant. This provides good opportunity to schools to offer and promote workshops and other opportunities for parents to see your school as the “expert on all things related to the education and development of children.” For example, workshops and meetings that promote the “Best Apps for Early Learners” and “Monitoring Your Teen’s Social Media Footprint” are offerings that hold both recruitment and retention appeal for today’s parents. Finally, the parents of these generations expect to be heard when they have something to say, and they also expect to be asked and to have input into how a school operates and plans for its future.

Administering annual parent satisfaction surveys and providing a timely report back on the results is a best practice that all Catholic schools should undertake. Soliciting student input and perceptions as to satisfaction is also recommended as early as junior high and through face-to-face exit interviews with the members of each year’s graduating class. Involving the voices of a school’s community in strategic planning processes is also highly recommended.

Yet, there are some areas in which these generations of parents differ, and these differences can be subtle, yet important to recognize. In some cases, the differences are also not so much a difference of generation, but more a reflection of the changing of times and way in which easy and abundant access to information causes rapid shifts in perception and understanding. Key areas for focus have to do with evidence of academic quality, approach to use of technology, and the provision of opportunities that inspire growth of the whole child.

Marketing Academic Quality

Both Gen X and Millennial parents are data hungry, but they are also data savvy. Gen X parents tend to be more high achievement-oriented and are interested in knowing that your school’s overall standardized test scores reflect strong performance when compared to others. At the high school level, these comparisons are more readily made due to the use of national tests such as the SAT, PSAT, and ACT. At the high school level, there is also a strong expectation, from younger Gen X parents in particular, that included with the cost of tuition is standardized test preparation embedded in the curriculum, with specifics as to strategies for how to approach test taking as well as experience with actual test questions.



For those Catholic elementary schools that take state tests, relatively easy comparisons can be made to local public schools. For those that do not, there is a need to actively and deliberately market the test or testing protocol that is used. Does your test provide a national platform through which student achievement can be compared? If so, then you are providing a more 'real-world' assessment scenario for students whose future will be part of a global economy more so than a state-specific reality. Most importantly, how can you show growth over time for students in your school? Have you moved from a summative, once-a-year model of assessment to a formative assessment model? If so, this is music to the ears of today's parents who worry that the efforts of their children on just a single day, or during a specific testing week, do little to reflect the total and accurate picture of the whole child. Disaggregate data and produce graphs and charts that show your success in providing a strong academic foundation. In cases where you are seeking to improve educational outcomes, be transparent and engage families in your journey to do so. If you know, and your parents have let you know, that your Math program needs improvement, acknowledge the issue and find an improved way to go about delivering Math instruction. Share your school improvement goals and strategies, inclusive of professional development for teachers. When you can celebrate improved student achievement as a result of intentional engagement in curriculum improvement, then you gain the trust of your community that you are not stagnant but forward-focused. This is particularly important for programs of Math and Science, inclusive of STEM initiatives, given that recent studies undertaken by NCEA and the Catholic School Philanthropy Working Group indicate a national, public perception that Catholic schools are not up to date in these areas.

Most importantly, follow your graduates. Stay in touch in a way that allows you to gather data to celebrate how their academic preparation in your school prepared them for success in their next level of schooling. How many Advanced Placement classes are your graduates taking in high school? How often are your graduates gaining distinction as valedictorians or salutatorians as high school graduates? We often refer to the "partner" relationship that exists between elementary and high schools, and this is one of the ways in which that partnership can be further developed.

For high schools, disaggregate college acceptances by quintiles in your class to show how it is not just the top few students that are being offered admission to quality colleges and universities. Continually market the college scholarship dollars that are being offered to your high school graduates, for both need and merit-based awards. The reality of lifelong debt incurred because of the rising costs of education weighs heavily on the minds of Millennials. Seek to prove to them that the investment in a quality Catholic education actually leads to long-term financial gains using statistics on Catholic school graduates available through NCEA and the USCCB (see the 2016 FACT



sheet). In the October 2012 issue of the *Regional Economist*, researchers Michael T. Owyang and E. Katarina Vermann of the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis published their study: "Measuring the Effect of School Choice on Economic Outcomes." A key finding, after controlling for individual and job characteristics, was that private high school graduates earn 2.6 percent more than their public school counterparts. While this increase was deemed not to be statistically significant, the 13.6 percent wage premium earned by Catholic school graduates was suggestive of a statistically significant result, and certainly worthy of promoting to parents wondering if the cost of tuition produces outcomes of significance! Also keep in mind that for many inner-city families, and in particular families classified as minorities or first generation Hispanics, there is an imperative to show how the Catholic school provides opportunities to open doors. Mentor programs, internships, research experiences, and summer work options all fall into this category of being desirable.

Technology Is Not Just an Add-On, It's Always On

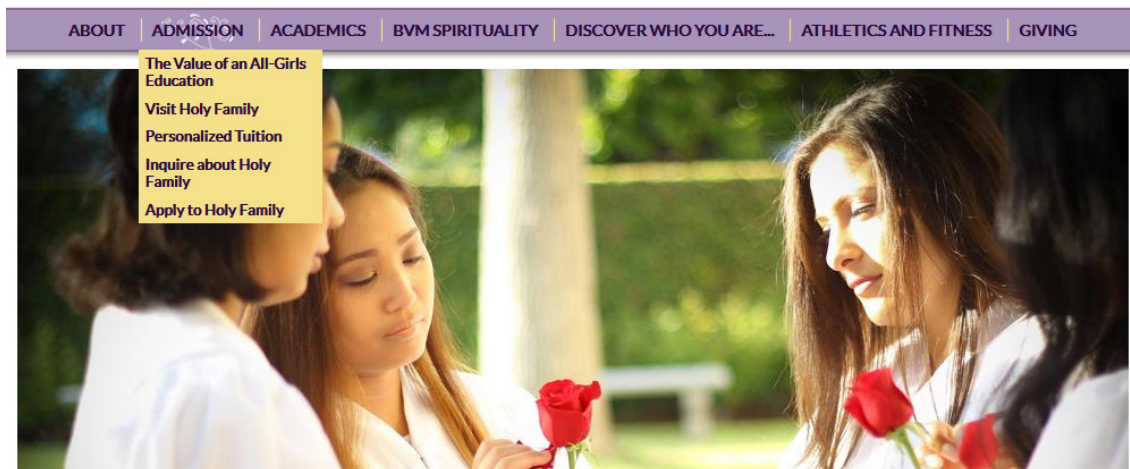
There has been a subtle shift in the expectations of parents with regard to technology in the Catholic school. At the junior high and high school levels, there is an increasing expectation to see one-to-one device programs for students. These can be programs that provide for each child to have access to a device while at school during the day, and ideally to be able to have their device at home with them outside of school hours. Schools achieve this ideal through a variety of approaches, including access to school devices while at school, bring your own device programs, family leasing or purchase programs, and programs based on a technology fee. When questioned in parent focus group interviews across the country, CSM researchers have found that parents, as well as students, believe that integrated use of a device is what they can expect in college and in career; therefore, preparing for this way of approaching learning and life should start in junior high and high school.

At the younger grades, expectation is changing among parents in this area. There is increased perception that use of technology can be too easily equated with “babysitting,” and frustration is experienced when students are perceived to be using technology during school hours for things they could be doing at home. Explained from another angle, parent concerns escalate if they perceive that they’ve paid tuition dollars for quality teachers to provide individualized attention that is not being received because of an overreliance on technology tools. Inherent in this dilemma is an opportunity for schools to invest in online technology programs that can be used at home to supplement and enrich the overall education experience. This may be as simple as the purchase of subscriptions to online typing programs so that students can complete their required “time” learning to type as homework in order to allow for classroom time with a teacher to take advantage of the kind of instruction that comes best from a great teacher. Extensions of this approach include online math, reading, grammar, and vocabulary programs. By comparison, there is a strong expectation that students will be using technology tools to communicate and present their learning in interesting and engaging ways. This kind of technology use is considered necessary and a sign of being current with educational best practice.



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Use of technology also plays a significant role in how a school goes about deploying a comprehensive marketing strategy. There is no denying that today’s parents shop online, and this includes for schools. Viewing the website as a marketing tool is more imperative than ever, and the way content is packaged and displayed needs to consider this understanding. The website needs to move from a product description to a presentation of features and benefits. For example, information with regard to tuition should not simply be a chart of costs, fees, and penalties for late payments. Instead, the financial decision to purchase a Catholic school education should be supported by information as to the value of a Catholic education, how to afford a Catholic education, and the many unique Catholic school benefits that are included with the cost of tuition. And, it goes without saying, every website developed today must be optimized for viewing on a mobile device.

When shopping online, today's parents are also seeking the reviews of their peers – even when they don't personally know them. Any search for your school will likely produce reviews on testimonial sites such as greatschools.org and k12.niche.com among others sure to come and go with a rapidity that can be exasperating. Monitor these sites in order to make sure that school profiles and information are accurate. Launch deliberate campaigns to have positive testimonials submitted by satisfied parents, students, alumni, and others on a regular and frequent basis, and hopefully not all on just one day.

Social media is another powerful tool for promoting the school, beginning with ensuring that your school's Facebook page has positive reviews for visitors to peruse. Marketing dollars should be designated for social media in increasing amounts and with increasing frequency. Survey your community to find out which social media tools they are using. It makes sense to purchase ads or to promote basic recruitment and other events by using social media tools such as Facebook Events, but take a more deliberate step into the marketing of your school and use the impact of social media just as you would if you had the funds for a print campaign for postcards, flyers, posters, or other means to get across your marketing message. Pay for the use of social media algorithms to promote photos, testimonials, visually appealing graphics, and any other multimedia examples that will make others experience your mission in action and what you have to offer that makes a parent say, "Worth every penny." Promote the quality of your teachers, the ways in which students engage in service, the production of a new strategic plan, the release of your annual report, and short videos that showcase great moments in teaching, learning, faith development, community building, and memories that will last a lifetime. The social media algorithms that are available allow you to target the demographic markets that you want to know more about your school.



What's the "Value Added" from a Catholic School Education?

Articulating the advantages of Catholic education and what makes the Catholic school different from its competitors in a way that resonates with today's parents requires a closer look at particular values and preferences associated with Gen X and Millennials as a whole, as well as their relationship to the Catholic Church. Gen X is known to value diversity and think globally, and they are seen as being skeptical as well as independent thinkers. By contrast, Millennials have a strong sense of civic duty, and they seek purpose and meaning in their activities. While they may be more socially liberal than their predecessors, they also exhibit values that are fairly traditional.



About the author ...

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Maria Ribera has been associated with Catholic education since 1992 and has held several administrative roles during this time frame. Her experience includes extensive work in curriculum development, professional development design and delivery, teacher supervision and evaluation, and technology integration and planning.

Maria has worked with CSM since 2001, providing consultative guidance in various areas. In the administrative and academic arenas, she has worked directly with schools for administrative mentoring, strategic planning, technology planning, development of research skills curriculums, implementation of curriculum mapping, and evaluation of guidance and counseling programs. She coordinates CSM's distinctive Institutional Assessment and Strategic Management and Development Programs while also providing leadership and vision to client work in strategic planning, enrollment management, marketing and communication. She is a lead presenter for CSM seminars and workshops and has been a speaker at NCEA and ISTE among other conferences.

For both generations, great attention needs to be paid to ensuring that parents are aware of the opportunities that are provided to grow the whole child beyond core curriculum offerings through leadership, co-curricular programmatic enhancements, elective offerings, extracurricular offerings, and especially through programs of Christian service and service learning. Engagement in service, through acts of charity and kindness as well as when tied to the curriculum, combined with emphasis on service as a mindset and not just an obligation, are both highly appreciated. When CSM researchers speak to parents today about why they love their Catholic schools, a recurring theme is confidence that the Catholic school environment promotes the development of admirable values and a strong moral compass, and that parents feel a sense of community and belonging with a group of peers who desire this kind of experience for their children.

A fascinating glimpse into the mindset of young Millennial Catholics was provided in the November 2017 issue of *Christ is our Hope*, the magazine of the Diocese of Joliet. When asked what they would like priests to know about Millennials, the responses from a group of 40 young Catholics included the following:

- We need encouragement to live our lives based on our Catholic beliefs.
- We want to learn how to defend the faith.
- Connect. Be welcoming. Provide hospitality. Get to know us. Listen.
- Invite young adults into leadership roles.
- Foster the creativity of young adults.

Seen through a lens that seeks to understand the desires of families considering Catholic education today, these responses also give insight into attributes that Catholic schools can promote, particularly with regard to how religious formation is an integral part of educating the whole child. Consider how members of your community would respond if asked, "What makes your school Catholic?" If responses are just skimming the surface and noting the existence of a Religion curriculum, daily prayer, and the celebration of the Mass, seek to dive deeper and make explicit the connection and understanding that your school's approach to educating the whole child invites them to explore the gift of their own faith while it also provides a Catholic world view through which to understand and navigate the challenges of today's culture and society. Positioning the ongoing relevance of Catholic education to today's parents, whether Catholic or not, will gain greater traction when aligned to the values and ways of thinking that distinguish them and that resonate with their concerns, hopes, and dreams for their children.



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