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Enabled to Proclaim: Designing an Effective Marketing Message to Enhance Enrollment

When the time for Pentecost was fulfilled, they were all in one place together. And suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house in which they were. Then there appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim. Acts 2:1-4



The vivid account of Pentecost described in the Acts of the Apostles identifies that moment when a broad group of people gather under one shared mission and are empowered to go forth and proclaim that mission. We refer to the Pentecost as the “birthday of the Catholic Church.” The passage describes the commissioning moment for all of the work that we do in Catholic schools to share the good news of Jesus’ message and build the kingdom. We are commissioned to teach, to pray, to serve – for and with our learning communities. In Pentecost, we also recognize our commissioning to *proclaim* – which certainly includes the work of marketing our schools.

Start with Mission

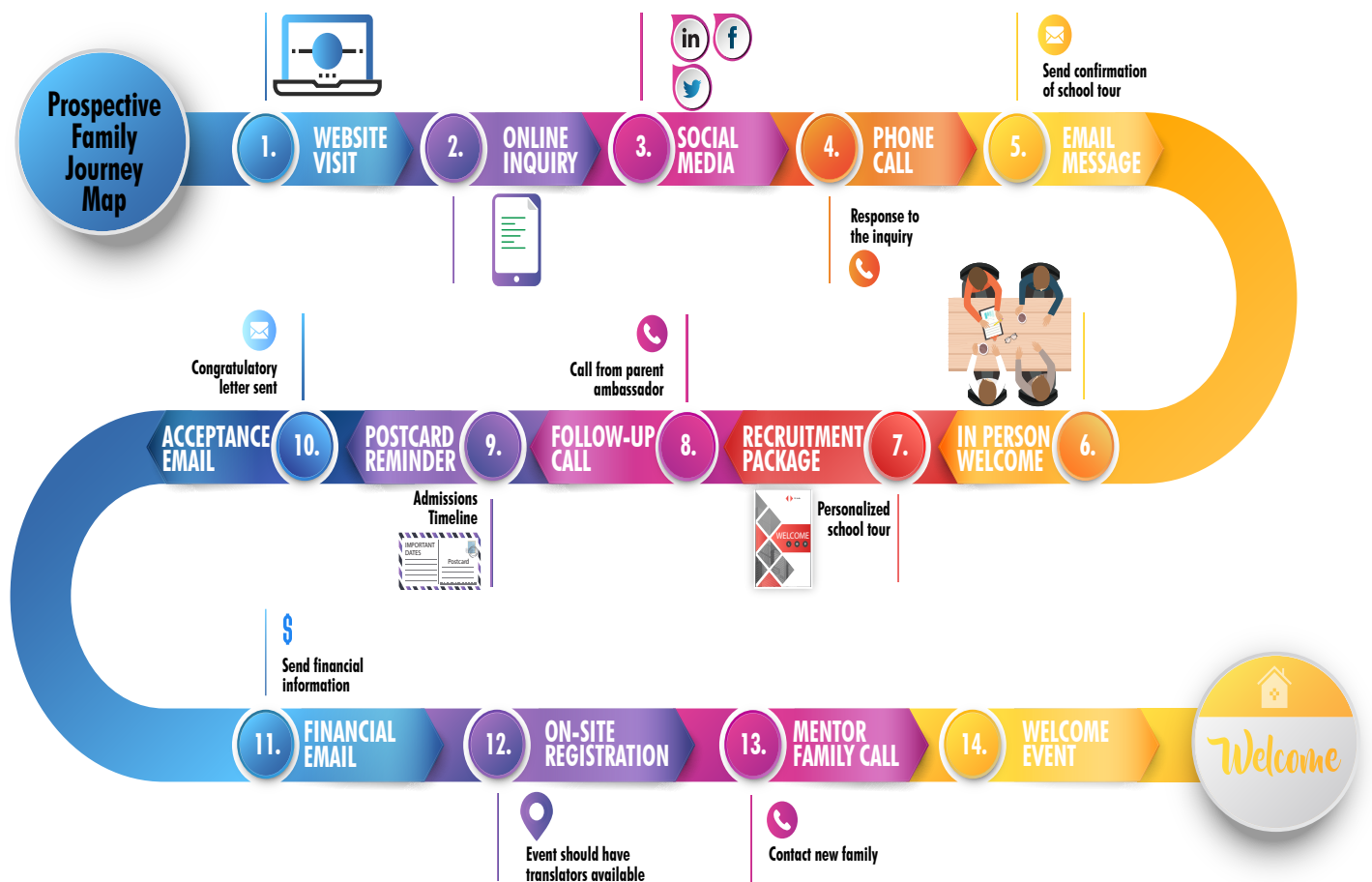
When considering how to design and launch an effective marketing strategy, it is critical to return to the school’s mission and build from that foundation. Marketing a school is about telling the school’s story, and doing so in a compelling and honest way. Because the school’s mission is its *raison d’être*, the marketing message needs to give people a *reason to care*. Who you are, whom you serve, and your core values need to be clearly evident in your school’s mission.

James Heaton, president and creative director of a New York based marketing strategy and advertising agency, speaks to the critical link between mission and marketing. “Marketing is an essential tool for the success of all business and non-profit activity. What matters is not what you do, what matters is that you communicate what you do so that others will take interest in it, support it, and tell friends about it... Your mission is only as successful as far as it can spread and have an impact. If you are indeed working to make the world better, you need to be actively marketing what you do.” In order for this marriage between mission and marketing to be effective, the school’s mission statement should be succinct and differentiated from other nearby schools. And, as Heaton points out, the mission must be accompanied by active marketing.

Speak in Different Tongues

This reference in the passage from Acts is evocative. Today, being able to “speak in different tongues” is about more than being multilingual; it points to the importance of maintaining a fluency with the many ways in which we communicate. We must speak in the tongues of varied communication platforms – from interpersonal to digital – in order to effectively market our Catholic schools.

When designing an effective marketing message, consider the various ways to engage prospective families in encountering the message. The specific strategies will depend largely on your context, but your marketing plan should include varied and differentiated ways of communicating your marketing message. Consider building a customer journey map that scaffolds the marketing message and transitions your target audience from a prospective family to happy community member. It may be helpful to remember the classic “rule of seven” used in marketing, which states that a customer has to see or hear your marketing message at least seven times before they will decide to buy. In reality, the number will be different for different markets. The key, however, is that there is strategy and fluency with multiple platforms to engage prospective families multiple times. Your ability to “speak in different tongues” may be the difference between an effective marketing message and a good idea.



Developing and maintaining relationships with multiple constituencies are keys to long-term viability and vitality for Catholic schools. Indeed, those school administrators, board members, and faculty who can articulate a clear vision and regularly communicate the elements of that vision to multiple publics are often the most successful in their field in terms of enhancing image, increasing enrollment, and attracting resources, both human and financial. It is true that people respond to people, and money follows vision.

Tongues As Of Fire

How did it happen? What did it look like? Could they feel the heat of the flames? Were they afraid? The author of the Acts of the Apostles successfully captures our attention with imagery of “tongues as of fire.” Our interest is increased by this small but memorable detail carefully placed within the unfolding of a meaningful story. Capturing interest, even when fire is not directly involved, is an important next step.

In his practical book, *Word of Mouth Marketing*, Andy Sernovitz directs marketers to “be interesting, or be invisible.” His message is succinct and accurate. In an environment filled with noise and distraction, becoming eclipsed and invisible is a real threat to marketing your school. To combat becoming invisible, make your marketing message interesting by using a combination of basic, yet effective, strategies:

- **Leverage research:** Research, first conducted in 1976¹ and confirmed through various replication studies, indicates that families choose Catholic schools for Catholic identity, academic excellence, and safety. More recently, an array of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities as well as other leadership or value-added opportunities have been added to this list. An effective marketing message addresses each.
- **Know your audience:** Understand your audience’s motivations and concerns, then address them specifically. Segment your audience so that you can tailor your message (e.g., parents v. students).
- **Tell meaningful stories:** Behavioral research shows that stories are powerful because they lead people to meaning and decision-making. Through stories, people are more likely to remember the message, be persuaded by it, and sense a personal connection to it as well as the storyteller.
- **Utilize data:** Know your data and indicators of excellence. Present data with infographics that are visually friendly and easily consumable. Data used along with stories is particularly powerful.
- **Make it memorable:** Use memorable phrases and sound bites that are strategically repeated. Make it easy for your prospective families to remember you and your school’s mission.
- **Be consistent:** Create a plan that aligns all communications with the marketing message and a school style guide. Then, consistently and continually communicate.
- **Build relationships:** Relationships with current students and families allow you to tell their stories in a meaningful way. Relationships with your prospective families foreshadow the experience they will have in your learning community. As Sernovitz says, “Treat people well; they will do your marketing for you, for free.”

Word of mouth is critically important to marketing any school for image and eventually for enrollment. When your community believes in the mission of your school and integrates basic marketing strategies, it is easy to be interesting rather than invisible. The premise that “people respond to people, not to institutions” is particularly true when related to schools. Many successful Catholic schools have made the shift from a “product and program” marketing approach to a more “client-centered and benefit-oriented” marketing posture. Utilizing the strategies above can assist with this process.

Know Your Roles

While many are familiar with the passage read at Mass to celebrate the Pentecost, few are familiar with the passage that comes just before it, *The Choice of Judas’ Successor* (Acts 1:15-26). Among a large community of disciples, the remaining eleven apostles seek to understand their roles moving forward. Designing an effective marketing strategy, likewise, requires careful reflection on roles.



About the lead author ...

Susana A. Garcia
Adjunct Consultant

Enrollment Management,
Marketing, Social Media Planning

Susana began her career in Catholic education as an undergraduate admissions officer for Santa Clara University recruiting from local Catholic high schools and leading the Latino recruitment efforts. She later transitioned to the secondary level as a Religious Studies Teacher and holds a Master of Arts in Spirituality. Her leadership roles have included Religious Studies Department Chair as well as Director of Campus Ministry.

Since 2011, Susana has been directing enrollment management at Notre Dame High School in San Jose, California, and currently holds the title of Vice Principal for Enrollment and Public Relations. In the late 1980s, the school faced a crisis in enrollment and, in the 1990s, serious facilities issues on its landlocked, downtown San Jose campus. Strong leadership, careful planning, and targeted marketing have led to the success that Notre Dame continues to enjoy today with strong student enrollment programs under Susana's careful direction.

Marketing a school is not the work of one person, but rather the entire community. All of the staff that you work with should be oriented to the need for marketing and their role in that effort. Your staff will benefit from specific workshops and professional development opportunities that empower them with tools to be successful as partners in the school's marketing plan. Similarly, consider opportunities to train student and parent ambassadors. From the person who answers the phone in the main office to the admissions director who recruits at off-campus events to outreach from current families, every interaction should be aligned with a well-crafted and consistent marketing message that has been widely shared, discussed, and embraced.

Additionally, identifying key stakeholders in the design and implementation of your marketing message deserves careful attention and planning. Consider how to engage key members of your community in opportunities to shape the message – whether in the situation analysis that precedes shaping the message or in the think tank that creates a marketing plan. Engaging your school's leadership team in owning the marketing message will also support integrated implementation and enhance enrollment objectives. Faculty, staff, board members, and parent and student leaders should all be as aware of the message as they are of the important role they play in the consistent delivery and effective use of the message.

In the time of Pentecost

A healthy, stable enrollment is the life force of a school, and it is everyone's role to support the effort of attracting and retaining students. A mission-aligned, compelling, and meaningful message is central to a comprehensive effort to market for enrollment. This effort begins with marketing that attracts them to the school, continues with marketing that re-recruits current families along the way, and culminates with alumni students and families that promote the school to other prospective families. Taking the time to think about roles and clearly articulate related responsibilities will serve the school in the long term.

Pentecost is not a moment in history that came and went thousands of years ago. The ongoing work of the Spirit lives in each of us in the sharing of our school's mission through effective marketing strategies and professional partnerships. We are commissioned with the giftedness to proclaim that good news to all whom we encounter.

¹ Andrew M. Greeley, William C. McCready and Kathleen McCourt, *Catholic Schools in a Declining Church*. (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, Inc., 1976).



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