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Relationship-Building in Marketing Today's Catholic School for Image, Enrollment, and Resources: People Respond to People, Not to Institutions

Continuing on our theme of "relationship-building" from the March 2017 issue of CSML, this issue will focus on specific strategies for enhancing image and enrollment through the utilization of social media as well as more traditional external communication.



There are two truisms that must be considered when addressing long-term viability and vitality for Catholic schools. These are:

1. People respond to people, not to institutions.
2. Money follows vision.

The first truism is an essential component of leadership and, indeed, all marketing and development efforts. An understanding of the truism that people respond to people, not to institutions is essential for the long-term viability and vitality of Catholic schools at every level.

The second truism, that money follows vision, is well documented in Father James L. Heft's recent book, *Catholic High Schools: Facing the New Realities*¹, and suggests that "without vision, Catholic schools have and will continue to perish."

One universal bond that unites all Catholic schools is the importance of marketing themselves for image, enrollment, and resources. The need to build and maintain relationships with multiple constituencies is essential and imperative if marketing programs are going to be successful and if, indeed, Catholic schools are to survive and flourish. Relationships are maintained and sustained through communication and contact carried out on a regular, frequent, and consistent basis. When communication and/or contact lapses, relationships become strained or begin to unravel. Therefore, board members, school administrators, staff, and volunteers should be constantly attentive to relationship-building and in seeking ever more effective communication strategies.

Key constituencies for Catholic elementary schools include:

- Area pastors and deacons
- Daycare providers and nursery school teachers
- Parents about to have their child baptized
- Parents with children ages 0-4
- Current parents at the school
- Alumni parents
- Grandparents
- Alums
- Service organizations

Key constituencies for Catholic middle and high schools include:

- Area pastors and deacons
- Feeder school principals
- Teachers in Catholic feeder schools
- Elementary and middle school teachers (public and private)
- College admissions officers
- Civic organizations and businesses
- Service organizations
- Alumni parents
- Alums
- Public officials

It has been made evident that parents choose to send their children to Catholic schools because of the perception of quality academics, solid religious values, the safety of the campus, along with the structure and disciplined management of the student body. In addition, families are opting for schools that provide a variety of co-curricular and extracurricular activities, including leadership development opportunities.

Effective marketing of these strengths to the right audience at the right time will help build these relationships. In their book, *Strategic Marketing For Educational Institutions*², Philip Kotler and Karen Fox define marketing as “...the research, analysis, planning, implementation, and control of carefully formulated programs designed to bring about voluntary exchanges of values with target markets to achieve institutional objectives.”

The key marketing pillars for a school should be consistent across all platforms, but flexible enough to vary for each target audience.

While schools can marketed for image, enrollment, and resources, image is, indeed, the key to successful marketing for both enrollment and resources. (See diagram at right.)



It is known that Catholic schools provide a service for their stakeholders, just as restaurants and doctors provide a service for their patrons and clients.

Knowing that you are marketing a service, not a product, is imperative to creating successful marketing strategies. As Harry Beckwith states in his book, *Selling the Invisible*³, “...when you’re selling a service, you’re selling a relationship.” He argues that what consumers are primarily interested in today are not features, but relationships. He emphasizes the key points of listening to the customer, selling the long-term relationship, identifying what a business is really selling, recognizing clues about a business that may be conveyed to customers, focusing on the single most important message about the business, and other practical strategies relevant to any service business.

This premise underscores the importance of the relationship-building and the connections that need to be made with each target audience that school seeks to reach. In order to develop productive relationships, strategies should focus on capturing, conversing, cultivating, converting, and caring.

As CSM adjunct consultant and president of Melbourne Central Catholic High School Michael C. Burke wrote in *Momentum* magazine⁴ in 2015, “In real estate it’s all about location, location, location. In Catholic schools, it’s all about relationships, relationships, relationships. These relationships don’t just magically happen, but rather are built and nourished systematically from the inside out.” As the boxes above suggest, school administrators need to build and nourish relationships with multiple key constituencies.

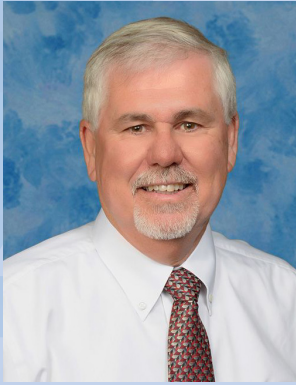
Below are some pragmatic suggestions for building, maintaining, and nourishing relationships.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS REGARDING SCHOOL IMAGE:

- Utilize social media sites including Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to post photos and relevant news about students and the school. “Tag” parents and students (with permission) in the posts while adding relevant and engaging comments.
- Complete “autopsy” surveys after events to identify what attendees enjoyed and how to continually improve school functions. When modifications are made, credit the individual who suggested the change.
- Utilize both social media and other communication channels to emphasize regularly and consistently the strengths of the school in terms of academic quality and programs, instructional delivery, technology utilization, personalized and nurturing relationships, structure and safety, Gospel values and religious environment, service learning, and participation in co-curricular and extracurricular activities.
- Design apparel that is functional, classy, fun, and trendy that features the school’s brand and name. Those donning these clothing options will become walking billboards for the school and help generate conversations in the community during face-to-face interactions.
- Ensure all digital representation is professional. Assess the school’s website and online school reviews (greatschools.org, niche.com, SchoolDigger.com) to ensure that the school’s online presence showcases the best of the school. Ask trusted parents to write reviews on sites to help ratings and to provide relatable content for those seeking the information.
- Provide personal attention to all families. At PTO/parent meetings, greet guests at the door, take photos of the meeting (post and tag), have guests introduce themselves, provide an environment for attendees to socialize after the meeting, and ensure that everyone feels welcome.
- Create a “Social Media Ambassador” program. This program will allow for authentic endorsement by parents and also increase the virality of community-building posts. In addition, the ambassadors will feel valued as they serve as the school’s social media “cheerleaders.”

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS REGARDING ENROLLMENT:

- Utilize technology when communicating with prospective families. Use mail merge or the school’s database program to personalize letters with the student’s name, gender, address, etc. When sending emails to a group of families, use the school’s information system to personalize the text to the maximum capacity.
- When students participate in a shadow day, take a photo of the student (with permission), and text or email it to the parents. Follow up with a handwritten “thank-you” note from the tour guide to the prospective student. A nice touch is to have a personalized parking sign in front of the school when the family arrives (this can be easily done by using a template in Word, printing the document, and placing it in a clear plexiglass holder in front of the parking space).
- Build relationships with staff at partner schools. If you work in a high school, provide lunch for the middle school teachers, and host a “lunch and learn” presentation about your school. If you work in an elementary school, take the time to meet those who provide daycare in the area and treat them to breakfast while educating them about what your school has to offer.
- Host “friend-raiser” activities where guests are not asked for money, but rather are provided an atmosphere for mingling and socializing with one another and school staff.
- Run Facebook ads prior to Open Houses and enrollment events where school staff can engage in two-way communication with those interested or attending. Post photos after the event and thank those who attended online.
- Establish a Parent Ambassador program in which volunteers carry out specific functions on behalf of the school. Ambassadors can assist the administration with planning recruitment events, providing tours for prospective parents and students, etc. while reinforcing their passion for the school.
- Facilitate “exit interviews” on a consistent basis in order to provide a base of research on reasons that students leave the school. It is paramount that efforts be made to maintain a positive relationship with this audience as they are frequently asked questions in the community. These exit interviews also provide detailed information for the enrollment team in order to help develop strategies that reduce student attrition and improve retention rates.



MEET ...

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Michael C. Burke has spent more than 30 years working in the Catholic school profession as an administrator, teacher and coach. His visionary leadership skills have led to the implementation of a variety of innovative programs at schools where he has served as administrator. Enrollment sustainability has been one of his greatest strengths throughout his career in Catholic education and he was recently selected as one of only two high school presidents in the nation to be recognized with top honors from the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA), with the Lead, Learn, Proclaim Award for his outstanding leadership efforts, contributions and achievements in Catholic education. He currently serves as president of Melbourne Central Catholic High School in Melbourne, Florida.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS REGARDING RESOURCES:

- Make “Friendly Friday Phone Calls” to donors to thank them for their contribution made that week. Those contacted will be flattered and thrilled to have such a personal touch and, more often than not, a thoughtful conversation will ensue during the call.
- Maintain a database that tracks donor contact information, but also “bonus” information such as extended relationships in the community, birthdays, significant anniversaries (i.e., wedding, loss of a loved one, etc.).
- The art of a handwritten note is often one of the most genuine ways to build rapport with someone. Include a personalized and handwritten note when mailing the school’s annual report to a donor and/or write a message on the envelope to surprise the recipient.
- Invite donors and special guests to events with a complimentary ticket. Even if they choose not to attend, the gesture of providing a season pass to sporting events, free tickets to the school musical, etc. are thoughtful.
- Cultivate relationships with alumni near and far. Relationship-building with this specific group of stakeholders is paramount. Host events through the Alumni Association and provide opportunities for those not in the area to gather at satellite events. With alumni across the country, utilizing social media sites dedicated to graduates is an ideal way to share information.
- Host “state of the school” or morning coffee gatherings for select audiences. Providing a relaxed environment for stakeholders to clearly understand what their gifts are being used for is important. This venue also provides an open forum for donors to ask questions and strengthen relationships with administrators.
- Recognize donors (with permission) on social media. This is an ideal way to reach a large audience, while being cost effective. By posting the names of those who contribute to an Annual Giving Campaign, special events, or help to underwrite the cost of a “wish list” item, the donor will receive recognition and attention can be made to the fact that the school honors those who give generously. Be sure to respect requests for anonymity or confidentiality.

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.

¹ James L. Heft, S.M., *Catholic High Schools: Facing the New Realities* (Oxford University Press 2011).

² Adapted from Kotler/Fox, *Strategic Marketing For Educational Institutions* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1995).

³ Harry Beckwith, *Selling the Invisible: A Field Guide to Modern Marketing* (Warner Books, Inc., 1997).

⁴ Michael Burke, *Momentum*, Summer 2015, “Building Relationships: A Systematic Approach to Sustainable Enrollment,” pages 62 and 63 (National Catholic Educational Association).



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Published in September, November, January, March, May and July.

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