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THE 3 Rs OF PRIVATE SCHOOL MARKETING

by

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When it comes to announcing any list, you're bound to leave off something. Nevertheless, this report talks about the importance of the 3 Rs of private school marketing. I guess I could have included any of the following:

- **Real-time search results**
- **Relationship building**
- **Reaching out**
- **Real results**

There are several options, but I have settled on the 3 Rs that I think are absolutely essential for every private school.

- **Recruiting**
- **Retention**
- **Referrals**

Before launching into the details of these 3 Rs, we need to talk about Duct Tape Marketing.

What is Duct Tape Marketing?



Wish your school could have a
SYSTEMATIC approach
to marketing?

RANDY IS A CERTIFIED DUCT TAPE MARKETING CONSULTANT

Duct Tape Marketing is a funny sounding name, but a powerful marketing philosophy. Designed around the principles of SIMPLE and EFFECTIVE small business marketing, I saw it a perfect fit for private schools. Like duct tape, it is easy to follow and produces results that every school desires. Like a tool that can work wonders when everything else you've tried has failed, Duct Tape Marketing offers your school a guide to systematic marketing.

Five years ago (at the time of this writing), I was invited to join the international network of certified Duct Tape Marketing consultants. As I have worked with schools in the past 4 years, I see so many reasons why every private school needs a systematic marketing plan offered by Duct Tape Marketing.

The definition of “marketing” (as offered by Duct Tape Marketing) is as follows:

“Getting people with a specific need to know, like and trust you.”

The reason I like this definition of marketing is that it is NOT about tactical approaches, promotional gimmicks, or useless manipulation leaving the customer feeling forced into a corner. Decisions may be made, but “loyal ambassadors” are not created.

Decisions are one-time, single events. But with the cost of acquiring a new family, you can’t afford to spend your time securing “decisions.” What you are looking for are “loyal ambassadors.” As you spend your marketing resources recruiting families, those “loyal ambassadors” will return year-after-year . . . and they will tell others as well!

Duct Tape Marketing is all about making your marketing more about “strategy before tactics.” With a sound marketing strategy, you’ll fill your seats and stop wasting money!

Now, on to the 3 Rs.



Recruiting is part of your school's ability to attract the ideal family (yes, admit that although there are some families who can afford your school, they are not ideal).

Recruiting is intentionally seeking to bring families to your school who will be:

- great students (academic and character assessments),
- supportive families (financial ability + actively engaged),
- great referral sources (willing to talk about, write about and post about your school), and
- generous donors (while enrolled and certainly as alumni)

(If you can't get all 4 in one family, at least shoot for the moon when evaluating your families.)

Many schools fall victim to filling seats with less-than-ideal students with more challenges than can be tolerated, families who are overly critical and unsupportive of the school's efforts, parents who never speak of your school in a positive light, and never give back in any way. While their tuition money may help satisfy a bottom line, there are consequences to poor recruitment strategy. **They are a drain on your marketing energy.**

So while we could talk for hours about various tactical approaches to recruit great families, none of the promotional efforts will be worthwhile unless you have clearly identified the IDEAL FAMILY for your school.

Do you have your criteria for an ideal family?

Now, we begin focusing on how your school can transform your retention efforts! In addition, we will explore later how your referral strategy works together with your retention strategy to cultivate "LOYAL AMBASSADORS."



The first word of the phrase “loyal ambassadors” reminds us all that loyalty helps ensure retention!

This is a common consideration in small businesses, but something often overlooked in private schools. As one school administrator told me once, “when we retain even one family, it is our best fundraiser.”

So if your school’s financial solvency rests on the keeping your ideal families coming back year-after-year, then what are you doing to intentional cultivate loyalty?

Earlier, we focused on recruiting the ideal family (unless you know what makes someone an ideal family, you'll be fighting your own efforts at retention). Cultivating loyalty is made much easier when your ideal family is matched with your school's excellent performance. When an ideal family finds a suitable solution to the academic, spiritual or moral challenges facing them, they are more likely to stay year after year. If at any time, this family feels taken advantage of, or taken for granted, their eyes may be lured elsewhere.

Here are 7 tips on ensuring your ideal families sign on year after year for your private school:

CUSTOMER SERVICE – yes, they are customers. Treat them as such – much like you would like to be treated when you shop for shoes online, or for a new car at a dealership. Make them feel appreciated not just at the signing ceremony when they first enroll, but at every moment you can think of. When their daughter wins an award, write a hand-written congratulatory note to them. When they bring in their monthly tuition check, seize the moment to inquire about their satisfaction (if too many months go by and they begrudgingly pay for poor service, their loyalty dies off). Send families appreciation gifts/notes periodically from the Board, Administration, Admissions and teachers, too.

REMIND THEM OF WHAT SETS YOUR APART – this may have been evident in the search process, but as they experience the ups and downs of your school, those stark differences may wane over time while their eyes are lured to those other options they previously left on the table. Don't just send newsletters with stats, pictures and event information. Use such communication to reinforce what makes your private school different than your competition.

MAKE THEM FEEL NEEDED – from the moment they enroll, get them plugged in somewhere. Ask every parent to participate – whether on the PTO, at the concession stand at basketball games, or as part of administration's advisory council. Do an inventory on their knowledge, skills and abilities and plug them in. If they feel needed, they are less likely to walk away. Involvement = investment = commitment = loyalty.

INCLUDE THEM IN YOUR MARKETING TEAM – related to #3 above, get each family involved in marketing your school. When they first enroll, don't just take a picture of them and post it on Facebook. Capture a video testimonial and share it all over the place (your website, Facebook, Twitter). Then ask them to write notes of encouragement to other families. Ask them to refer new families and reward them for doing so. Raise the bar of expectation – make sure they know they are part of your marketing department!

SHOWCASE THEIR BABIES – there's something important to every family about seeing their child on stage. Recognize them for achievements, even the small ones. Post their successes on Facebook. Include all kinds of students in your recruiting video (don't just include the "pretty people" – you know what I mean). This takes effort on your part to include every kid somewhere – not an easy task if your school is 500+ students!

WHILE YOU CAN BE PERFECT, AT LEAST BE AUTHENTIC – when a teacher or administrator makes a mistake, own up to it, and apologize. Admit where you fall short and ask for grace. This goes a long way to retaining families. Nothing drives people away more than hypocrites or people who refuse to admit they are wrong. Remember that ol’ business adage, “the customer is always right.” A difficult pill to swallow in some instances at your school, but a great guide for those times when you are tempted to try and be right yourself.

BE SENSITIVE – and by this, I mean appeal to the 5 senses! Don’t be out-of-sight, out-of-mind (give them a taste of your school’s uniqueness by not just inviting stay-at-home parents to daytime assemblies, but including live-stream events or late-night video webinars for those working parents.) Invite them to smell the roses – allow them to sniff the aroma up close and personal by inviting them to be involved in ways they could never have done at the public school or private school around the corner. Create touch-points that inform, educate and inspire (making newsletters actually worth the time to read; transforming open house events into something current families ask to be a part of, etc.) Let them hear from you – via thank-you notes, appreciation events, and invitations to share ideas on making your school better. When you engage the senses of families in as many experiences as you can, it only makes “sense” for them to continue choosing you as the best educational option for their child.



Now, we move to the third R of school marketing. Let's take a look at some ideas and realities of referral and word-of-mouth marketing! As we discussed earlier, I want to remind you of the term "LOYAL AMBASSADORS."

Loyalty speaks of the extent to which your families are not just re-enrolling out of a lackluster

attitude of "aw shucks, I guess we'll stay put." This lukewarmness will never produce a quality referral. Loyalty is retaining families who would do whatever it takes to have the opportunity to continue another year. And they are not swayed by another school's tuition rate or even extra-curricular offering. Fierce allegiance is earned and is intentionally cultivated.

In the same way, ambassadors speak with boldness and clarity. Just as the United States Ambassador to Benin speaks on behalf of the President, your school will struggle or thrive based on how many ambassadors you nurture. (By the way, read a little more on our website about why I lived in this French-speaking West African nation - click on *"Our Marketing Philosophy / Who We Are"*.)

From a biblical standpoint, 2 Corinthians 5 speaks to believers as being "ambassadors" as though God were "making his appeal through us." Ambassadors serve at the pleasure of the one who appoints them and they represents the interests to those to whom they are sent. Does your school's leadership "appoint" your families as ambassadors? Do you place expectations on families to "make appeals" to their friends? Probably one of the sins committed by any school is the omission of asking for referrals . . . better yet, asking your families to make them for you!

There's an old adage in business marketing:

"the referred lead is easier to close and costs less to obtain."

In lieu of spending thousands and thousands of dollars strictly on advertising only to generate a few clicks, an ambassador's referral optimizes the leverage of their friendship to validate the lead. In other words, you are going to listen to and trust suggestions from your friends more than you'll believe bullet points from a slick brochure. And when I ask schools, most of the time, they admit that referrals are by far the best source of new students. So why are you still having trouble filling seats year after year?

3 of the most common reasons why referrals are not made:

1. Referrals are risky. Sure my own kid has a great experience, but can I guarantee that my friend's kid will also have a life-changing experience? Will that also find it as "worth it" as my family does? If I'm not 100%, I'm gonna pull back a little.

2. People don't refer their friends to boring things. This is hard to swallow because no business, organization, ministry or school wants to think that part of the reason that the referral pool is low is because they are not very exciting. Author Seth Godin has been quoted as saying "The products and services that get talked about are the ones that are worth talking about." If you are not "remarkable" then you are not worth making a remark about!

3. Your happy families don't know how you want them to refer. I may be willing to refer, but I just not sure of the process. Do I get something in return? Is there a form to fill out? Are you looking for elementary families or upper grades? Do you have an open house event that I can bring them to? Unless you spell this out for me clearly, I may not go to the trouble and try and figure it out.

So give your prospective families lots of information on how to refer ideal families to you. Train them. Teach them. Guide them. They want to help, but they are busy and you're asking them to stick their neck out and risk their reputation, too. And give them some remarkable things to talk with their friends about at church, at Little League and in their living room. And most of all, call them to a higher level of expectation to do it. If you don't ask them, they may not think of referring at all.

How are you cultivating ambassadors at your school?

For more information on our coaching and consulting services for private schools:

www.YourSchoolMarketing.com

by Randy Vaughn

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