

LOOKING FOR SOMETHING DIFFERENT
FOR YOUR NEXT ADMISSION EVENT?

33

NEW
IDEAS
FOR YOUR NEXT
OPEN
HOUSE

FREE REPORT!



by
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Are You Attracting the Right Kinds of Families ?

What does this picture say to you?

I served 10 years as a church planting and leadership training missionary among the Aja people of Benin, West Africa.

The picture to the right is one of my favorite pictures. It was taken on our final Sunday after a gathering of hundreds of Christians in this small African country. I count these men as great friends. I speak their language, Aja-gbe.

When most people look at this picture, you probably see “Randy standing with 6 African men.” True, but there is a more specific description. They are not just “African” men. They are African men from the country of Benin. They are also African men from the country of Benin, from the Mono-Couffo region. They are from the Aja people group in the Mono-Couffo region and they speak a specific dialect of the Aja language. These specifics would tell you much more about their culture, attitude, behaviors, fears, struggles, histories and challenges.



WATCH VIDEO Listen to what Aja-gbe sounds like!

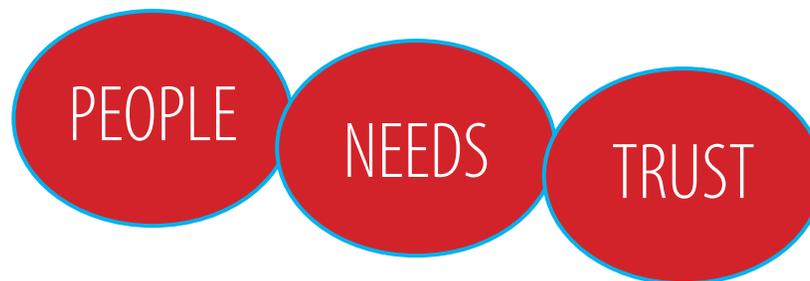
Strategy before Tactics

I am a certified Duct Tape Marketing Consultant. No, it has nothing to do with marketing duct tape, but rather a systematic and strategic approach to marketing.

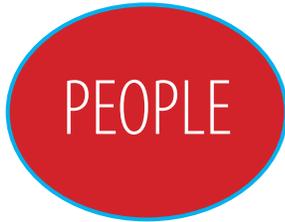
As a private school, you are a business and must consider systematic marketing in order to attract the right kinds of families to your school and keep the ones you have. When we talk about the “3 Rs of School Marketing”, I consider recruiting, retention and referrals to be the complete system necessary for any school to succeed. Having a system and a strategy are essential.

[Click here to download another free report, “3 Rs of School Marketing”](#)

So before we dive into the “practical and tactical” side of driving people to an Open House/Preview event at your school, we will discuss the core elements of the strategy: knowing your audience, understanding their need and showcasing your solution.



Strategy: Audience



Schools must move beyond generic marketing if they are going to reach their ideal audience. Just like my African friends, those men represent a more complex profile than just “African”.

In a frenzied world, your ideal families are inundated with communication messages from the marketplace, their church, their local community, their current school and by all the online social channels to which they subscribe. Tossing out a general message intended for “everyone” will in fact reach “no one.”

When all we had were expensive one-time corporate videos or bulk viewbook/brochure printing, schools were forced to come up with a big tent message that would reach out to families from PK to 12 (or however high your school’s grade level reaches).

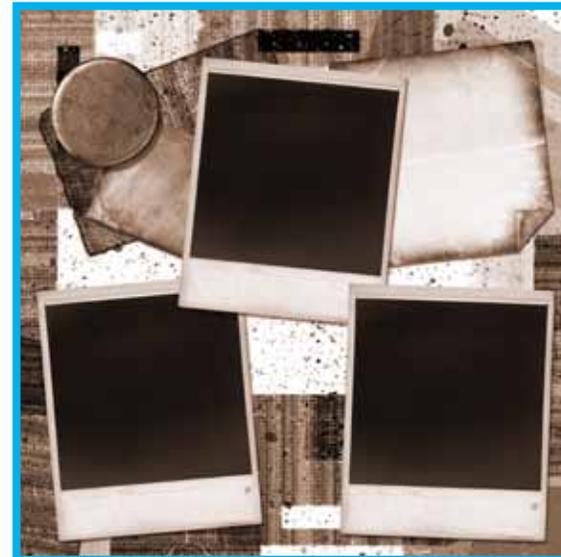
What may have been an annual expense necessitated content that would last all-year long. Even print ads were done using this same approach. Mass marketing forces you to cast a large brand message but if you are going to drive the right kinds of families, you will need to target your message to match your audience.

Tossing out a general message intended for “everyone” will in fact reach “no one.”

Our current communication climate affords every school (and every budget) the opportunity to create content that is tailor-made for specific audiences. Some of your marketing materials will carry your overall brand and you will still use those. But now you can customize your messaging to the exact types of audiences you are wanting to reach.

As I mentioned, my family and I spent over 10 years of my life as a missionary reaching out to the Aja people of Benin, West Africa. We spent considerable energy, time and effort to study their language, customs, and lifestyle. I had one Aja friend tell me, “you know our people better than we know ourselves.” **You should know your audiences that well.**

Create ideal family profiles for the various segmented markets you need to reach. Analyze their demographics, buying habits, and communication preferences. Create a spreadsheet that details this information. One of my favorite ideas is to draw a typical family and literally put their profile details inside of a picture frame you hang above your computer. Having this profile in front of you reminds you of your specific audience whether you are talking to them on the phone or writing a blog post or sending them an email. It will improve the connection you make with them when you compose content.



Strategy: Need



To fully comprehend each audience profile, you will need to go beyond just knowing their socioeconomic data, zip code or gender. Before moving on, let me address one misunderstanding about “target market”.

You can/should have multiple segments you are marketing to (hence, the wonder of customizing marketing content). For example, while Moms occupy many school audience segments as the primary decision maker on education of their children, you may want to consider a “Dad” segment so you can address the specific concerns that he may have.

You must know more about your audience than just where they live and how much income their family brings in annually. You must also consider buying habits (where they shop, what they shop for), purchasing patterns and priorities, and what incentive or environment drives their buying decisions (value, coupons, discounts, prestige, etc.)

Even knowing their consumer behavior is incomplete unless we understand what keeps them awake at night. My clients hear me incessantly insist schools understand their audience’s

“needs, problems, pains, frustrations and fears.”

This quintuplet phrase forces us to consider their pain points, the deeper struggles they have and what compels our specific audiences to act.

Some examples of pain points:

- “We need a school that is small enough to give my daughter one-on-one attention, challenging her academic standards in preparation for her future in engineering.”
- “The problem with our current school is that it is so big that our son never makes the A-team of any sport.”
- “We are troubled by the direction of our state’s Board of Education and want a biblical worldview for our children’s academics.”
- “There’s no way our current school will prepare my son for the type of college he wants to go to. We need financial assistance and having a higher SAT will open up scholarships. Our public school may not be giving him the right tools.”
- “We have homeschooled our 3 kids since they were little, but I fear now that my role as ‘educator’ is less effective for preparing them for college, mainly because I do not understand the subjects myself! I want to be a parent first but fear that being their teacher, too, is complicating that relationship at home.”

Return to the profile you have on the wall or on the spreadsheet and include some of the language in these statements. Harken to conversations over the years with parents in these profile segments. Recall how they articulated their need, problem, pain, frustration or fear. This will help you make an emotional connection with your audience when you are talking to them.

Your marketing message must be more focused on THEM and less about your school’s offerings.

Strategy: Solution



You now have a strong handle on the specific audience you are addressing (in a phone conversation, campus tour, blog post or video). Make the conversation about THEM, their life and their need, problem, pain, frustration or fear. As you talk about THEM, you have them in your hand. They will listen.

Remember, erase the robotic sales script from your conversation. When you are talking to “everyone”, people almost always assume you are talking to someone else and they ignore you.

Now begin articulating your solution.

In a one-size-fits-all messaging, you are forced to include global claims such as “we have a wide range of extra-curricular activities and our academics are top-notch across the board.”

That’s boring.

Rather than dribbling out the standard admissions script (which is about YOU), turn the conversation to a solution that nurtures TRUST this family will place in your school.

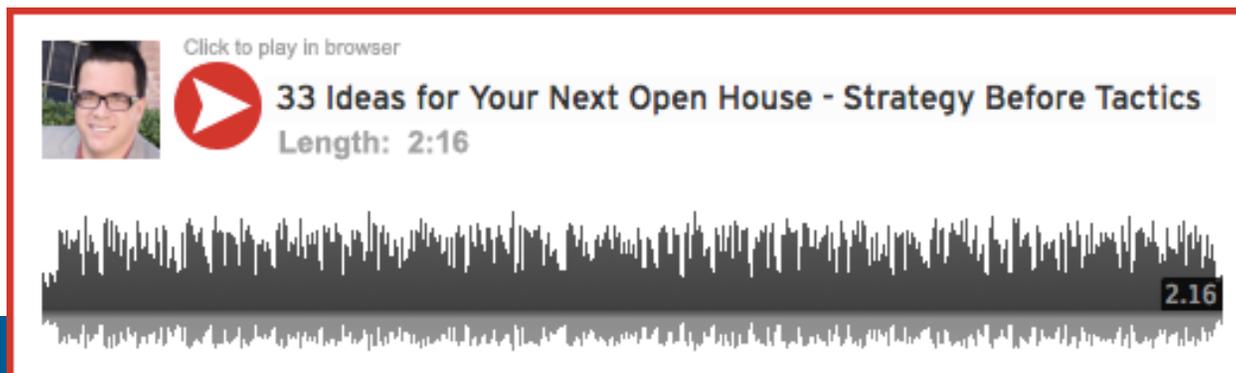
Validate their concerns. And use informational content to educate and build trust.

In targeted messaging, you address the needs. If a homeschool family is struggling with whether a Christian school abdicates their role, craft a message like this: *"We partner with families who have homeschooled with success and now want to take their children's academic preparation to the next level."* By "partnering" with them, you alleviate the guilt feeling some homeschool families have about leaving their homeschool community for the local Christian school (unfortunately, these are often adversarial relationships).

Rather than generically stating that you offer "high academic standards", make the effective comparison to recent SAT scores from your Upper Class students to their peers at other private or public schools.

If you are a Christian academy, there may be a local perception that your school is led by ministers, pastoral staff, or Bible teachers (generically ineffectively marketed as "quality teachers who care for your child"). Market the professional credentials of your staff so concerned parents can have confidence in your school's academic standards.

Now on to the 33 ideas for your next open house . . . but listen to this first:



33 NEW IDEAS FOR YOUR NEXT OPEN HOUSE

USE THIS HASHTAG #openhouseideas
also get ideas from:
#ismarketing #sm4schools

[Using Hashtags on Twitter Will Introduce You To New People & Ideas - Click to See for Yourself](#)

CAVEAT:

I am using a widely-used term “Open House” for any marketing/admission event you may organize at your school. You may call it “Preview Night”, “Campus Tour” or “Friends Day”. I think any term that is warm, friendly and inviting works. I would not recommend using “Join Us Night” or “Admission Coffee”. This seems too aggressive if you are only in the attractional stage with certain prospective families.

You want a large pool of families to visit so you can follow-up with them through phone calls and email marketing. If they are turned off and never come (because they do not want to be pressured into enrolling), then you may have missed an opportunity to help a family begin their journey. There will be ways to use your Open House event to sell and convert, but I believe the main purpose of these events is to connect prospective families to the larger story of your school.

BEFORE

WORD-OF-MOUTH CARDS

Customized/personalized business cards are dirt cheap and can be used in a variety of ways:

1. Open House invite cards with something to watch on your website (takes them to a unique landing page to watch a targeted video related to the audience's need/pain/problem/frustration/fear - "3 Families Say Why They Are Happy They Left the Public Schools")
2. Family referral cards that families can pass out to their friends (can be used year-round but can also include Open House details) with a customized web address for each family. The card will direct recipients to a family landing page with customized family-generated content (videos made by the family, audio interview with Mom, or a written article from Dad titled "5 financial decisions we made so we could afford Covenant Academy")
3. Current families could carry around stacks of profile-specific cards to pass out to people when the conversation goes in a specific direction. For instance, print up school branded cards but with directions to visit your website to "Watch Video Testimonials of 7 Homeschool Families Who Consider Covenant Academy a Critical Partner in their Children's Education"

Content must attract! Read: "You don't attract families with promotional brochures."

NEWSPAPER/MAGAZINE/DIRECT MAIL ADVERTISING TIPS

BEST PRACTICES

Drive readers to unique landing pages on your website (i.e., covacademy.com/openhouse) in order to better track the success of each and every ad, billboard, or direct mail piece. Unique phone numbers may also be used, but can have a negative impact on SEO as search engines may get confused with different phone numbers on your site. Also, while receptionists can be trained to ask “how did you hear about us”, sometimes they do not ask and thus render your response analytics inaccurate. To further engage in best practices, when visitors arrive from the ad to the unique landing page on your site, capture an email address from a contact form, gated content (require an email address to watch a video or download a free report), or, at a minimum, encourage visitors to sign up for a newsletter. This is critical to engage with consistent follow-up.

4. Instead of a kitchen-sink-tell-all ad, reduce the ad size, drive the reader to your marketing website where an interested reader can find out more details. If you want to track differently or have a different design, you may need to create a separate website to act as a landing page.
5. Rather than occupying a majority of the ad space with your school crest/logo, shrink the size of those graphics in favor of more captivating visuals or a larger attention-getting headline.
6. It is no longer necessary to spend 25% of the ad space for a map to your school. With GPS technology built into most phones and cars, compelled viewers will find out where to go.
7. Offer targeted content that resonates with the audience’s needs, problems, pains, frustrations, and fears. Generic ads are limited to only saying “Visit Our Open House” and only talk about your school. Consider splitting your ad into two smaller ads that target unique audiences with text/visuals that connect with each specific audience. One ad for Kindergarten families would be noticeably different than an ad targeting families of high school students.

Click here to read:
"Better Magazine Advertising
Practices for Schools"



8. For each ad's landing page, create a video greeting from an energetic school representative (Head of School, Admission Director, or even Student Council President). This unexpected connection with the reader can even address the ad source (impressive because it shows you are intentional about reaching this audience and aware of where your ads are showing). For example, a surprise video might say, "Welcome Fort Worth Child reader! We know there was another school on the same ad page as us, so we want you to know the major differences between us and them. Also, there was an ad for a trampoline park, too - and we admit that it may be hard for us to compete with them for your kid's entertainment." Have some fun with it! You might even say on the ad, "watch our Head of School attempt to juggle a bowling ball". With some trick video editing, you could make it look like he's got real talent. More importantly, **you now have their attention** and can address more serious issues as well. Silly as it seems, this is sometimes the most viral content on social media.

ONLINE CONTENT & SOCIAL MEDIA BEFORE THE EVENT

9. Use all of your social channels to drive prospective families to a unique Open House landing page with all the details and possibly an RSVP sign up (offer an incentive to those who do take the time to do it because in our culture, few people respond to invitations).
10. Announce your event with a keyword-rich online press release. Tweet that release out to local media and/or email them the PDF (you can use PRWeb.com or PRLog.org).
11. Create a hashtag for the event and use it across all applicable social media platforms (Twitter, Google+, Instagram, Facebook). Encourage current student ambassadors and parent volunteers to use it, too. Warning: hashtags can be “hijacked” because no one can “own” or “claim” a hashtag, so realize that others may use that hashtag other than how you intended. There is very little you can do about it, but you can flood the hashtag feed with positive posts.
12. Because prospective families will likely do their own investigative research BEFORE they come to your on-campus event, start securing as many online reviews as possible. Have families review your school on Google and on GreatSchools.org - these are the most prominent places where families will look.

As reviews are made by families, repurpose them as content on your Facebook page (and elsewhere around social media).



DURING

MAKE IT ATTRACTIVE SO THAT PEOPLE WILL TALK ABOUT IT

Not every “Open House” event has to be a sales pitch. Schedule some events just to let people know you exist by drawing them to your campus. It may also be a great way to showcase a different side of private schools, which can often be perceived as “elite” or “exclusive”.

13. Coordinate a contest to see which area schools can collect the most canned food donations for your community food pantry. Make your Open House a celebration event to recognize the winner. You attract community leaders, sponsors, public school families and even private school competitors while showcasing the good you can do for the community.
14. Our culture loves amateur talent competitions (American Idol, The Voice, etc.). Host your community’s version of such a talent show. You can garner a lot of publicity and goodwill in the community as well as using this high-profile platform as a way to introduce your school to the larger community. Capturing their email addresses, you can follow up with high-quality content and opportunities for future campus visits.
15. Cooperate with your local artists to display an art exhibit at your Open House. Those artists will certainly promote the event for you.
16. Host a friendly “throwdown” between burger joints or BBQ restaurants in your town. They create the buzz and you simply host the event as a way to let people know you exist.

ENTERTAIN & OFFER VALUE

17. I have been to Open House events that were just plain boring and nothing more than an informational walking tour [yawn]. If your Upper School Open House event starts at 7pm, make sure that starting at 6:30, you have a parade of lower school performances on stage to entertain guests as they enter your facility. This calms nerves and creates a welcoming atmosphere. If you are hosting a PK or Lower School-focused admission event, this is a great time to showcase the Middle School jazz ensemble or the High School drama department doing excerpts from their upcoming Spring musical. Or allow your student leaders to inspire the audience with their unique perspective on impacting the world.

Watch this video below of a teen telling his story about starting a non-profit called "Bags to Riches"



18. Because young parents want their child to be the brightest kid in the class, include in your Open House valuable presentations that give Moms and Dads tips on raising up great readers, thinkers and creative geniuses! One school is including at their Open House a presentation that teaches young parents what they must do at home to prepare their child to read well. TIP: put this in your advertisement, so prospective families can anticipate something of value at your event (one Mom might also invite a friend if her friend is also worried about this, too).

FUN FOR THE FAMILY

19. When possible, make your event something for the entire family. Moms and Dads tend to be cerebral about informational events. While they are the decision makers, it is the students (and siblings) who talk and share about how great (or how dull) the event was. Invite parents to bring their little ones to a high-energy “Kid Party” where they can play dress-up, put on a style show or costume parade (donated after Halloween by current parents), or have a scavenger hunt around campus for prizes. Whatever Mom and Dad thought, the younger ones will talk incessantly about their experience at your Open House. Provide ample photos that parents can take-away or share on social media. Fine Print: yes, there are issues of child security and safety that must be considered. Regulations may limit your ability to offer child care. Be careful, as well, with displaying photos of kids online without getting permission (just like you should do with your current families). Do not be flippant in the way you showcase pictures.
20. Perhaps have breakout sessions for parents where Moms can talk with current Moms while Dads hear from current Dads talk about your school. Authentic testimonials will resonate more than a scripted Admission Director speech. Dads might ask more questions with other men than he might with other couples around or even around his wife. Moms, too.
21. Giveaway family-centered SWAG that will be seen by others. But rather than making the promotional materials “too promotional” (in other words, with your logo all over it), give away other great T-shirts or coffee mugs that will get people asking about or talking about them. Clever T-shirts for students and stylish tees for Moms can produce future conversations with friends about “where did you get that?” Sell more on your website to get future traffic, too!

MAKE IT MULTISENSORY



SIGHT

22. A prospective family can decide within the first 5 minutes of being on your campus whether they will return. Greet known visitors (those who may have sent an RSVP, see #9) with a RESERVED parking spot with their name on it.
23. Have clear signage in the parking area that directs visitors where to go (remember, they are likely unfamiliar with your campus). Clear out all reserved parking that is used by HS seniors or faculty and remake them as “Future Student” or “Guest” parking spots.
24. Rather than typical stock-like photographs of your school (aka., the pretty, popular and multi-racial pictures), showcase your student-athletes at a local nursing home or the cheerleaders on a mission trip in Haiti. Unexpected surprises are memorable and tell a greater story.
25. Invite local artists to display their artwork or sculptures that make great “Instagram Moments” for parents and students to pose with (is this replacing the “Kodak Moment” lingo made popular in the 70s?). You want to extend the visual experience beyond the event.

SOUND



26. Like a museum, have video stations (using TV/laptop/iPad) where you may have headphones for parents to listen to various video testimonials from families dealing with specific concerns (i.e., Dads talking about the ROI of the financial sacrifice, former homeschool Moms telling about their struggle to let go of the educational responsibility, etc.) These short videos allow authentic voices (non-marketing personnel) to speak their testimony of success directly to your visitors. You should repurpose these videos on your website, too.

SMELL

27. Many real estate agents suggest that it is the aroma of homemade cookies that helps sell more than offering a plate of them on the counter. Use your school's kitchen or gym concession area to bake cookies or pop up some popcorn. Avoid air fresheners or scented candles.

TASTE

28. Offer guests tasty treats prepared (and paid for) by a local gourmet baker who would like to get her business in front of more customers. This costs you nothing and sends a message to your guests that they are important (store-bought snacks communicate the opposite).

TOUCH



29. Rather than handing out only promotional materials, give your guests items of greater value for their lives. Ideas could include donated gift cards, movie tickets, restaurant coupons, a tip sheet on saving/making money, an article by a local pastor or counselor on raising smart social media teens, etc. Give extra that they can pass on to friends. These bless the guests' lives and the extra copies allow them to help a friend (and they will talk about your school).
30. QR codes are often used poorly (like on a billboard), but allowing your guests to interact with a smartphone or tablet with a QR reader gives them an interactive experience.

Click on the link below where I describe the best way to use QR codes at an Open House event.



AFTER

31. Capturing photo and video content during the event is crucial so you can assemble a slideshow or video of the event to share on social media. Because of privacy issues, it may be best to steer away from a lot of front-facing photos or videos of guests. Rather, capture the energy from your entertainment, from the staff, or from current students/parents engaged. Do not tag your guests on Facebook in the video, but if they follow your page (another thing they can do during the event on a stationary computer or tablet), hopefully they will “like” it or even share it over on their profile.
32. Email every attendee with a personal “thank you”, a link to any resource you have that would help them (perhaps a link to a resource about parenting teens that you have on your blog), and include any photos that you captured during the event (this allows you to share with them a great family photo and ensuring that you are not going to post on social media without their permission shows you have respect for their privacy).
33. Add them immediately to your **email marketing newsletter** (this is different than your internal newsletter). This message offers more helpful resources than it does promotional pressure. Start sending this out within 2 weeks of the Open House. Some families may just be starting their journey with you and it may be the 3rd, 7th or 10th contact from you before they take the next step. **CLICK TO READ: “Providing Stepping Stones Not Stumbling Blocks”**

A FEW BONUS THINGS TO CONSIDER:

- **NO SHOWS:** You will have many families who PLAN on attending, but for whatever reason, they do not show up. Do not count on their attendance to gather key follow-up information. That's why, at a minimum, you should be trying to get them into your email marketing, Facebook or Twitter database so you can continue the conversation.
- **NO DULL:** Rather than having a stale speech by the Head of School or Admission Director (admittedly, those can be pretty dull), grab the visitors attention with a high-energy video produced by the students with iMovie. This should include student testimonials, student Instagram photo streams, positive tweets about your school, etc. This sets the tone early that students are happy and engaged in your school. This is how parents want their kids to feel about school.
- **NO BULLEts:** If you or your HOS has to do a presentation, avoid reading bullet points from a PowerPoint presentation. Use eye-catching photographs of your students "in action" that tells a bigger story. Short targeted videos are much more memorable on the drive home.
- **JOKES ON YOU:** Never display LIVE tweets about your school during the Open House unless you have the ability to filter and moderate which ones get shown. Trust me, I've seen this go bad in a public forum because of a few pranksters.
- **BE UNIQUE:** Showcase clearly your differentiating features (if technology sets you apart, have current students demonstrate some of the great works they have done using the technology). If arts, sports, or special learning accommodations make you unique, ensure these are prominent in your presentation.

- **DON'T SAY THIS:** Avoid subjective marketing cliches: “we provide a better atmosphere”, “we have great quality faculty”, “good academic standards” or “strong spiritual environment”. As a visitor, I need upfront evidence. Don’t make me ask for it.
- **PAY ATTENTION:** If you are conducting individual tours, assign a student/parent ambassador to follow around with you to simply take note of questions/concerns that the family may ask; you are gathering information as well that can be put on file (personal things like where the Dad went to college, how long the couple has been married, anniversary date, etc.) This allows you to personalize each individual family’s profile that you keep on file (details the family will be surprised that you remember.)
- **MAKE IT PERSONAL:** Follow-up with handwritten notes from as many people as possible (parents, admissions officials, Head of School, students). Space them out over the 3-5 weeks following the event. Vary the type of correspondence: postcard, official letterhead, handwritten notecard. Using any specific insights gleaned from your conversation, attempt to personalize the note (“I am thankful you got to visit with our soccer coach” or “I hope you guys had a great anniversary trip after you came to see us”).
- **KEEP UP THE HELP:** Keep the flow of targeted high-value content coming (free blog articles, downloadable reports, accessible video/audio content that prospective families can consume). What may seem like an overwhelming amount of content to you will be perfect for your audience. Because of their busy schedules, do not assume (nor count on) that they will read that one follow-up email, blog post or watch that lone video you sent them afterward.

[Click to add to this list with your favorite #openhouseideas on social media!](#)

 tweet this!

CONNECT



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QUESTIONS or INQUIRIES:

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