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# 9 STEPS TO MARKETING YOUR CHRISTIAN SCHOOL

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SOURCE: thefreedictionary.com

**shoot from the hip**  
to react quickly without considering the possible effects

Most schools practice “shoot-from-the-hip” marketing. As described in the definition above, such actions are reactionary without much consideration for future impact.

Are you a hip-shooter (I think I just made up a term)?

- **Hip-shooters** allocate resources year-after-year, sometimes never changing the line item, even if the tool has shown little ROI.
- **Hip-shooters** spend marketing money on things “because we can’t afford not to” (meaning: you competitors are doing something so you do it because they are doing it)
- **Hip-shooters** practice copycat marketing, sometimes even without knowing it!

Effective school marketing is a system. Marketing is not only a system, it may be the most important system in any school.

In this e-book, you will find the 9 steps that will offer you a systematic approach to marketing your Christian school. Schools that appreciate and implement this approach to marketing will grow in a consistent and predictable manner.

## Step #1 - Define “Marketing”

If you were to get a room full of Heads of School, admission directors or communication team members and asked them to define “marketing”, you would likely get as many different answers as bodies in the room. To understand how to approach marketing for your school, it may be helpful to understand our definition of marketing.

**A good definition of school marketing is “getting ideal families with specific needs to know, like and trust you.” \***

Let’s break this down into 3 parts:

**FAMILIES** - when considering your ideal families, this most likely consists of full-pay/mission-appropriate families and families that share your values and will be great voices for your brand. However, depending on the grades offered at your school, this could include young couples with pre-K children to middle-aged families with middle or high school students. That’s quite a variety but you need to clearly identify who you are communicating to in any given marketing effort (trust me, one-size content marketing does NOT fit all!)

**NEEDS** - related to the educational choice for their child, the family may be struggling with a need, problem, pain, frustration or fear. They may need a rigorous academic preparation not currently offered at the government school. They may have a problem with the values of the state-offered curriculum. They may have a pain or frustration with their child’s participation level on the large public school sports teams. Or they may fear their homeschool instruction is not adequately preparing them for college, both academically and socially.

\* This definition of marketing is adapted from John Jantsch of Duct Tape Marketing. In a small business marketing system, such a definition allows business owners to know their audiences and follow a strategic path of conversion that leads to repeat business and word of mouth marketing. In addition to assisting schools, Randy also helps small businesses around the country as a licensed Duct Tape Marketing Certified Consultant.

**KNOW-LIKE-TRUST** - This process is much like a dating relationship where conversation, experience and time build trust. In some instances, families may know just very little about you (if at all). They may be new to the area or just have never turned their attention to private education (until their recent need, problem, pain, frustration or fear arose). You intentionally work at making them aware of your uniqueness and evidence that you are worth a second look. The relationship develops through a series of “touches” with you that give you a good experience. They may subscribe to your externally-focused newsletter, follow you on Twitter or Facebook or interact with some of your current families at church, Starbucks or a Little League game. At the LIKE stage, they are still weighing options but not yet exclusively convinced you are the one for them. Continuing the relationship metaphor, TRUST is built over time and through a series of touches that cultivate a strong commitment from these families toward your school. As a result of the TRUST stage, families decide YOU are their one and only school of choice.

One can argue about what “like” and “trust” are in a given industry (including schools), but now more than ever, this definition gets to the heart of the marketing game. Families are beyond marketing-as-manipulation and self-promotion will get you nowhere. Rather, focus on cultivating a trusted relationship with prospective families.

## **Step #2 - Develop a Communication Strategy**

Most schools take the “idea of the week” tactical approach to marketing, tossing money and other resources at the latest fad in marketing (this includes social media, too). However, a good strategy is the most important aspect of any successful marketing implementation.

Before you decide on a direct mail campaign or launching a Facebook page or Instagram account for your school, you must adopt and commit to a marketing strategy. All tactical decisions should be filtered through your strategy to see if they make sense or support the overall marketing strategy.

The concept of a marketing strategy may seem foreign or out of reach, but it’s really little more than determining and narrowly defining your ideal client, and creating and

communicating some key points of differentiation.

Differentiation is critical. As it pertains to competing with other private schools, simply offering “strong academics” or a “solid spiritual environment” is wasted language because it offers no evidence and it probably is also being touted by your competitor. You must be specific in what sets you apart. Realize that you also compete with public/government schools, too, so make sure your audience is keenly aware of how you compare. Obviously, working against you is that most public schooling is FREE and yours is NOT. You cannot overcome such a barrier with broadstroke, flimsy language. Be aggressive in your communication strategy, even provocatively challenging the Goliath of FREE education.

If you want your audience to KNOW-LIKE-TRUST you, it is imperative to give them tangible evidence and specific examples of your value. Without it, any tactical approach is dead.

### Step #3 - Understand the 3 Rs of School Marketing

As you grasp a strong definition of marketing and hone in your communication strategy, step back to acknowledge the bigger picture of marketing.

Yes, enrollment is the #1 priority of most schools. **Enrollment = seats filled = \$\$**, so yes, it is of paramount importance. However, focusing simply on enrollment is short-sighted.

You cannot spend all your time and money on simply filling seats. This is “addition marketing” where you need “multiplication marketing”! The process of recruiting new students to fill seats will occupy your complete focus if you are not wise to the 3 Rs of school marketing.

**RECRUITMENT** - yes, this is the effort that consumes most of your time. Whether it is talking with Kindergarten families or high school sophomores, the number of seats filled sets the budget for your school’s operations (and is most likely how your effectiveness is measured). But there are two other equal parts that need your attention just as much. And when you intentionally focus your attention on the other two Rs of school marketing, you may discover your recruiting stress goes way down!

**RETENTION** - schools must aggressively market to current families, too! Re-enrollment is not just a January event where you send a letter out to parents informing them of an upcoming deadline. Even if you offer automatic re-enrollment (not a bad idea), you must continually communicate your value to current families. A business owner knows well that it takes a lot more time and money to bring in a new customer than it does to invite a repeat customer to come back. Why? Because it takes time and money to cultivate KNOW-LIKE-TRUST.

**REFERRALS** - the other critical way to improve school marketing is to enact intentional efforts of referral marketing and word-of-mouth marketing. Get happy families, staff, students and alumni to become your voices in the community (offline and online). This may happen on its own (if your “product” is worth bragging about), but you can add fuel to the fire if you are intentional about referral marketing strategies.

The final two Rs, retention and referrals, complete the full marketing cycle. If you simply focus on recruitment, you are “filling seats” which will exhaust your marketing budget and your personal energy. When you realize that enrollment is only part of the process, you can turn your attention to cultivating “**loyal ambassadors**” (families that repeat and refer!)

## **Step #4 - Build a Solid Brand**

Looking back at Steps #1 and #2, consider if your overhaul school brand is consistent with the audiences you are trying to reach. A complete overhaul of the visual identity elements may be necessary (this could include an academic seal, a marketing-friendly logo, athletic/mascot identity marks, etc.) Ensure that your branding is consistently represented across all media, whether it is on-campus signage, advertising graphics, website or social media avatars. Consistent branding communicates value to families; communication chaos tells a family that you are disorganized, underfunded or lacking in excellence.

Do not obsess about your school’s tagline or mission statement. Boards and marketing committees can spend hours laboring over the semantics and inclusion of the perfect phraseology. However, it is your school’s overall story that will resonate with your audience. Micro-stories, which tell your school’s larger story, grab the attention of your audience and



work as evidence showcasing your school's value. Mission statements may rally your staff to deliver a great product, but most prospective families ignore such statements or taglines (or certainly could not repeat them a day after their campus tour).

Your brand is more than just a logo or letterhead. It is the representation of your school's unique story and value. Spend some time making sure this is clear.

## **Step #5 - Recognize that Content is King**

School marketers today must commit to producing content, much like a publisher might. Prospective families expect to search and find large amounts of useful information, particularly as it relates to their "need, problem, pain, frustration or fear." This is why STRATEGY still trumps TACTICS every time.

Consistent production of content that builds trust (success stories, testimonials) and content that educates (blog posts, e-books and online seminars) are major components of the new marketing system.

Content publishing is a much better strategy than simply pushing out direct mail pieces twice a year or paying for a huge billboard about your Open House. Not that traditional methods won't drive traffic to your website or light up your phones, but a content publisher fills in the gaps and offers a steady "top-of-mind" presence year-round in front of your prospective families. Many marketing efforts attempt to get families to KNOW them and TRUST them in the same breath. But in reality, there are some ideal families who need months or years to develop a level of TRUST with you. You need a consistent communication strategy for these families.

## **Step #6 - Be Everywhere Online, But . . .**

It's simply not enough to have a website and a Facebook page and think you're really participating online. You must, as online entrepreneur Pat Flynn suggests, "be everywhere"!

OK, take a deep breath. I am not suggesting that you spread yourself so thin only that you offer little value to no one. A better way to “be everywhere” is to consider “be in every place your ideal families are” and do it well.

This requires a thorough inventory of every possible social media tactic or platform. Then filter your possible efforts by determining if this is a great venue to reach your target audience. Is one of your ideal family profiles (identified in Step #1) active in this space? If they are, be active there, too! But if they are not, consider letting go of that tactic even if other competing schools are there (or some marketing consultant like me suggests you be there.....trust your strategy!)

However you present yourself online, consider that your website is your HUB of your total online presence. And most likely it is the one platform where you have ultimate control (unlike, for example, the changes consistently being made to Facebook). Center your communication tools around your website and allow them to integrate well with your traditional tools as well. Drive direct mail traffic to your website, to specific landing pages that capture valuable information.

## **Step #7 - Lay Out the Stepping Stones**

When you are walking near a creek, everyone looks for the stones to step on to get to the other side. One summer day, I was out with my young boys and there was not a safe pathway for boys with small strides, so I found larger rocks and created a path that would get them to the other side safely.

Sit down with a team (staff and/or volunteers) and map out a clear pathway for prospective families. Draw it visually so everyone can imagine the intentionality of each step. There is not always just one path, so creatively imagine when certain ideal families may enter your marketing system. Similar to a flowchart, design a systematic approach to moving a family from KNOW, LIKE, TRUST and then to ENROLL, RE-ENROLL and REFER.



**“Don’t put up stumbling blocks, but provide stepping stones.”**

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At each stone, there are a variety of ways to attract them and then propel them to the next step. Design a schematic for families who are new to town to get to KNOW you. While jumping stones is permissible, some families need to be methodically guided from action to action. If you leave too big of a gap, they might retreat in fear and go back to the shore where they started.

This process may be lengthy but allows for you to be intentional, strategical and systematic. It also puts the entire team on the same page in terms of their role.

## **Step #8 - Identify the Gaps & Assess Your Resources**

In a recently marketing exercise with your administration, you may have done a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats). This classic marketing exercise identifies areas where you may succeed and projects places where you could be vulnerable for failure.

As you assess the competitive marketing landscape, you must look at your communication strategy (Steps #1-4), your content strategy (Steps #5-6), and now your implementation strategy (Steps #7-9). These final three stages are critical to do the hard work of assessment, reinforcement, and any necessary reallocation of funds and personnel to carry out the marketing objectives.

## Step #9 - Plan and Live By Your Marketing Calendar

The scarcest resource in any school is time. There is always more to do than possibly can be done. Some people deal with this by simply shutting down and doing very little. Have you ever felt like throwing your hands up in defeat?

Marketing momentum requires consistent work over the entire school year (and this includes holiday and breaks). Your school marketing is best managed by creating a marketing calendar. The annual marketing calendar is not only a great planning device for re-enrollment campaigns and Open House events, but it's also a great tool to organize and schedule a year's worth of marketing efforts.

Begin by assessing your 12-month calendar as it relates to the school calendar. Acknowledge when there are student holidays, breaks, and major on-campus events. This gives you a real assessment of your manpower hours (yours and your team's). You will not likely get a lot of help during the 2 weeks of Christmas break. As well, you know that your Back-to-School Week and Graduation Week are both jam-packed with other responsibilities (consider all the hats you have to wear those weeks).

Now, look at your enrollment calendar, taking special note of Open House events, community school fairs and re-enrollment information meetings. Start to identify the general times of these events, paying close attention to your school calendar. Overlapping and double booking is a nightmare.

Looking at your school's enrollment goals, begin to identify the marketing efforts that are most critical. Those areas needing the most growth will likely need to consume more of your marketing calendar. However, a systematic marketing calendar also ensures other areas do not get neglected. **Do not forget:** while high school may have a waiting list now, retention efforts cannot be overlooked. Families are like customers; they love to feel recognized and not pushed off to the side because you are more focused on the acquisition of new families. Now that you have your enrollment calendar (focusing on the 3 Rs in Step #3) overlaid on top of your school calendar, and with your school's enrollment goals clearly articulated, you can start creating solid action steps on your marketing calendar.

Here are some examples:

- Creating monthly content themes that correspond to both your enrollment and school calendar. Holiday themes make super content, but do not simply show Mrs. Johnson's 2nd Grade class projects about pilgrims and Indians (public schools do this, too). Showcase events or stories that tell how your school celebrates holidays differently, perhaps with a stronger spiritual emphasis than students at a government school may get. This is called marketing your differentiators!
- On-campus events are great marketing showcase tools, so use them wisely. If your high school students participate in mission trips during Christmas or Spring Break, look for ways to do video interviews with students before they go and after they return. Does your school offer community forums where "Hot Topics" can be discussed in a civil venue? Use these as teaching tools for your students, but these are excellent examples of showcasing to your community your values and distinctions. These are often great Instagram moments as well.
- Video testimonies communicate powerful success stories when it comes time for re-enrollment campaign time or to show at an Open House in February. But factor in the lead time to produce a good video, so this might require you working in October on a day where you record videos of parents and students. Online reviews are also great ways for satisfied families to be your brand ambassadors. However, without a calendar, you just hope someone will write one. A calendar establishes a goal to obtain one or two reviews each month (so you might need to start emailing or phoning these families at the beginning of the month so you have time to remind them later!)
- Blogging, Facebook posting, tweets and email marketing messages may require more frequency, so soliciting your team's help in following a thematic posting schedule will ensure that your online communication is orderly.

Marketing is not complicated but it can be complex.

**“Complex”** simply acknowledges that there are many components in a systematic approach to marketing. **“Complicated”** refers to a high level of difficulty, often something that is difficult to understand and therefore challenging to implement.

What I hope this report has done has taken the “complication” of marketing and offered you a hopeful, albeit complex, approach to marketing.

When you follow these 9 steps to marketing your Christian school, you will find yourself with greater confidence that your marketing efforts are systematic, coordinated and achieve the results you want.

**-Randy Vaughn**, School Marketing Consultant



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