



39 RETENTION TIPS

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If I ask a room of 10 or 100 school marketing professionals to define “marketing”, I would likely get 1000 different definitions.

Some would offer up tactical examples such as “advertising”, “promotion” or “event marketing”. Others would even bring up some negative connotations such as “hype” or “manipulation”.

I think there’s a better definition of school marketing that will give you confidence in the choices you make in your time and budget. This definition is also easy to remember so that it can be shared with your entire marketing team (paid staff as well as parent volunteers) and even explained to board members or administrative staff that always is putting forth random ideas on how to market better. When you have a definition to what you are doing, it serves as a filter that guides your agreement/ disagreement with any marketing suggestion brought to you by a well-meaning donor or a slick salesman on the phone. It also offers a better lens through which you can judge how you spend your money and your time on marketing your school because the objectives are built into the definition.

This definition serves as the foundation for all marketing and enrollment goals you are trying to achieve. If you need to see an increase in lower school families, then applying this definition helps you set an agenda of content that will help you achieve those goals. The same applies for any grade level gap you are facing.

As a note, I am a certified Duct Tape Marketing consultant. This is a global network of independent marketing consultants who serve a variety of industries and niches, from dental practices, to CPAs, to mom-and-pop shops. I am the only one in our global network working to apply these marketing principles to independent schools. This definition of marketing is a variation of a definition put forth by John Jantsch, founder of Duct Tape Marketing, as it applies to small businesses. I simply have modified it to better a private school market.

My definition of school marketing goes like this:

“Getting ideal families to know, like and trust you to build loyal ambassadors for your school.”

This is a holistic approach to marketing that includes what I call the 3 Rs of School Marketing:

- **RECRUITMENT** (trust)
- **RETENTION** (loyal)
- **REFERRALS** (ambassadors)

The first part of the definition ends with “to trust you” which typically results in an ideal family surveying the landscape of educational choice and determining that they trust you for their kids’ education. If accepted, they enroll and you get to fill an empty seat! Hooray . . . but . . .

Let’s recognize the obvious: it takes a whole lot more money to recruit a new student than it does to keep a student you already have. Businesses know this, too, but even they ignore this reality and pour all of their marketing budget and time into getting new people to darken the door. Why not be as INTENTIONAL with RETENTION as we are with RECRUITING?

In other blog posts, podcasts and inside other content, we also focus clients on creating an intentional REFERRAL system that capitalizes on a word-of-mouth marketing. In this report, I will focus your attention on 13 different categories of RETENTION and offer 5 specific tips you can implement in your year-round retention system.

39 RETENTION TIPS

PARENT SATISFACTION:

- Give authentic open door access to your administration. While some parents can be know-it-alls and even high-maintenance nuisances, most parents simply want to know that they are treated as investors who want value for what they sow into your school. Host regularly scheduled coffees each month with the Headmaster, invite parents to hear from the Head of School via a podcast each week or some other venue where the parents know they can ask questions, express frustrations and catch and repeat the vision that the administration has for the school.
- Offer consistent “attaboys” to the parents about things that their children are doing well on and off campus. Certainly on-campus achievements in athletics or arts is worthy of acknowledgement, but do not underestimate the handwritten note to a dad about their son’s character in the classroom. Moms and dads beam with pride when others recognize their kids’ goodness on display. Look for these, and create a culture where teachers, coaches and staff are on the lookout for reasons to offer praise.
- In addition to (or in lieu of), offer parents bite-sized communication pieces that showcase value and excellence. Parents of lower school students need to see the value that parents of middle schoolers are receiving and how well your graduates are scoring on the SAT and in merit-based scholarships. Parents of elementary kids need regular reminders that smaller class size makes a palatable difference. When competing with free public schools (where a lot of elementary schools are strong), you have to showcase value frequently.

PARENT INVOLVEMENT:

- 20% of your parent pool will do 80% of the work, but work to shift this by seeking year-round jobs for all moms, dads and grandparents. It is frequently frustrating to ask for volunteers and not get anyone, thus, the default is to do it yourself. But if you solely rely on paid staff, you will not only burn out your staff, you will leave out families who need a reason to stay. Keep asking, be creative in the job descriptions and create a culture where each parent has a place to belong and feel needed.
- Especially important is to note the “fence-sitting” families who you have doubts about their level of long-term commitment. Even if you have some high-maintenance families that always love to complain before they congratulate you, invite these individuals to participate in a “school improvement” committee where they have a platform to constructively express frustrations and suggest changes. Your committee can admit that not every idea would be implemented, but if you can allow a place of participation and look for tangible ideas to improve the school experience for everyone, you will turn these individuals into raving fans!
- Create specific family pages on your website that allow specific ambassador families to tell their story. Create unique videos, audio testimonials and written reviews from this family that other current families can relate to. Certainly a great recruiting tool, but these stories, placed on specific pages that these families can post on social media, are reinforcement for established families.

STUDENT SATISFACTION:

- Birthday recognition is important but your competition will likely call out their name over the loud speaker or put it in the newsletter. Be different, be unique. Look for ways to creatively recognize each child for their achievements on and off the field. If they hit an inside-the-park home run on their city league’s baseball team, or if they performed in a community or church theater, recognize them for that rather than just their birthday. Any database can spit out the child’s birthday, but it takes a special place to pay attention to their student achievements and honor those!
- Involve students on important committees around campus where they can not only contribute meaningful ideas, but also develop friendships and community. Some groups will be a select group of student leaders who serve on the morning welcoming committee at drop-off and pick-up, but other groups will be hand-selected by staff to help beautify the campus, host a special event for international students or do some super-secret Santa shopping for teachers during the holidays (maybe they get out of class to do that). Avoid picking the popular kids all the time . . . pick the ones who don’t always get picked! Invite students into leadership positions, even if short-term and give them a budget of \$100 and tell them to use it however they want to better the school campus. The point is to involve them in tangible leadership opportunities.
- Assign a mentor relationship with an older student to help them feel welcome, a part of the family and valued. The older student can contribute ideas to the staff about unique ways to recognize the student for achievements or to include them in other ways at school (see previous two bullet points).

SPECIAL EVENTS:

- While your school likely hosts a number of fundraisers that bring everyone together, look for other ways to bring families together that do not involve money. Ideal families that may not have the resources of others can often feel discouraged and frustrated if all the school functions ask parents to give more. Think of it as a “customer appreciation” party and have it for new families (where current families pay for everything and serve the new families), where the vision of the school is cast for all who attend and where community is reinforced.
- Most private schools enjoy the distinction of having a smaller “family feel” campus in comparison to a larger public school system. And while sometimes a private school has a separate lower and upper school location, you still want to do your best to involve all students in just about every “family” event. This has to be reinforced consistently because most likely it is a strong differentiator.
- Host geographic get-togethers closer to where families live rather than hosting everything on campus. Some families drive 20-30 minutes away (or more) and can often feel left out if the evening or daytime activities are too far for them to come. Cultivating a community of geographically similar families may also result in carpool opportunities, family connections and will likely depress the feeling of always feeling left out.

DISPLAY EVIDENCE:

- If current families (and possible prospective ones, too) are the jury, then it is incumbent on the school to make its case of the value they are receiving as parents. Showcase stories of success on a regular basis via video, audio and written features. Share these stories all over social media and your website. It is easy to create a few and rest on these all year long. In this age of the 24-hours news cycle, our culture is addicted to fresh news. We have to think that publishers and provide evidence on a consistent basis!
- Secure online reviews on Google and GreatSchools.org so that not only prospective parents see them, but also that current families hear repeated value statements from other parents. It is easy to lament your frustrations but when you hear a consistent flow of parent satisfaction, it is compelling and hard to deny (and maybe makes that complaining family re-consider their gripes).
- Stories have to be told and one of the most powerful stories may be of a satisfied dad. Stereotypically, the moms are more emotional about their kids and can find evidence of the love, care and concern around the campus, but it is sometimes dad who looks for “ROI”. These are generic characterizations for sure, but if true in some instances, you would do well to create a video all from current dads who see the ROI, know the value and can testify strongly to their case that they would never choose another school. Speaking as a dad, it is hard to argue with other dads who all confidently speak of the value of the school. When finances get tough, it’s easy for dad to make money trump emotions, but if other dads speak of the value, it offers compelling evidence to stay.

OPTIMIZED COMMUNICATION:

- I do not know a school that says they send out too few emails between the school and parents. Most of the time, parents are complaining about too many or they are too long. While certain information is important to share, there are plenty of platforms to lay out the upcoming events or longer letters from the coach or teacher. Use your email marketing as a monthly or bi-weekly STORY newsletter where successes are shared (go back to PARENT SATISFACTION and include the “attaboys” here). Parents need a reason to want to click on the email and these emails go a long way to support a year-round retention effort.
- Whether your school has 200 students or 800, you must find a way to put a handwritten note in the mail to every student and their family. In our digital age, the unexpected note in the mail at home goes a long way to remind families how much each student is valued. Involve board members, teachers, coaches, staff and even parent volunteers to write these notes. Invest in some inexpensive stationary cards and good pens and this will make you stand out!
- Use audio and video tools like podcasts, Periscope, Blab, and Hangouts to produce content where parents can HEAR and even SEE the Head of School more often.

BRIDGE THE TRANSITIONS:

- PreK to Kinder: in many cases, this may be one of the hardest transitions to address because in many cities, the public elementary programs are strong and/or parents think their little one is not susceptible to all the peer pressure that they will get in upper school. So you most likely need to double down on your efforts of promoting the value, the ROI and the differences between your Kindergarten and the public school. Your Kindergarten teachers will be significantly important so create videos to showcase their personalities, invite PreK families to school often to interact with your Kindergarten teachers and pull back the curtain and let moms and dads get to know your teachers better. This will require a willing spirit on behalf of your teachers, so press upon them the importance of their role in marketing (see GETTING TEACHERS IN ON RETENTION later).
- Elementary to Middle School: families will often leave during these years because they are struggling financially, they are not seeing the value and they are not experiencing the community they feel warrants such a hefty price tag. Create special opportunities for Middle School families that are enticing to Elementary families facing the pre-teen/teenage years. Your MS teachers and coaches should be familiar faces to moms and dads of the younger kids which creates an expectation of continuation. Having 5th and 6th graders team up on projects but offer 6th graders special perks . . . this gets 5th grade students and their families involved with the next year up and hopefully solidifies their seat for the next year.
- MS to HS: families will often leave at this stage because they feel they have more opportunities at the public school. Dads may think his child will get noticed on the court more by college scouts if they move to a large school or parents want to ensure their child has access to the latest technology in the classroom as they prepare for college. While the technological competition costs you to keep up, it might be worth the investment depending on your competition. Still, spend considerable amount of time touting the success stories of your graduates. Showcase their scholarships, their acceptance into prestigious universities and for the character profiles that demonstrate the influence your school has on them as they leave secondary education. Access to the latest i-tech gadget may be cool at the “other school”, it is hard to argue with the compelling evidence that the smaller private school graduate is going on to the same or better universities with the same or higher amounts of scholarships. In some cases, you may be able to show families that paying for secondary education is an investment that could lead to full-ride scholarships at college (again, some families are leaving in the high school years)

CLOSE THE BACK DOOR:

- As mentioned above in other categories, families must feel appreciated and acknowledged. Commit to handwritten notes or even phone calls to every family; if you cannot reach all of them, make sure you can identify those fence-sitting families and call them first! Keep a chart, if necessary, of every student and family as to when they have been called (even better if it can be done multiple times by various staff members) and even keep record when the students are mentioned in a newsletter, on social media or in an award assembly. This is not meant to be a “medal for every child” concept, but an intentional effort to acknowledge the existence of every family, especially those on the fence.
- Raise expectations! While families may not say this on an exit interview, studies continually show that families are looking for more in their churches and schools. Ask more participation, lay out the expectations you have of families to share on social media, and herald the call of participation of parents. Look for ways to involve both moms and dads because involvement breeds emotional and relationship commitment to the school...you need that in your retention efforts.
- Invite and encourage detractors! Yes, you read that right. If you do not, you will two negative results. One option is for the disgruntled family to rant in an online review. The other is for them to slowly drift away. This is more than just a “Suggestion Box” that is mainly for show...but invite criticism in a town hall style format, one-on-one coffees with the Headmaster, or at a minimum, offer even a form on your website where individuals can rant directly to the head of school and even keep their comments anonymous. While you may get some trash, you may find that opening the door like this gives runaway families the idea that you really listen. This may even turn them back your direction and even into one of your most loyal ambassadors!

WATCH OUT FOR NEW FAMILIES:

- New families are most susceptible to dissatisfaction and disillusionment. Why? Because they likely left another school because they were unhappy and in the discovery/application/enrollment process, they perceive your school will be perfect! What I have suggested in previous categories might need to be tripled in effort: get to know the new family and open the door of communication! Your Admission director should be noting on file things like “why did you leave the previous school” or “what do you expect our school to do for your child?” While you may not be able to meet every expectation, you can at least know the expectations and speak into them regularly. The probably is that the teacher/coach may not know those expectations and thus are not in the loop.
- During the first year, new families should get special perks because you want them to return and tell their friends! Perhaps it is special new family spirit wear, price discounts on tuition/fees, or special places in line at the concession stand or pick-up line. Yes, it may only last for a year, but it may be the most important year, so roll out the red carpet (see CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE coming up).
- Have your Head of School and/or grade principal call each new family within the first 8 weeks just to inquire about their first couple of months at the new school. Ask how their student is doing in school, friends, involvement, if parents feel connected, etc. Always end with “how can I personally help you?”

GET TEACHERS IN ON RETENTION:

- When families rave about your school or when alumni fondly remember their school experience, most often, it is not a board member, the Head of School or even the Admissions Director that they list. It is a teacher, a coach or a special director of choir, debate, or band. Have special conversations with these individuals and remind them that they are the “front line customer service professionals”.
- Pull back the curtain and invite your teachers to become more personal on a teacher page on the website or get them featured on your school’s Facebook page. For those well-liked teachers, leverage this by using them in your school videos as well (they need to be visible to ALL parents).
- While you may not be able to demand this, the administration should reinforce the importance of each teacher, coach or staff person making a review on Google or GreatSchools.org - and they should be willing to share why they love working at your school.

REMIND ‘EM OF YOUR UNIQUENESS

- Identify 3-5 distinct differentiators, even specifically for lower school and upper school as it contrasts to your competition at those same levels. Know why your high school is a better high school choice than the public high school, another private high school or even the charter school. Revisit these often with your Admissions folks, but parents need to see these repeated time and time again.
- Capture stories from individual families/students that coincide with your unique selling points. While you should regularly reiterate the same 3-5 differentiators in bullet points, you also need video and audio stories that showcase the evidence. Not only is this good material for prospective families, your current families (especially the fence-sitting ones) need this reinforced because disillusion, dissatisfaction, or disgruntlement with a teacher can cloud these unique things about your school!
- Publish these stories on your website, reiterate them on social media and in emails and point them out at every parent ambassador group meeting. Rinse and repeat. Rinse and repeat.

CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE:

- Harvey Mackay, long-time businessman, created what he called the “Mackay 66”, a customer retention tool where he knew very detailed things about each of his customers. He knew birthdays, anniversaries, favorite sports teams, frequent vacation spots, etc... When talking with his clients, he would talk of the things they LOVED. In this tool, Harvey had 66 items that he had on file for every customer. Why not create a parent/student profile on every family (guard it with your life) and pass it on from grade to grade so that new teachers can know the history of families and what each child has done in previous years. This fosters a culture of getting know to families and the students intimately which is a noticeable differentiator between you and other schools.
- Surprise a dad with a invitation to lunch with him and a few teachers/coaches who just want to brag on his kid. Surprise the single mom with a gift basket full of handwritten notes about what a great son she is raising. Record a video specifically for each fence-sitting family, paying not platitudes but particular attention to things many coaches/teachers/staff have seen them doing. Send them a private link that they can share if they want or just keep it private.
- Create a culture where, unless entirely impossible, a mom or dad comes to the school, even if to drop something off or for a quick lunch, call in the headmaster or principal and have him/her stop the parent and say, “Thank you for being a part of our school community. Is there anything I can do to make your family’s experience even better?” A simple invitational question goes a long way!

PERK IT UP:

- American Express had a long-time campaign saying, "Membership Has Its Privileges". What are the perks and privileges a family has for being a part of your school family? The real key is to assemble a group of parents (moms and dads) who are committed to customer service, understand the competitive landscape and the need to differentiate, and who can brainstorm within a budget. Invite them to come up with a list of special perks families get for being new or for staying at least 5 years or for having more than 3 kids enrolled or for staying on through the transition years. Special parking spots, front-row seats at the gala, free concessions, new spirit wear each season, etc...all are items on the table.
- Many of your families own their own small businesses. While you no doubt ask them often for donations and advertising, step up the game and agree to do more for these individuals. Increase the banner ad on the website or in the gym, have the head of school pass out free coupons to family-owned restaurants (that the school pays for), or whatever you can do to give back to those businesses who often support your school's fundraising efforts.
- Sign up for SuperFanHigh (superfanhigh.com) where students can receive perks and bonuses as rewards for the attendance at various campus events. One school gave away an iPad to the student who attended the most student activities. This is a great tool and it encourages attendance at ALL your student events, not just the big football games. Attendance at more events also increases student community and ultimately improves that student's love for the school.

Retention is a year-round, never-ending, dynamic marketing effort. Assign someone to be your RETENTION CZAR and commission them to examine areas needed for improvement and to assemble a team of individuals who can help.

NOTE: Ultimately, retention falls at the feet of the administration - the head of school must create a culture of expectation and enthusiasm, not one of assumption. Families are investing tens of thousands of dollars into YOUR institution and they should expect to be treated like a **VIP!**

V - parents should know, without a doubt, of the **VALUE** that not only are their kids are receiving, but they should know the success stories of other families, too. To be a strong ambassador for your school, families need to be able to talk with their non-attending friends about their own personal experience but also about a wide variety of other experiences. Not every family has the same specific value that they would claim, so having a host of stories in your pocket make any family a great ambassador.

I - parents should receive not just information, but **INSPIRATION** on a consistent basis. Stories of student and institutional successes must be seen regularly on social media, in on-campus presentations, inside every email, and in one-on-one conversations. Inspired families return.

P - is is the duty of the school to **PROVIDE** evidence of these successes. Do not lament a lack of budget or time restraints. Find a way. Budget better. Tell and share your stories!

If you have other ideas, sent them to randy@yourschoolmarketing.com. Perhaps in a future revised report, I may be able to include your ideas with attribution.

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