

Government schools... polish your image for more student enrolments

Emma-Jane Hamilton

The current economic downturn (I'm not ready to use the word crisis... yet) presents an opportunity for *some* government schools to secure additional enrolments from the independent and Catholic sector. Let me first explain why I emphasise *some* government schools.

Why parents choose to go private

Market research conducted in Melbourne among parents with children at non-government schools, revealed that they chose to go private for the following reasons:

- ◆ Perception that independent schools offer stronger discipline;
- ◆ Perception that independent schools offer broader opportunities – curricular and extra curricular;
- ◆ Perception that generally the results of independent schools are higher;
- ◆ Perception that their child is more likely to complete school at an independent school – better levels of retention (secondary only);
- ◆ A belief that their child has a greater chance of securing a tertiary offer (secondary only); and
- ◆ An independent or Catholic school may meet the family's religious affiliation.

Given these beliefs, it is hardly surprising that most of the parents researched said that they would need to suffer *extreme financial hardship* before they would consider moving their child to a government school. Their assessment of extreme hardship included loss of employment for a prolonged period of time.

Pruning the family budget

Most parents interviewed said that they would drop or decrease spending in the following areas, before changing their children's schooling:

- ◆ Leisure spending (gym, sport club memberships);
- ◆ Entertainment costs (including dining out);
- ◆ Clothes, cosmetics, general grooming;
- ◆ Holidays;
- ◆ Downgrade cars or sell second cars; and
- ◆ Sell investments

These findings are consistent with a reported increase in the number of independent schools engaging the services of debt collectors to recover outstanding fees.

However, there was one recurring exception



Smile ... prospective parents are watching you

to the research data... many parents said that they would move their children to the government sector more readily if a quality government school alternative were available within a reasonable proximity to their home.

What does this tell us? Families who currently in the independent school sector, if faced by financial hardship would move their children to a government school more readily and more quickly, if they perceive the government school alternative is offering a high quality educational product. If the government school options did not enjoy a quality reputation in the local community, then independent school parents would be reluctant to move their children and would go to more extreme lengths to stay in the private stream.

Wake up to marketing

Government schools have a window of opportunity *now* to polish themselves up and reverse the trend of the last decade of declining enrolments.

In today's environment, schools need to market themselves – so what do we mean by marketing? Marketing is a multi-faceted

business discipline, it is not just advertising in glossy magazines. Every element of a business, when combined, creates the whole service as the target market experiences it. These critical combined elements of a business are referred to as the marketing mix and each individual element of the mix has the unique ability to impact the end product and to influence the way it is perceived by customers..

To marketers, these elements are known as the *7Ps of (Services) Marketing*. Whether parents are aware of the marketing theory or not, our research tells us it is *always these elements* they are analysing when they visit a school with a view to enrolling their child.

Thus, it stands to reason that if a school can improve or polish up these seven elements and then communicate what they offer, they will be well positioned to attract enrolments. So what are the 7Ps?

Product This includes breadth of programs and subjects, acceleration and scholarship opportunities, extra or co-curricular opportunities as well as results, tertiary placement data and retention figures.

Price A review of all costs in totality (including

uniform, laptop programs, camps etc).

Place The location of the school and a review of geographic accessibility.

People The quality of the educational staff including: the principal, assistant principals, and teachers, the quality, friendliness and approachability of the office administrative staff and the business manager. Finally, and very important, the quality of the existing students and old collegians who hold an almost ambassadorial role in the representation of their school.

Physical evidence The physical environment and facilities the students experience and *critically* – how clean and well maintained that environment is.

Process The policies, procedures, systems and communications which assist the school to manage its daily business. A well-run school is supported by strong policies and processes which generates confidence in the school's ability to manage situations.

Promotion At last, the glossy magazines! Promotion refers to how the school promotes itself using different media. This includes all published communication, all communication with parents and the community, advertising, events (such as open days and school tours), signage, general public relations and websites to name a few.

Discerning parents

It will come as no surprise that, when it comes to choosing schools for their children, parents are smart, educated, discerning consumers. They really want to make the right decision.

Some schools have told us that parents are turning up to open days with clipboards and checklists of questions to ask. They are in effect assessing the suitability of your school for their family and they will consider many facets of several schools before making their final selection.

If one or two elements of the marketing mix are not at an acceptable standard, it may be enough to turn parents away and have them seeking an alternative school.

Our research indicates that parents' decisions around school selection, whether independent, Catholic or government, have changed as a result of dealings with unfriendly or disinterested staff, lack of cleanliness of the toilets and grounds or after witnessing poor behaviour of current students in the community.

While a school's level of academic achievement is still considered to be very important to most parents, it is just one element of the entire product parents consider, one element of the marketing mix (product), and generally in isolation, not enough to secure enrolments.

Find and fix your school's shortcomings

So, my message to government schools is simply this... in consideration of what your target market (the parents) is seeking, start by reviewing what you currently offer. Implement plans and strategies to improve shortcomings you may uncover. This will place you in a better position to meet parents' expectations. Next, promote and communicate to your target market the excellent educational product you offer because everything would indicate that now, in 2009, you are more likely to see an increase in student enrolments, but only if your school offers an attractive alternative to the private schools in your area.



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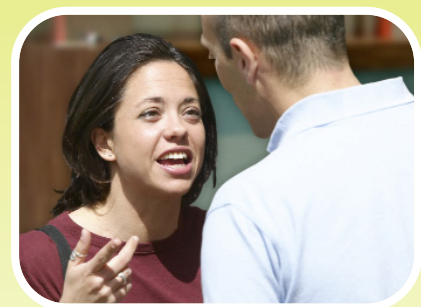
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