

Market position: ask a local

Linda Vining



To determine the market position of Investigator College in South Australia, registrar Julie Brentson, asked local business people what they knew about the school.

What position does your school hold in the marketplace?

Stop . . . This question does not want to know where you see yourself; rather it asks how other people see you? That's quite a different proposition.

When this question was put to Julie Brentson, Registrar at Investigator College as part of

her coursework for the Diploma in School Marketing, she set out to find out just what the local population thought about her school. She was in for a few surprises.

Wearing her uniform and name badge, Julie canvassed the opinions of local business people within a one km radius of the school. She introduced herself and informed respondents

that she was undertaking market research on community perceptions about Investigator College. As part of the conversation she asked two questions: How would you describe Investigator College to someone new to the area? What do you know about the College (if anything)?

"It was a bit confronting at first," said Julie, "but I used to work in real estate and my experience in the field came back, and progressively I began to relax and enjoy it."

Investigator College is a Christian School situated in a rural area 80 km south of Adelaide. Julie conducted her research in Goolwa, local population 6500. The school has 650 students from reception to Year 12 on campuses at Goolwa and Victor Harbor. Six years ago it underwent a management and name change.

Julie discovered that outsiders held an assortment of perceptions, and, generally speaking, were not well informed about the school. In some cases, the facts they gave back to her were wrong or outdated. The local real estate agent knew very little about the school and this was a worry because Goolwa is a revitalising town that is attracting young families looking for a lifestyle change.

"The local real estate office is usually the first port of call for people coming to live in Goolwa, and the question a family invariably asks is the name of the good schools in the area," said Julie.

Her small sample was a convincing indication that the marketing office had a lot of work to do to reposition the school



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and develop an accurate identity in the community's mind. Her research and action plan formed part of her final assignment, which was to prepare a strategic marketing plan for Investigator College.

Defining your position in the marketplace

Market position is a reflection of your image. It is the perception that happens in the minds of your target audience; for example, you may see your school as progressive, creative and well managed, with good academic results and a focus on the performing arts. In contrast, the community, for whatever reason, may see you as that singing and dancing school with noisy, unkempt kids without a uniform and not much discipline. The former is your view; the latter is your market position.

Market position happens whether or not you do anything about it, and is often measured relative to the position of your competitors. If you manage your image and project a clear, consistent identity you can reposition your school in the collective mind, but market position is something that needs constant maintenance. It can be fragile, as many a school has found after an unhappy run of media glare.

The first thing you need to do is gather valid data on how you are seen beyond the rosy glow of your loyal supporters. The market research undertaken by Investigator College is an excellent starting point. Next you need to manage your image by defining the market position you want to achieve and work to put this in place.

When I asked Julie what she would like people to be saying about Investigator College she replied: "A very good, school, from reception to Year 12." As a marketer, it takes a lot of hard work to plant this simple image in the collective mind. Here are suggestions to guide you.

Six steps to reposition your school

Know the message you want to get out. Simplify the school's identity and make sure all staff are pulling in the same direction with a clear understanding of the quality features of the school, its strategic direction, its ethos and image objectives. Talk about this regularly with both teaching and non-teaching staff.

Define your target audience

Anyone who has an opinion about the school that they discuss with others is your target audience. This includes your present, former and prospective students, parents and staff, local business people, other educational institutions, and any other groups that are relevant to you, such as clergy. You need to plant and maintain a positive, accurate image of your school in their minds.

Decide how you will reach people

Schools have many channels of communication to reach their target audiences – consider what they read, what they do and where they gather; and be there.

Ensure quality of promotional material

Consistency is important so make sure you have quality promotional material, a good website and a style guide for internal use.

Train staff

Operating in a competitive market environment is a new concept for staff (teaching and non-teaching) so they need training to help them understand market forces, the attributes of a customer friendly school, and why they should pull together to project a unified image.

Evaluate

Some of your marketing strategies will be successful and others will not, so you need a way to track and record the effectiveness of different approaches. It's a good idea to use SMART objectives. This acronym stands for objectives that are:

- ◆ Specific goals that are expressed as a number, frequency, or percentage
- ◆ Measurable methods to measure outcomes in quantitative terms
- ◆ Achievable resources, the time, the right people, the political environment, the budget to get results.
- ◆ Relevant objectives that will benefit your school
- ◆ Time-defined action plans with a start and finish time.

With a Strategic Marketing Plan with SMART objectives you are ready to raise awareness about your school's positive features and develop a fresh new identity. I find it takes about 10 months to change community perception, so don't expect an instant turnaround.

Gradually you will hear a different sort of talk – there will be a consistent positive buzz that you will hear it wherever you go. When people genuinely start feeding back to you the information you have been projecting outwards you will know that your repositioning strategy is working.



Dr Linda Vining is Director of the Centre for Marketing Schools and convenor of the Education Expo™. Visit www.marketingschools.net

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