

# Understanding and identifying your target market

Emma-Jane Hamilton



**W**hen I visit schools to assist them with their marketing, I always ask two questions: “Who are your target market?” and “Can you describe your typical customer?” Usually, the answer to these two questions tells me a great deal about the culture of the school.

To the first question – who comprises your target market? – the answers I receive range from “Children in the local community” to “Parents of children in the local community”. To the second question – can you describe your typical customer – I am frequently told: “We don’t have customers, we teach children!”

It’s not that these answers are completely incorrect, but if you are only considering ‘children’ or ‘parents’ in the local area as your entire target market then chances are you are missing enrolment opportunities you could otherwise secure.

If you don’t recognise that your target market should be thought of as ‘customers’ and then deliver the required customer service, potentially you are suffering from poor student retention and missing out on all that great free PR school families can provide when they are happy customers.

## Market segmentation

Certainly a target market is the group of people the school is working on to secure enrolments, however within that target market, there are two distinct market segments, an *internal* and *external* market. Neither should be overlooked in a school’s marketing efforts because both have considerable ability to impact or influence enrolment levels.

### Internal market

A school’s internal market is made up of existing school families, current students and currently employed staff. When a school markets itself, the internal market segment is often overlooked as schools spend their marketing dollar trying to attract new enrolments, secure in the belief that if they are already educating a student, they are less likely to lose them to another school.

It is worth pointing out that the internal market is critical to the success of a school and should always be viewed as a significant component of the entire target market and here’s why.

School families and students are discerning consumers. Research indicates that families will change schools if they believe there are

better educational options available elsewhere. Extending quality customer service, marketing and communicating effectively to your internal market, will reduce the likelihood (or perceived need) of families to seek alternatives.

Schools refer to keeping students as student retention. In marketing speak this is referred to as customer retention. These same families may also have younger siblings. Increasingly, families are choosing schools based on the needs of the individual child and siblings are no longer automatically enrolled in the same school. This challenges schools to attract all the available sibling enrolments from school families.

The community considers existing school families, current students and staff to be experts on your school and for this reason members of the public may seek their opinion or advice on your school. In short, they are your ambassadors and it behoves the school to be able to rely on them to speak favourably of you in the community. This will only happen if they are happy and satisfied with their own personal experience of the school, in other words, if they are happy customers. This is perhaps particularly pertinent to your teachers. Because of their industry knowledge, their opinions are often sought and the public frequently interprets their actions. For example, my children attend a school where several of the teaching staff choose to send their own children. This sends a powerful message to me that the school impresses the professionals, the experts. The way I think is that if it’s good enough for them and their children – with all their knowledge – then it’s good enough for me and my children.

### External market

The second market segment, the external market is more complex than many schools realise. It is not just made up of prospective families. It actually comprises of:

- ◆ Prospective families – those families conducting a search to determine the most ideal school for their family.
- ◆ Prospective students – research has shown that increasingly students are having more input over the choice of which (secondary) school they will be attending. While their decision-making process is somewhat unsophisticated, (they tend to want to stay with their friends),

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## marketing

their input is gaining in significance and they should therefore be given real consideration in the school's marketing initiatives.

- ◆ Prospective staff – a high quality school attracts high quality job applicants.
- ◆ Suppliers – companies that deal with a school on an ongoing basis form an impression of that school, which is communicated to the wider community. It is therefore beneficial to the school's reputation to ensure that supplier relationships are maintained and reflect positively on the school.
- ◆ Local area businesses – any business in the local area that observes or even employs your students is (rightly or wrongly) considered to hold special 'inside knowledge' on those schools; other members of the community will seek their opinions. Therefore, local area businesses should be regularly communicated with and schools should seek to establish and grow strong relationships with these businesses.
- ◆ Old collegians or alumni – these are former students who still have the power to speak about a school with authority and knowledge, or importantly, send their children to your school if they hold favourable memories.

***When a school markets itself,  
the internal market segment  
is often overlooked***

### Catering to your market

Here's an illustration of exactly what I mean by catering to all target markets. During a market research project we conducted for a secondary college, we interviewed a mother who reported having visiting three secondary schools' open day/information evenings with her son to determine which school suited him best.

They liked all three schools. The mother had one clear preference and that was the strongest academic school, but the son still had no clear preference.

Of the three schools, one gave the boy some promotional material that included a DVD of all the fun activities on offer. The boy watched the DVD, saw the camps, travel, sport and extra curricular offerings and told his mother that was where he would like to go to school. His reasoning was that he liked the fact that this school engaged students by offering fun activities. The mother was happy enough with his choice even though it wasn't her first choice.

When we asked her why she was happy for her son to have the final say, she said that if he was happy and engaged, then she felt he would work harder in class.

This is an illustration of the need to appeal to two target markets, external parents and external students, because the two groups are seeking similar, but still distinctly different benefits. The parents are seeking end results and the students are seeking engagement and fun.

Truth is, all three schools would have offered camps, bands, travel opportunities and sport, it's just that only one school thought to communicate these offerings to prospective students.

So my message to schools is simply this: as you start to identify the wider array of customers segments that influence the perception of your school, it becomes clearer that you need to actively consider how to position yourself, how to communicate with and market to many – and in some circumstances – all of these market segments.



Emma-Jane Hamilton is Director of MAPS Marketing, a specialist provider of marketing consulting, services and products to the education sector.  
tel (03) 9885 3733  
email [emma@mapsmarketing.com.au](mailto:emma@mapsmarketing.com.au)  
[www.mapsmarketing.com.au](http://www.mapsmarketing.com.au)