Capitalizing on Word-of-Mouth Marketing

Most prospective private-independent school parents seek admission consideration for their children because of their relationship with current school families. Spontaneous word-of-mouth marketing is predominantly a product of enrolled families’ confidence that they’ve made the right choice of school for their children. The social tendency is to want to invite others to share in their experience. As school leaders, we recognize that parent referrals are the primary driver of prospective family interest. Yet, because we cannot control—or even manage—the message our parents convey, how do we best capitalize on parents’ tendency to brag about their school?

Strong word-of-mouth marketing is the result of purposeful, persistent, and engaging communication with current parents that repeatedly confirms they have made the right choice of school for their children and their families. When you purposefully and systematically implement internal marketing strategies designed to validate parents’ choice, through the lens and voice of your school’s mission, you inspire prospective families to enroll and re-enroll. The stories and experiences you share with your constituents also motivate them to give and get involved. They come to believe their gifts of time, talents, and resources are linked to that transformational student experience you are consistently communicating with them.

Successfully planning and executing a strong internal marketing program for current parents drives the more organic word-of-mouth process. This is not to say that external marketing is unnecessary. Your external marketing (e.g., digital and print advertisements, press releases, billboards) is simply an abbreviated, though consistent, remessaging of your internal school experience.

To capitalize on parents’ natural inclination to brag about their school, here are three key ways to enhance your internal marketing efforts.

1. Create a message framework. Share with faculty, staff, and administrators a list of keywords and phrases derived from your Purpose and Outcome Statements. This provides some common language for use internally in your communication with parents. When you distill this published list of keywords and phrases, you articulate a direct connection between your school’s mission and the desired student outcomes you seek. ISM defines Purpose and Outcome Statements as the mission, Portrait of the Graduate, and Characteristics of Professional Excellence. The statements express the unique qualities that distinguish your school from others in the marketplace and help you “make a case” for enrollment.

Most schools do a good job of articulating their mission in various ways—on their schools website, in their admission materials, and in other collateral publications. Equally effective is the language used to describe the student who graduates from your program in the Portrait of the Graduate. Parents choose schools out of a desire to provide an educational environment for their children that is likely to deliver the results they seek. When you communicate with them using the keywords and phrases from your Portrait of the Graduate statement, you confirm that students are, in fact, developing into the students you described as the school’s primary goal. Similarly, when you talk about the behavior, traits, and attitudes teachers contribute to the learning experience, you effectively describe a relational process that is specific and deeply connected to the student outcomes you seek.

2. Another key internal marketing difference-maker that contributes to a robust culture of word-of-mouth marketing is a weekly schoolwide or division-level e-letter with the primary purpose of celebrating learning. Regular communication meant to celebrate student learning not only validates parents’ choice of school, it provides current parents with tangible evidence to share with their fellow parent peers. Numerous email utilities offer low-cost, customizable options that support the upload of high-impact photos, video links, and short stories, as well as your school’s logo, tagline, and branded fonts. When implementing an e-letter, consider the following.

   - Publish the e-letter on a regular schedule—e.g., every Friday morning or every other Friday. While it is wonderful to plan and announce a weekly e-letter, do so only when you can deliver on your promise with excellence and predictability.
   - Determine who will be responsible for creating your e-letter. Even though one person—or a small team of people—may be responsible, your entire school community should share ownership by contributing stories, photos, and video.
   - To prepare teachers to contribute on an ongoing basis, host a training session during preplanning, on a professional development day, or during a designated faculty meeting. Empower them with tools, strategies, and templates to make it as easy as possible for them to contribute to your school’s internal marketing effort with consistency using a unified “mission voice.”
   - Ask teachers to bring samples of classroom communication (e.g., print or electronic newsletters, emails to parents, and report card comments) to the training session. This enables them to practice speaking and writing in mission terms in a way that is relevant to their own work.
   - Encourage contributors to share why students engaged in a particular learning activity, what they learned, and what they will be expected to know and understand moving forward. Teach faculty how to focus on how students were transformed by the experience, and about the benefit to students. The goal of benefits messaging is to describe how students, through their learning experiences, move closer and closer to resembling the student described in the Portrait of the Graduate.
   - Keep your e-letter entries as short as possible, but avoid the “just the facts” journalistic approach. Keep it conversational, personal, and emotionally evocative.
   - Parents who think in a contract mentality care only about their child. Use your e-letter to move parents closer to a community mentality by celebrating learning schoolwide. This not only validates parents’ choice of school today, it offers hope and promise of the ways their child can be expected to benefit over time, inspiring a long-term re-enrollment commitment.
• Draw prospective families into a relationship with your school by adding them to your e-letter group. Every story they read validates their decision to enroll, particularly to the extent they can imagine their child engaged in the learning experiences you describe.

3. A third strategy that draws parents into closer relationship with the school is a Parent Retention and Education Program (PREP). A PREP is a systematic and systemic plan that focuses and coordinates all the school’s efforts related to parent relations and retention. The program provides your school’s leadership a unique opportunity to engage parents in important topics of mutual interest or concern. You may use it to educate parents about:
- teaching and learning innovations in your curriculum;
- parenting skills;
- new parent orientation;
- children’s metacognitive and developmental milestones, segmented by grade levels and/or divisions;
- specific components of your programming; and
- strategic plans for the long-term viability of your school.

PREPs reinforce the notion that you have entered into partnership with your parents around an interest you share in common—their children. PREPs should anticipate parents’ needs and be proactive in addressing those needs with particular messaging, programming, and/or experiences designed to affirm their choice of school. It further binds them as trusted partners and professionals who are co-invested in the care and best interests of their children.

Other modes of communication are efficient in communicating “real time” changes to school or game schedules, weather advisories, and meeting reminders. Uploads to YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook make systematic bragging a social experience among student, parent, and even grandparent peer groups. But these are auxiliary to—and more spontaneous than—the strategically planned and executed mission-based message framework, PREP, and e-letter publications celebrating student learning. Structured, regular communications provide your parents with a steady stream of tangibles to share by word-of-mouth with other parents within their sphere of influence.