

MARKETING ADVENTIST EDUCATION

Ways to Fight Declining Enrollment

“All of life is a journey. The path we lay before our children will determine their destination. How will we light the way so they can see; so others can see? How will they know once they’ve arrived that they are actually there? Will we prepare a place for them as our Father has promised us? The house of God has extended its wings beyond the church and into our schools. Yet, where are the children? Who has captured their attention? Has the path been properly laid? Has the light been lit?”

- Marie K. Compas-Polo

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OVERVIEW

***Purpose:** A discussion on the “issues confronting Adventist education” and “recommendations for change and growth”.*

UNAWARE & UNATTAINABLE

Christian, more so, Adventist, education has not always been a priority for me. Even after spending six years teaching in the Broward County Public Schools system and facing challenges that went against my faith as a Seventh-day Adventist, I had not considered Adventist education. The reason was simple. I had never heard of Adventist education outside of the discussion of Oakwood College; now Oakwood University. If there were Adventist primary and secondary schools in the county where I spent my childhood, they were never promoted at my church.

While growing up in Nyack, New York, I remember briefly attended a Catholic preschool called St. Ann’s School. A few weeks ago I grew curious as to how my parents, Seventh-day Adventist themselves, came to make the decision of sending me to a Catholic preschool. Their responses were that they were not aware of any Adventist preschools in the area. They further informed me that after much inquiry, they were able to locate one in a nearby town. The next challenge they faced was that of tuition. To their surprise, tuition at the Catholic school was less expensive. With my father being self-employed and my mom working at minimum wage, they would not be able to afford the Adventist school. There were no provisions made known to them for being an Adventist, so they went with what they felt was their only option. For one year they entrusted the young impressionable mind of their only daughter into the hands of the nuns at St. Ann’s while my two brothers attended a public school. My experiences at St. Ann’s were good, but imagine how much better it would have been if only education from my own denomination was attainable.

Now a mother of three and an active member of the church, my husband and I have made a commitment to Adventist education. Not because the problem of awareness has changed, but because of our belief in what I call the “Adventist Brand”.

MARKETING ADVENTIST EDUCATION

How Enrollment is Effected

WHAT WORKS

From my experience as an officer in the church and a parent, most, if not all, Adventist schools rely on “word-of-mouth” marketing. This method tends to work well particularly if there is support from the church. However, word-of-mouth can swing both ways. Unhappy parents are loud! I’ve watched a school lose 16 students; most leaving one school and ending up at the same new school. If we rely solely on this method, then is it truly working?

WHAT COULD WORK

There are several marketing strategies that could work in increasing enrollment at our Adventist schools. Before any of these methods are applied, a few things should happen. The need for marketing must first be understood. Too many times I’ve ran across school Directors, Administrators, and School Board Members who neither understand the meaning nor the need for marketing. When attempting to introduce the concept, I’ve gotten responses such as “we don’t need marketing, we have word-of-mouth”. Yet enrollment remains low.

Second, our brand and value position must be defined.

With that said, this burden of blame is now extended beyond the Directors, Administrators, and the School Boards and onto the hands of the Local & General Conference. They play a vital role in the overall success of our schools. If you look at the public education system, it is not the responsibility of the individual school administrative staff to market and promote the school. Although we are considered as private schools, our structure is relatively similar to that of a public system, where ownership does not belong to the local church. The owners of an organization should be its biggest stakeholders.

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In my experience as a Marketing Consultant and in developing Marketing Plans for Adventist schools, I had to conduct marketing needs analysis. What I noticed was that marketing and promotion was absent in the school improvement plan. It was absent even in their discussions. Such an important process should be discussed.

Where do we go from here?

First we must **brand our product**; Adventist education. Too many of our constituents are unaware of the values of an Adventist education and why it is imperative to gain the support of the church. This branding would be more effective if it were to begin at the General Conference (GC) and the Union level, as a foundation for the local churches to build their schools through set marketing initiatives. Our brand will be the source of our promise made to our clients; our students, parents, and the community. It is the introductory piece in our marketing communication and one we do not want to be without. As we brand, we must keep in mind to properly represent the Adventist Education Mission and not diminish its value. While developing our marketing strategy, we should not detach ourselves completely from the ideals of a traditional corporation; after all we are running a business.

A segment of the branding stage involves **creating a corporate identity**. Our brand identity should be repeatedly communicated, in multiple ways with frequency and consistency throughout the life of the school.

A corporate identity includes your basic stationary, logo, mascot, website, etc. Other marketing tools that I would highly suggest are listed below:

- Logo & Mascot
- Tagline: This is your branding slogan used to create a memorable phrase that will sum up the tone of your school's mission.
- Stationary (business cards, letterhead, envelopes – “Corporate Identity”)
- Website: one that identifies the unique qualities of your school. If resource is a major factor, as it is for most of our schools, a free website is provided by the [North American Division](#) and [AdventistSchoolConnect.org](#). I still recommend having a .com or .edu site that would give you a more personal touch and not template base. The free .org site provides you with a connection to Conference material and is FREE; therefore it would be worthwhile to have.
- Banners: All schools should have a banner with basic information such as name, tagline, logo, website, and contact; to be used at events. I also recommend having someone create a banner promoting Adventist education and placing such banners at each constituency church campus during Sabbath. They will

serve as a reminder of our education mission. “Step Up for Students” Scholarship (provides scholarships to more than 29,000 low-income children in Florida) and “VPK” (voluntary pre-kindergarten program provided by the government) both provide banners promoting their programs. These banners are a great way to generate attention and interest to the school. Both banners are free of cost!

- Brochures & Postcards (“Corporate Identity”)
- Welcome Folder (for current and perspective parents): This will give your school a professional edge. It will also show the parents that the administration at this school is organized and care about the representation of the school.
- Student Agenda: A great branding strategy. With the school’s name and logo printed on the cover, each time a student takes out their agenda at home or in public, someone will see the name of the school. It sets the stage for your popular “word-or-mouth” marketing. Just be sure that you deliver whatever is promised to ensure a positive promotion. An agenda specific to the Adventist message could even design. What a great resource this could be to our students. This is one of the missions of Joshua Tree Marketing. We have already begun outlining this agenda.
- Signage, Landscaping, and School Building: I can’t tell you how much of a difference this makes to parents when selecting a school. I’ve known parents who have based their decisions of selecting a school on just this. Not having a sign is like not wanting people to know where and who you are. Disregarded landscaping and poor building conditions are indicators that there is little care and little involvement.
- School Paraphernalia (bumper stickers, lanyards, student folders, lapel pins, etc): This will not only help promote and brand the school, but it is an excellent revenue source as well.
- School Visits (last chance at a first impression): It is very important to prepare for visits. I recommend that someone from the Marketing Team or the Office Manager conducts the visits. They should be equipped with the Parent Folder I mentioned earlier. They must also be prepared to answer questions. The person conducting the visit should not be interrupted with phone calls; therefore, someone should be assigned to manage the office in their absence.
- Events: Create an annual event unique to your school to draw a crowd from your constituents and the general public. This will help give you visibility in the community.
- Partners: Professional partners will not only help with donations, but may be available to assist in fundraising events as well as “Career Day”.
- Home & School Association: As a former Home & School President, I can tell you first hand that if you empower your parents and teachers, you’ve empowered

your program to take flight to places beyond comprehension. On the other hand, if you stifle your parents and keep them uninformed, you lose them... This group should be part of the support staff. I would take this a step further and suggest that an organized association of Home & School groups be developed where all the leaders and members can interact and share best practices. I have already begun to lay the foundations of such an association and will share more information if requested.

- Become a Resource Center: A church is meant to be a beacon in the community. If that church has a school, even better. Create community programs that will help spread the education message, empower the community, and increase your school's enrollment.
- Advertising: I would recommend starting your advertising campaign with the following sources:
 - Broward County Family Resource Guide (annual publication listing all the schools known to Family Central)
 - City Websites
 - Conference Website (must be current to effectively be part of the brand strategy)
 - Online Directories (www.schooltree.org, www.floridaschoolchoice.org, www.greatschools.org)
 - Local Radio Stations
 - Church Bulletin

WHAT IS PREVENTING WHAT COULD WORK

There are several factors that are preventing the implementation of what has been outlined above. After conducting research on the needs of Adventist schools, several factors have been determined. For the sake of time and simplicity, I will narrow it down to four elements: **Finance** | **Support** | **Time** | **Follow-through**

Finance

Ok, all these ideas and strategies sound great, but where do we get the money to implement them? Having a grant writer would be an asset to our schools. I propose that the Local Conference hire someone to represent all the schools in that conference. If the hiring is done at the school level, the Conference would more than likely need to assist in compensation. A more cost effective route would be to hire a general representative under the Conference.

Support

Support of our schools should first come from the General Conference. There must be an initiative to guide our church leaders in understanding the benefits and mission of an Adventist education. They need to believe in the product. This initiative may come in the form of a summit organized by the General Conference and implemented through the Local Conference. A few colleagues and I have discussed such a summit and have briefly presented it to our local Conference.

Our church leaders must believe in and understand the product of Adventist education.

There also must be additional manpower at the Local Conference Department of Education and each school. A good addition to the education team would be a Marketing Department. I have created such a department while functioning as an Independent Contractor for a Seventh-day Adventist school. We are still in the developmental stages, but with time I believe the department will gain strength. I have notice though that the work that has been done so far to brand and create the school's identity is a new concept to the group. The mission of my ministry is to work with as many schools in the Southeastern and Florida Conference as possible to help set goals for growth and implement their school improvement plan.

Time

When I examine the administrative structure of our schools, I have to ask myself are they setup for success or failure. We have our Principals as teachers... Everyone who has experience as a teacher knows that it is literally a full-time (or all the time) job. With lesson plans, grading, meetings, assessments, conferences; who has time for anything else? Likewise, those who have experience in school administration understand the time involved in running an effective school.

What person can claim that they have been successful at meeting both needs of such an unrealistic expectation? If we want our schools to thrive, we need to invest in them. That means to restructure our organizational chart and job descriptions. Allow the Principals to be administrators. Perhaps they could have one class such as worship, ethics, or debate. Whatever we decide to do, time is always a factor.

Follow-Through

Lastly, we must be able to back up whatever it is we promise to our clients. All the work in developing and implementing marketing strategies means nothing if you can't deliver what is promised. This "follow-through" can be problematic even when the best intentions are present. Take a look at the example presented below:

- **PROBLEM:** A school can lose a program such as music if the anticipated funds do not come in.
SOLUTION: When developing programs, don't rely on the funds from tuition. Have your grant writer search for grants that will meet your specific school improvement plan. They are out there. You just need someone to research the grants and write them.

MARKETING REVISTED

As you can see, marketing goes beyond a logo, tagline and general advertisements. It is the way you do business, the people you hire, and how you are portrayed to your perspective clients and community at large. It is usually the most neglected aspect of a business yet, will produce excellent returns. Is marketing expensive? It can be. Is it worth it? It is.