

Let Your Customers Do the Talking

Making Word-of-Mouth Advertising Work for Your School

“A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches, and favor is better than silver or gold”

(Proverbs 22:1, RSV).

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Imagine the promotional power if 40 percent or more of your current constituent families bragged about your school. That is a real possibility, and it won't cost much to achieve it.

Social scientists have found that some people get listened to more than others. So who are the talkers who get listened to in your community? Your challenge is to learn how word-of-mouth advertising really works, who the talkers are, and how to inspire them to talk for you.

The talkers (also called *opinion leaders*) who get heard are the ones who are believable, genuine, experienced, and enthusiastic in what they say about your school. Anything relating to students and education can get them talking about your school program. For example, one of your parents says to a friend, “My daughter really liked what they did in school last week.” The friend begins to have a new interest in and attitude toward your school. And that friend is likely to pass on the information to others in informal conversation.

The book *Let Your Customers Do the Talking* contains a list of 16 identifying characteristics of influential talkers. Here is a sample of that list: Positive talkers who have an impact are self-confident and curious about all types of related products and services. They are socially active and may be for-

mal or informal leaders in their community. They want to know your school and your staff. Most important, those who have recommended you in the past are likely to continue bragging about you in the future.

How can you make word-of-mouth advertising work for your school? Here is a simple three-step, time-tested approach: (1) *Find* the talkers. (2) *Inspire* them to talk more for you. (3) *Thank* them for their support.

Find Them

First, identify by *name* all your known and potential champions. Ask families of new students who told them about the school. At a staff meeting, brainstorm to create a list of school champions. Each teacher, staff person, and special program will have loyal supporters. Champions exist in every social class and age group. Search your files and your memory for thank-you notes and other evidences of opinion leaders. Train your staff to notice people who comment positively about your school, its staff, and its programs. Identify the names of loyal volunteers. You can even ask potential champions whether they talk for you. Research has shown that talkers will usually tell you how they feel. Be on the lookout for people who enjoy telling stories.

Next, broaden your search to include individuals in the community who are experts in education-related areas. Teachers, counselors, alumni and their parents, retired educators, pastors, Parent-Teacher Organization officers, consultants, trainers, coaches, and educational administrators can all give advice to prospective students and their parents. If they know you and your program, they can make a valuable

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recommendation on your behalf.

Market mavens make it their business to help others (their families and close friends) to become wise consumers of a variety of products and services. Hardly a day goes by that market mavens do not gather information that they can use for someone's advantage. As consummate shoppers who are looked to for advice, market mavens play a key role in communicating information about your school—all at no cost to you. Even if they are not experts in education, because of their close ties with others, market mavens can become your best supporters.

Political influentials also play a role in extending your school's good name throughout the community. These individuals make it their business to be on the inside track of group dynamics. Even if you don't always agree with their points of view, they and other "opinion leaders" have positive information to share.

Begin by making a written list of names. Otherwise, your word-of-mouth marketing efforts will be unfocused. Everyone on your list may not appear to be an opinion leader, but use your best judgment. Look for those to whom other people listen.

How Leaders Create Success for You

Leadership is the basis of successful word-of-mouth marketing efforts. Opinion leaders are seen as sources of helpful information. They help reduce the time prospective students and families spend looking for information about value and quality. Using their own experience as evidence, they make recommendations that reduce other people's risk of having a negative experience. Such champions are especially persuasive because they have little to gain by their positive talk. Prospective families may have heard of your school. But an opinion leader will help shape their attitudes before they decide where to enroll their child.

Thirteen Ways to Inspire Your Talkers

Inspiring others to talk begins with the student-teacher and student-student relationship. We are not in the business of selling pizza. We offer important

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spiritual, physical, mental, and social values prized by every family. Thus, the motivation to talk on your behalf stems directly from what happens at this level. Below are examples of the time-tested actions that stimulate and maintain vigorous and positive word-of-mouth advertising testimony:

- *Give excellent service.* Positive word-of-mouth advertising depends on a foundation of excellent service. Make sure your customers are treated like the champions that they are. The hallmark issues that consumers consider to be important include reliability, safety, durability, responsiveness, access, courtesy, credibility, competence, and communication.

- *Exceed expectations.* People won't praise the school if your actions are merely adequate or mediocre. But give them something positive and unexpected, and they will brag about it to others. Little things can make a huge difference.

- *Give samples of programs and services.* Samples help champions explain to others what to expect in the future. They help promote the new program or service in advance to help others understand what you are trying to accomplish.

- *Create champions.* Whenever you help people become better than they thought they could be, you have an opportunity to create word-of-mouth advertising. A school is one of the places where this can happen often. Nurture students and parents to help them become better people. After all, Christian schools have a greater responsibility than merely transmitting information. Through the educational process, you are helping people achieve their souls' deepest desires. Your school and its programs can be God's answer to parental prayers.

- *Educate champions.* Opinion leaders need specific information about you and your school to share with others. More than mere facts, champions need a positive experience that inspires them to spread your good name.

- *Remember the power of personal influence.* Personal influence is one of the most important reasons why testimonials are effective. A good name is a gift of God and the community we serve. It is a sacred trust. Verbal interaction is important in education. However, the educational process can be seen as showing who we are. As your light shines through students' and teachers' positive character traits and selfless service, you will be giving a lesson more powerful than any lecture, discussion, or sermon.

- *Be an expert's expert.* Opinion leaders need others to whom they can turn for advice. If you are already knowledgeable on some aspect of education, continue to study and enhance this expertise. Make a long-term commitment to become the local authority on something. You don't have to know about everything. But if you specialize in something significant to champions, this will help spread the word faster. Each teacher can become an expert at something, and the school can leverage this expertise to burnish its good name.

- *Involve champions.* Tell a person something, and he or she will forget it. Show how, and he or she may remember it. Involve the person, and he or she will understand. Understanding drives word of mouth. Give lots of hands-on demonstrations and positive reinforcement. I've seen this work firsthand from my wife's success at involving parents in her elementary school classroom. Parents get excited about the things their children are experiencing. They tell others, and before the school year ends, prospective parents are already lining up to request a particular teacher for their child. Involvement is especially important for new enrollees, but it can be useful for every classroom. At the high school and college level, involvement is just as important, even if it involves a different set of activities.

- *Give information about related interests.* Make copies of authoritative

magazine articles on various topics that you can share at a moment's notice with your champions. Even if the articles don't match your primary interests, you will be helping the opinion leaders to do their work for you. Give them inside information on the trends in education that influence students' lives. They need this type of information to share with others who look to them for advice. Develop a simple card file in which you record areas of special interest for each champion. This kind of personal service

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will convince them to talk about you to others.

- *Ask champions to spread the word.* Tell them about future programs and ask them to invite their friends to visit.

- *Emphasize stories.* Stories are the primary vehicle for sharing the meaning of an event or experience. Listen to the stories that are told about your school. Retell the good stories, and learn from the others. Opinion leaders enjoy listening to and, more important, telling stories. If you want to use a story that

might breach a confidence, be sure to obtain approval from the key figures in the story before using it.

- *Don't promote what you can't deliver.* Nothing is gained and a lot can be lost by advertising something that is contradicted by the community grapevine. Consumers are sophisticated. They can spot the inconsistencies between paid advertising and what they hear on the street. They are more likely to believe experienced people who have no stake in the outcome of the promotional

messages. If you are getting negative publicity, identify the sources and make appropriate changes. An important principle to follow is this: Any product or service that will not sell without paid advertising will not sell successfully with paid advertising. In the midst of proofing advertising copy, analyzing your advertising budget, and planning your next publicity campaign, ask yourself, "What are we doing to cultivate champions who will carry our mes-

sage for us?"

- *Gather and use testimonials.* Others can extol your school's virtues when you cannot. Voluntary testimonials carry power.

Thank Them When They Talk

You can never thank a loyal supporter too often for her or his work. Find creative ways to show genuine appreciation. Personally thank people who recommend new students. Thank them on the telephone. Thank them in writing. Thank them again.

First, identify by name all your known and potential champions.

Remember: It is not the group with which you network, but the groups with which your champion supporters network that make the difference. Word-of-mouth advertising is the only promotion method of consumers, by consumers, and for consumers. It is the most compelling method of communication and the most natural way to use the communication patterns of the larger culture. And, typically, word of mouth is the cheapest form of promotion!

Keep your word-of-mouth marketing program uncomplicated. Keep looking for names. Constantly look for simple ways to inspire champions. Remember to thank them often. Encourage everyone in your school to work together, and soon you will have the best advertising in the world—when you let your customers do the talking. ☞

*An international authority on word-of-mouth marketing, **Michael E. Cafferky, Ph.D.**, is the author of *Let Your Customers Do the Talking: 301+ Word-of-Mouth Marketing Tactics Guaranteed to Boost Profits (Chicago: Upstart)*. Also, he is the creator and Webmaster of an Internet site devoted exclusively to this topic: <http://www.geocities.com/WallStreet/6246>. Dr. Cafferky is also the author of a soon-to-be-published book on word-of-mouth marketing for religious organizations. He has served as a Seventh-day Adventist pastor and elementary school teacher, and currently is a certified health-care executive. He was one of the featured speakers at the 1999 North American Division National Ministries Conference in San Diego, California. Dr. Cafferky offers word-of-mouth marketing workshops for churches and schools. He may be contacted by mail at 2052 Gemstone Drive, Walla Walla, WA 99362, by phone at (509) 529-7098, or you can E-mail him at: miccaf@bmi.net.*