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Loyalty, Loyalty, Loyalty

Using Data-driven Decision-making to Improve Enrollment

Adventist School of the Heartland (ASH)¹ is a private elementary school located in the rural Midwest of the United States. The two-teacher school saw its enrollment peak at 45 students during academic years 2004-2005 and 2005-2006.² By the 2020-2021 academic year, the school had 18 students from 13 families. Marketing efforts by the ASH administration have not yielded the desired increase in student enrollment. Similarly, there has been a decline in enrollment among Adventist K-12 schools within the North American Division.³ Researchers have found that positive school image, promotion, marketing of school programs, and parent loyalty are associated with increasing enrollments.⁴ For this evaluation, we (the authors) defined “parent loyalty” as actions that promote or lead to enrollment at ASH.⁵ Additionally, in the literature, Li and Hung define school image as follows: “School image can be formed by many different factors and is the result of a cumulative process that incorporates experience over time, diverse information, and marketing activities of the school. . . [h]owever, school image can be enhanced when parents are satisfied with the perceived school marketing activities.”⁶

Through a replicative evaluation based on the work of Li and Hung, we sought to determine (1) which current marketing strategies were most effective for learning about ASH and (2) how school image is influential in developing parent loyalty at ASH.

Marketing Strategies for Faith-based Schools

Mainda’s study analyzed the relationship between several factors and parent choice for enrolling their

child(ren) in Adventist schools instead of public education in southwest Michigan.⁷ The study found statistical significance with most factors, such as placing a high level of importance on Christian education, a desire for the teachers to be spiritual, Adventist biases in selecting same-faith education, and cost of tuition. Although data and resources were limited in Mainda’s study, it addressed parent loyalty and marketing strategies for an Adventist school and causes for low enrollment. Similarly, in research from Thayer et al., the North American Division Educational Taskforce (NADET) and the Strengthening Adventist Education (SEA) research project addressed the importance of school quality and accountability for Adventist schools⁸ and made several recommendations. The uniqueness of the Adventist educational system comes from the ability to provide education and nurture students spiritually. One recommendation suggests developing a system-wide plan that emphasizes the recruitment and preparation of qualified teachers, a consistent training program of the unique curriculum, and providing support for the teachers to enforce effective education and create a nurturing environment.

Another vital element to fostering parent loyalty and a positive school image is the collaboration between the church and the school. Anderson stated, “Decades ago it was considered de rigeur that pastors would wholeheartedly support our schools.”⁹ In a 2017 article, Thayer et al. reported, “many members and pastors have not attended Seventh-day Adventist schools, there needs to be increased focus on the importance of Adventist education to the mission of the church.”¹⁰

In this study, ASH experienced the benefit of a supportive pastor. The local Adventist pastor visits the school for a weekly whole-school chapel service, conducts small group Bible studies with the older students, and is “very supportive of [ASH’s] events and makes an effort to attend them,” reported the school’s teaching principal. The pastor promotes church events at the school, and likewise, the school has the opportunity to make announcements at church. The pastor also encourages the students to participate in worship service (e.g., reading Scripture).¹¹

Conceptual Framework for Loyalty

The ASH evaluators adapted a questionnaire from Li and Hung to collect and ultimately share more credible and reliable feedback.¹² Li and Hung investigated how marketing strategies can enhance parents’ loyalty in the educational context. Their results showed that the selected marketing strategies significantly and meaningfully determine the perception of school image; however, promotion strategies (e.g., formal and informal communication with parents) are the most effective strategy.¹³ Additionally, school image is an effective predictor of parent loyalty. While school image fosters the relationship between marketing strategies and parent loyalty, findings also suggest that school administrators can use marketing strategies to enhance school image, which results in increased enrollment. Badri and Mohaidat, along with Skallerud, examine three themes: school image, parent satisfaction, and parent loyalty.¹⁴ Utilizing previous research, the ASH evaluation team conducted and completed in late 2020 a comprehensive review of how marketing strategies impacted school image and parent loyalty. The adapted survey helped identify current marketing strategies and allowed the team to propose a framework for effective marketing.

Methods

The study consisted of a mixed-methods approach to gather data about marketing efforts and parent loyalty at ASH. A multi-pathway questionnaire, which measured marketing tactics and parent loyalty, was distributed to various stakeholders (i.e., pastor, church members, school board members, parents, community members, and ASH administration). Our team conducted an initial interview with ASH’s teaching principal to evaluate the school’s marketing program and create an action plan to address enrollment and retention goals for the upcoming accreditation process. This meeting offered insight into understanding ASH’s needs and hopes for the future of its marketing and recruitment initiatives.

The team used Qualtrics as the survey medium.

All quantitative questions in the survey were adapted from Li and Hung, and the team created the qualitative questions with the needs of ASH and the goals given by the principal in mind.¹⁵ The survey was designed with display logic that branched into three surveys to target each group (pastor, church members, school board members, parents, community members, and ASH administration) with specific questions for that sample type. To account for reliability and validity, several pilot surveys were distributed to staff members of a neighboring Adventist school. Their feedback was used to change the language in the survey to be more precise and more concise. The Qualtrics form was made available in print and digital format by the ASH principal. Participants had two weeks to complete the survey.

Data Analysis and Findings

The evaluation team used convenience sampling to collect surveys from participants. The sampling goal was to collect 75 percent of the surveys from the entire group of families, staff, and board members. Sixteen surveys were returned by participants who identified as being in one or more categories. Thirty-three percent of the board members and 100 percent of the school administrators and teachers responded to the survey. The parent response rate was 62 percent of the 13 families. Though our sample size was small, findings were still congruent with those of Li and Hung and indicated a positive correlation between school image and parent loyalty.¹⁶

Marketing Strategies

Respondents were given the choice of an online or physical questionnaire to complete. The questionnaire began with an informed-consent form, which discussed the purpose of the study. Throughout the questionnaire, prompts asked participants to respond on a Likert scale between *strongly agree* and *disagree*. Questions in the Qualtrics survey (adapted from Li & Hung) related to marketing were as follows:

1. The school environment is safe.
2. Teachers generally care for their students.
3. The school uses mass media such as newspapers or television or holds activities such as graduation ceremonies or sports meets to let others know more about the school.
4. The school holds exhibitions or performances of students and invites parents or people living in the neighborhood to join.

Nine Likert scale questions evaluated ASH marketing strategies and parent loyalty using additional open-ended questions adapted for each group. All Likert scale

questions were adapted from Li and Hung.¹⁷ Figure 1 shows the aggregate data to the four questions related to marketing by 16 participants for a total of 64 selected responses. As demonstrated in Figure 1, 85.9 percent (N = 55) of the selections were positive (either *somewhat agree* or *strongly agree*).

The results of this marketing analysis demonstrated that those affiliated with ASH agreed with the methods used to recruit and spread the word about the school. However, contrary to the survey respondents' beliefs that current tactics are successful, enrollment at ASH contradicts this. The school has seen declining enrollment for several years as it competes with public and private schools in the area. While the results demonstrate that parents have a high level of parent loyalty, their loyalty has not yet resulted in their actively promoting the school or recruiting students.

Although the data in Figure 1 is aggregate, it depicts the level of agreement by all 16 respondents with the school's fall 2020 marketing strategies. The only option receiving strongly disagree pertained to the use of mass media, newspapers, and school exhibits to spread the word about the school. One hundred percent of respondents strongly or somewhat agreed that the school was safe and the teachers cared for their students. This is great content that should be shared with the public but currently is not. Results showed that community outreach received mixed reviews by respondents. One survey question addressed the use of mass media. The respondents' selections varied from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

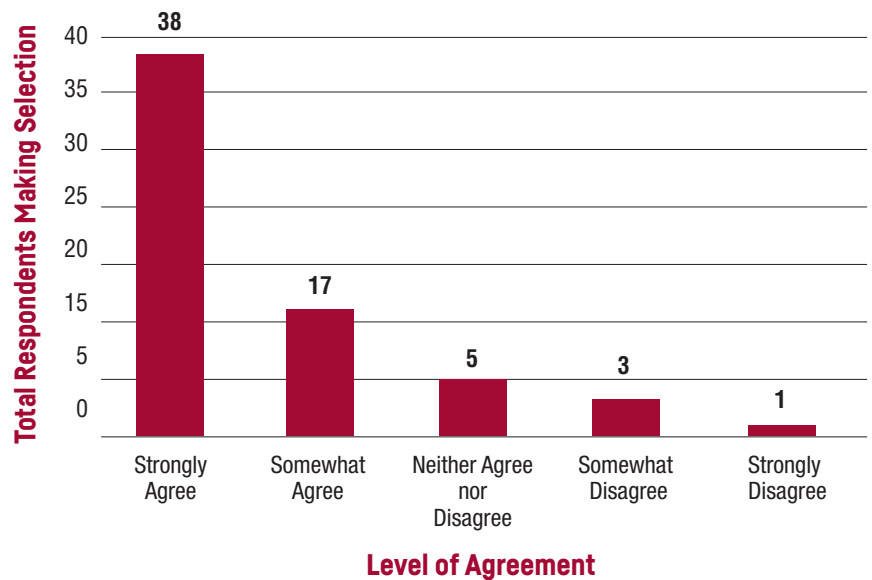
Parent Loyalty

According to Li and Hung, parent loyalty is a term that describes the parents' unwavering commitment to re-enroll their child at a particular institution in the future.¹⁸ Moreover, loyal parents, as influential advocates, provide positive word-of-mouth encouragement to other parents to enroll their children in the institution. Parent loyalty is also based on the parents' overall perception of the school, known as "school image." Of the questions in the survey, only those

about parent loyalty were considered for evaluation. The following questions in the Qualtrics survey (adapted from Li & Hung) relate to parent loyalty:

1. If I have an elementary child, I plan to re-enroll my child at the same school next academic year.
2. When my child is entering or enrolling in an elementary school, this school will be my first choice.
3. When my relatives or friends need information about school, I will voluntarily recommend this school.
4. I will encourage my relatives or friends to let their children attend this school.
5. When talking about school with my relatives or

Figure 1. Aggregate data to the Four Questions Related to Marketing by 16 Participants for a Total of 64



friends, I will praise this school voluntarily.

Figure 2 indicates that ASH parents had a high percentage of loyalty and positive school image. As shown, more than 55 percent (N = 7) of parents agreed to take action to demonstrate their loyalty. Similar to the findings in the marketing strategies in Figure 1, the declining enrollment strongly contradicts the results. More research is needed to extrapolate why parents with high loyalty and positive school image have not encouraged more parents to enroll their children in ASH. One stakeholder who identifies as a parent and church member consistently responded *somewhat disagree* or *neither agree nor disagree*. This particular stakeholder's insight could provide more clarity on what the school could do to increase their parent loyalty.

Implications

Two implications emerged from the evaluation. First, ASH should strategically deliver cost-effective marketing initiatives to inform the community of why the school is an important fixture in the area. This is an opportunity to expand beyond basic marketing venues such as mass media and the newspaper and focus on other marketing strategies. The second implication is to invite parents to act upon their parent loyalty and a positive school image to actively recruit based on their personal experiences. The parents have a powerful tool, word-of-mouth. Used effectively, this can help promote and expand the enrollment goals of ASH.¹⁹ ASH can build on incentive and referral opportunities for parents that enlist new students. The parents will be more likely to support their school if incentives (e.g., receiving a tuition benefit through a referral program) are used to encourage them to spread the word.

Future Research and Limitations

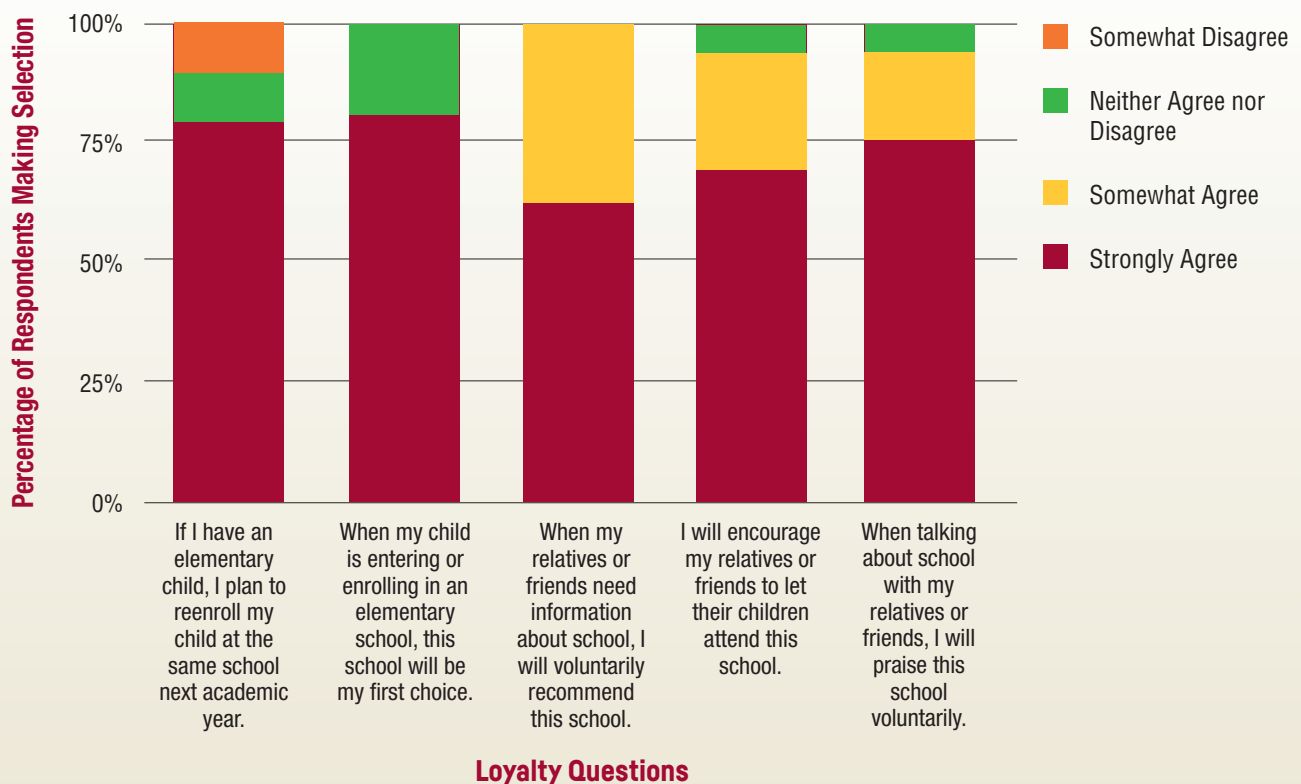
There were several limitations to this study. One of the study's limitations was a lack of comparison between ASH and other surrounding private schools

in the impact of marketing and school image. The comparison would provide a picture of similarities and differences for effective marketing and influences for school image. A second limitation was the inability to survey parents who chose to withdraw their student(s) from ASH or who did not participate in the survey. Gaining their insight would have been ideal for formulating recommendations better. A third limitation was the sample size and response rate of this evaluation. Another limitation stemmed from the nature of the questions. While the Likert scale allowed individuals to select a level of agreement to the statements, it did not provide details to explain the reasoning for their selection. Despite these limitations, the information collected can help ASH develop an action plan.

Action Plan

Thayer et al. recommend each "school develops a comprehensive marketing and public relations plan."²⁰ There should be cooperation between teachers, principals, and the pastor to foster and meet individual needs relating to learning, administration, and faith. Furthermore, there needs to be an accurate database

Figure 2. Breakdown of Responses to Loyalty Questions



of all Adventist homes in the community to make communication easier for relevant parties. And lastly, schools should focus on sharing the values and uniqueness of Adventist education to highlight their essential attributes among the educational landscape.

Organizations such as Grace Works, Christian Education Matters, and School Growth offer their services for a fee to assist schools in developing and implementing school marketing plans.²¹ The Northern California Conference has chosen to employ a marketing specialist, Carol Nash, to educate school leaders about the marketing cycle and assist schools through the process. Additionally, Nash sends out a weekly e-mail highlighting a marketing action. An archive of

the marketing tasks, organized by month, is available in the Marketing Corner under “Ongoing Tasks” of the Northern California Conference’s education website.²² Three common themes emerged from reviewing these programs, and these serve as the foundation for any marketing action plan: Create a marketing team, gather and review data, and communicate.

1. *Create a marketing team.* The first phase of the action plan is to create a marketing team. Building a team will ensure shared responsibility for the implemented marketing efforts. Anderson and Thayer et al. promote the need for collaboration between schools and churches.²³ The team should consist of the principal and various school stakeholders such as board members, parents, pastors, church members, and community members. Nash recommends recruiting a “cheerleader” to serve as a team member—someone who is excited about the school but is not directly affiliated with academic outcomes. An arrangement such as this allows the cheerleader to praise the school’s initiatives without appearing to be bragging.²⁴

2. *Gather and review data.* Phase two is to gather and review data. While surveys provide one format for data collection, other methods (e.g., focus groups, interviews, and informal communication) may also be utilized. At first, the data should focus on retaining students by developing loyal families. Then, the school

Acknowledging parent feedback is vital in developing an ongoing marketing cycle that encourages parental participation. The results from the ASH surveys indicated high loyalty among parents with children enrolled at ASH during the 2020-2021 academic year.

can shift to recruiting new students primarily through the word-of-mouth recommendations of loyal families and constituents. Acknowledging parent feedback is vital in developing an ongoing marketing cycle that encourages parental participation. The results from the ASH surveys indicated high loyalty among parents with children enrolled at ASH during the 2020-2021 academic year (Figure 2). During this phase of the marketing cycle, the team and school board can review the school’s identity (i.e., the school’s mission and vision statements) to strengthen and clarify the school’s image. In addition to a mission statement, ASH could consider identifying the core values of the school that can be promoted through the various communication

platforms to provide clear and memorable information. By asking what parents, the targeted consumer, want, the school board can then compare the parents’ wishes with the school’s mission and resources to prioritize the ongoing development of a school-wide improvement plan that will meet the needs of the students and their families both now and in the future.²⁵

Though the sample size was small, a yield of more than 60 percent of ASH’s families were considered in this study. Our findings revealed that the ASH parents felt the school was safe and provided caring teachers. Overall, the parents identified themselves as loyal to the school; however, their loyalty had not yet translated into the positive promotions of the school associated with increased enrollment. It is recommended that the school board initiate a referral award to provide a financial incentive to families who recruit new students. For example, a school could offer a free month of tuition for recruiting a new student who enrolls and stays for the school year. The incentive is applied to the final tuition payment of the school year.

3. *Communicate.* The marketing team must create opportunities to communicate who they are (i.e., their mission and values) and how ASH meets the needs of students and their families (i.e., teaching religious beliefs in a safe environment with caring teachers). The marketing team should emphasize the importance of sharing the school’s story. At the same time, the “cheer-

leader” inspires parents, pastors, church members, and community members to promote current information and thus provide free word-of-mouth advertising.²⁶ When creating publications for the website, social media posts, newsletters, radio ads, and other forms of mass communication, the messaging should be consistent. Including a call to action with the communication is also vital to initiate inquiries.²⁷

Conclusion

Based on the results of the surveys, the evaluators made three main recommendations for ASH. The first was to create a marketing team to share the responsibility for growing the school. Second, ASH should initiate a recruiting scholarship to inspire loyal parents to promote the school. And third, ASH should create a system for tracking results to generate data to drive future decisions. Small Adventist schools seeking to evaluate their marketing strategies can begin by going through a similar process using data-driven decision-making to improve marketing efforts. Progress must be clearly communicated, results need to be tracked to generate additional data, and the process repeated year after year to meet the expanding needs of a vibrant and growing school.

After completing the study, the evaluation team learned that the enrollment of ASH has increased during the pandemic; however, the cause of this is beyond the scope of the study. Future evaluators may seek to determine if the COVID-19 pandemic attributed to an increase in enrollment. ✍

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