

## **It's Your Open House?**

An Open House is your chance to shine, an opportunity to capture the essence of your school, a great way to engage prospective families for a brief time with the aim that they will apply and eventually enroll in your school. Often referred to as “dog and pony shows,” Open Houses are great opportunities to put on your best face, review the mission and goals of your school as a team, staff, volunteers and parish leaders, and gear up for what might be an exhausting but potentially rewarding event each time you do one.

As all schools have their own personality, your Open Houses will probably take on their own style as you do them repetitively, year-in and year-out. While your school should aim to distinguish itself from the other schools in the area, keep it competitive, not onerous. The key is keeping your events geared around a core of ideas that make a good framework for successful events; something you share with other Catholic schools. So, on the one hand there are some hard and fast guidelines that seem to work universally for most schools, and on the other we highly suggest that you remain creative, thinking creatively while you consistently tweak the basics as you go along.

### **I. Regimen matters:**

Routine has its place. Good marketing habits work to make you more efficient as a school marketing team, reducing procrastination and building confidence on staff when goals are met because schedules are kept. All that adds up to one very important outcome—less stress. When your Open House efforts are less stressful for everyone involved in the planning and execution,

mistakes will be fewer and result better. Here are eight tasks that your school should be doing on a regular basis to enhance your enrollment efforts:

**Do these things twice a year:**

1. Your Superintendent or Principal needs to personally call EVERY family and express “THANKS” for being a part of “our school”. Make sure that he/she emphasizes how your school is making a difference in the life of each student. Another important part of the message is making sure parents know that they can call at any time and the policy is “parents and students first”. This should be a phone call and not an email.
2. Invite parents to share your school with their friends. Consider developing a team of your 10 best “cheerleader” parents and make them your ambassadors. Ask them to spread the news of the school, pass out school literature, and invite new parents to come in for tours and lunches with the students.
3. Utilizing a list of households in the radius of your school, your Superintendent or Principle should make frequent contact with the Preschool parents, and do everything possible to get those students into TK and Kindergarten.

**Do these things every quarter:**

4. Principal, Marketing Committee and Parish Leaders need to meet faithfully each quarter making sure that they are on the same page. These meetings will facilitate coordinated communication to school parents, always with the invitation to encourage tours of your school.

5. Have a minimum of 4 enrollment events annually for all parents to interact with the Catholic School teachers and students. Ideally one should be at the beginning of the school year.
  
6. The school should attempt to communicate quarterly with all parish parents, filling them in on the good things happening at the school, awards received, curriculum, etc. All of this is to make your school look shine brightly in the minds of all parents.
  
7. Do a newsletter via email and printed hard copy mailed to homes. CSM can help you with the production of a well designed and impactful newsletter.
  
8. Make your school visible in the parish environment (and vice versa) at events, in the bulletin, school newsletter, et al. Be a big part of each other's family. You're one family under one roof with sometimes competitive goals. Coordinate this as best you can.

## **II. Style Matters:**

Style matters because people make instant judgments about who you are, and it is almost impossible to change this first impression. Catholic Schools should understand that image is essential in establishing their front row seat at the education table, to communicate that they are a major "player" who commands respect, and that they are confident, a smart investment and one of the best educational options available to parents. The following five points will help you capture style points with neighborhood parents:

1. Make your pricing straightforward. "This is the total. Divide it by 12. Your monthly payment."

2. Hire a professional to create promotional materials. These include school brochures, school magazines, staff business cards, newsletters, posters, banners, and more. They should all be consistently branded. Don't try to sell a \$50,000 education by using a cheap-looking, photocopied flyers. You must be willing to invest in your brand. Go to a new car dealer and see how they sell a \$50,000 product.
3. Make sure your website is top-notch. First impressions can make or break your success.
4. Create videos that are really good. People laugh at bad, homemade videos. But they share the good ones. Use your good videos on your impressive website and in your social media.
5. Frequently add news and events to your website. Post photos from your events, and share the cool things that happen around campus, on field trips, in school Masses, etc.

### **III. Details Matter:**

When you demonstrate that you are on top of the details, it gives parents confidence in your ability to handle students, curriculum choices, and scholastic programs. Often a parent's perception of your school is actually a combination of several small details. For example, have you ever noticed how bad it looks when the flag on your flagpole is tattered and faded? Or, what does a parent think when they receive a letter from you that has wrong dates and times listed? Being on top of the details communicates excellence to parents. Here is a list of six details that will help you stay on top of your enrollment game:

1. Be interactive with your social media, and don't ignore it for weeks on end. Post great photos and great messages often, and when people interact, respond quickly with upbeat interaction.

2. Make student department a major priority in your curriculum to reflect an attitude of department when parents and grandparents are guests.

3. Write down all major school accomplishments over the past 5 years: Student awards. Staff awards. School recognition, etc.

4. Make sure the campus is clean and organized. A messy space with exposed storage and dusty artifacts reflects poorly on the campus, students, and staff.

5. Smile when you answer the phone. Emphasize that every single incoming call is a chance to enroll a new student. The sound of the staff-person's voice can make or break that deal. NO phone trees!

6. Return unanswered calls ASAP. Someone shopping for a school (especially a preschool) might sign up with a competitor. Your window is always narrow. Don't forget the imperative nature of getting back to callers.

## IV. What does it mean to think outside of the box?

Thinking outside the box doesn't mean thinking smarter. It means to leave your psychological comfort zone, exploring new solutions with a good degree of mental agility, boldness, and creativity. Schools need to realize that there is always more than one option to solving a problem. For schools, 'thinking outside-the-box' can mean, for instance, looking beyond boundaries and existing markets to the parent's real needs. "No great discovery is made without a bold guess," said Isaac Newton. When you encourage your marketing committee to ask "why" every time a program for enrollment is presented, you are making the first, right step. Thinking outside the box is about overcoming constraints and allowing the thought process to move in a number of directions before you begin to sift out the one you will eventually call your path. Here are three ways to keep your thinking broad and varied:

### **1. Aim at your own target.**

RULE OF THUMB: Your target is your target. If you aim at the same target everyone else is aiming at, your shots will end up where everyone else's do. If you shop for a car but seek only the average of what other buyers are seeking (i.e. color, options, model), you'll achieve average and nothing more. Or, if you plant a garden and put in the same seeds, water it at the same time, fertilize it with the same fertilizers, and order the rows exactly the same way your neighbor does, you'll get the same garden. When it comes to marketing your school, make sure that you have a specific target in mind, one that compliments your facility, your staff and your community.

## **2. Assume that ideas are out there just waiting to be discovered.**

RULE OF THUMB: Many people think themselves to death believing that they need to create ideas. Most good ideas are out there just waiting to be encountered. Put away the thought that you need to come up with a “new idea.” Rather, you’re on a hunt to capture ideas; it’s a matter of stalking and not creating. Most good ideas are just waiting for you to bump into them. When you assume the attitude that it’s just a matter of time, you’ll find that it really is. When you go into a project hoping to create as oppose to hoping to find, you’ve already burdened yourself with the unnecessary burden of having to be creative.

## **3. Think in a broad scope.**

RULE OF THUMB: To get your thinking selves warmed up, think broadly from the start. Start by broadening and not narrowing. Put everything on the table,. Don’t discount anything as unrelated or unconnected. “It’s August and families are planning their last vacation together as a family for the summer. How do we work camping into our planning?” Or, “Is there a enrollment paradigm we are using that can be changed?” When participants begin to feel that you are drifting from the point, or climbing up the wrong tree in order to address your enrollment issues, that’s when real, imaginative thinking begins. Go offtrack to get on-track Narrowing comes after the broad scope.