Your roadmap to Growing Catholic schools!
Situation

We recall that a young Church, growing rapidly with European ancestors more than a century ago, found the will and the dedication to build, out of their poverty, the Catholic schools of the United States... The challenges our schools face now will require of us, as of our ancestors, sacrifice, competence and determination... Our schools are a heritage. We must make sure they remain a legacy for future generations.

- Catholic Schools: Heritage and Legacy, Catholic Conference of Ohio.

- Enrollment in the Diocese of Grand Rapids has been trending down for 20-plus years.
- Nationally, enrollment is declining.
- Today, in the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, enrollment is up – system-wide for the first time in 13 years, to the tune of 750 new students and a conservative $1.4 million in tuition revenue growth.

This plan models the Archdiocese of Milwaukee plan, which is based on 10 years of statewide and national research; best practices; and focus groups with Catholic school leaders, parents, teachers, students and lost prospects.

Opportunity

- Our families make enrollment decisions amidst tough economic times. Now, more than ever, making Catholic education a priority and a good value is critical as families streamline expenses and inevitably make tough economic decisions about supporting Catholic education tuition. Rather than focus on cost, we need to sell value. Why should parents choose Catholic elementary school for their pre-schoolers? Why should an elementary student go to a Catholic high school? We need to provide compelling answers. We know Catholic families who take out second mortgages to afford Catholic education. It is valuable to them regardless of their financial situation.

- Timing is right. This is an opportune time to review and refresh your Catholic schools marketing approach. New leadership. Increasing challenges. We face a remarkable opportunity to strengthen the understanding of the purpose, mission and values of Catholic schools; to ensure young people develop a deep personal faith and live the teachings of the Church; and to generate continuing revenue streams to help provide affordable education to all.

- A summary of 10 years of statewide and national research combined with other recent district research, i.e., Archdioceses of Milwaukee and Philadelphia, has proven helpful as the archdiocese prepares to aggressively promote Catholic schools. And earn significant results.

Principles

This communications plan is grounded in five key principles:

- Fresh. We live in an information-overloaded world. Same old, same old communications among organizations of all kinds are ineffective. Fresh works.

- Targeted. Delivering messages to mass audiences hoping that something sticks is an expensive way to reach the coveted few who will comprise your student population and financial supporters. This plan is highly targeted so that Catholic schools can most effectively reach influencers and decision-makers.

- Complementary. One-dimensional campaigns will realize far less success than an integrated campaign designed to reach people through their many trusted information sources – people, print, broadcast and online. Messages need to appeal emotionally and rationally.

- Consistent. Messages and delivery should be consistent among all communications. Consistency helps Catholic schools brand itself and motivate action with messages that resonate.

- Frequent. A year-long marketing study indicates that prospects need to receive nine messages from an organization before they act. Two of every three messages are ignored or missed. Therefore, Catholic school messages must reach prospects 18 to 27 times to elicit action. An integrated approach helps maximize frequency requirements.
A beautiful blend

- This plan and tools are a blend of science and art. Strong research. Savvy marketing. Together, they create a balanced foundation for this plan and its tools.
- The plan is designed for **personal, print and online communications**.
- The tools are **professionally designed and written**.

Targeted

This plan **turns traditional marketing upside down**.

This plan **focuses on your ambassadors** and **word-of-mouth power** as the key driver for success.

Market research recommends this time and resource investment standard:

- **Ambassadors.** Invest 60 percent in your “customers,” also known as “ambassadors.” **This is the most revered of your three markets** – those blessed and wonderful people who are part of your Catholic school family, faculty and influencer lists. They are your school families, parents, students, teachers, pastor, priests, grandparents and parishioners.

  These are the people who make you tick. Each one represents a connection to multiple new students. Each one represents a potential referral, then another. Referrals can lead to retention and new enrollments.

  Apathy toward school families and influencers is a commonplace omission on the part of many schools. Mail to them, keep in touch with them. Strengthen your relationships.

- **Prospects.** Invest 30 percent in your prospects. People in this group have differing degrees of interest in Catholic schools. Interest them, inform them, intrigue them, fascinate them, woo them. Do all you can to move them into your “Catholic school family” or ambassador group.

- **Universe.** Invest 10 percent of your communications dollar in the “universe” – the largest and least profitable of the three groups. It’s every single person in the Diocese of Grand Rapids.
Tools
You will have access to 36 tools to help you integrate this year-round strategy, including:

**Ambassador-focused tools:**
- Wallet-sized welcome
- Talking points card
- Posters (2 versions: grade school and high school)
- Annual report card
- Middle school retention fact sheet
- Middle school retention letters (2 versions: 4th and 5th grade)

**Prospect-focused tools:**
- Baptism folder
- Baptism folder inserts (2 versions)
- Pre-school letters (5 versions: for ages 1-5 in print and electronic formats)
- Postcards (2 sizes in print and electronic formats)
- Postcards – unique second version (2 sizes in print and electronic formats)
- Postcard – high school version
- Brochure
- Brochure inserts (3 versions)
- Bulletin ad

**Universe-focused tools:**
- Newspaper ad
- Outdoor banner

**E-Communications:**
- Middle school retention letters (2 versions: 4th and 5th grade)
- Pre-school letters (5 versions: ages 1-4 and kindergarten)
- Prospect postcard copy

Key principles

**Ambassadors are central to success.** We studied many Catholic school marketing approaches, interviewed leaders and looked at their results. Unfortunately, many plans focused on a mass media approach, which is expensive, difficult to maintain and much less effective than a grassroots initiative. Ambassadors are the ticket to success. When you retain them as school families and empower them to spread the word about your school in specific ways, your marketing power expands exponentially.

**Integration rules.** The new tools should not be viewed as a “menu of options.” Know that every audience – ambassador, prospect and universe-needs to be communicated with in systematic, calendared ways. The one-shot, one-dimensional outreach rarely works. Year-round, quality, consistent communications will be successful.

**It takes 9 times.** Like you, tour families are information-overloaded. A 10-year marketing study shows that it takes 9 communications to reach a prospect and move them to action. Challenge is, 2 of every 3 communications are ignored or missed. That means 9-plus year-round touchpoints are important. You can do that in person, in the bulletin, through the mail, on the web, etc. It doesn’t have to be expensive. It needs to be consistent.

**Patience pays.** Many leaders in all kinds of organizations are tempted to give up halfway through the program. You may implement and through the school year wonder where all of the new students are. Wait, persevere, stay on course. Results will happen. However, it doesn’t happen overnight.

**Tenacity rules.** Be creative; be a tiger when it comes to marketing. Find ways to bring this plan and tools to life in your own ways, given your distinct school cultures. For example, some schools in Milwaukee took the baptismal and pre-school strategy a step further by organizing kindergarteners each year to write birthday cards to the preschoolers who are ages 1 to 4. Another suburban school took the posters we created for their parish and school walls and hung them in libraries, grocery stores, realtor offices and day care centers. The sky is the limit. The great thing is – the strategy and tools are done for you. Now, you need to implement.
**Final thoughts**

- Involvement in the Catholic Church is the best way to attract families to Catholic schools. Research proves that **the more active a Catholic parent is in their parish, the more likely they are to enroll their children in Catholic schools**. This plan is designed to complement all diocesan and school initiatives which enhance Catholics’ involvement and commitment to their faith and parish.

- This plan is meant to be grassroots-based with a **guerrilla approach to marketing**. Limited resources and lofty goals require this plan to use novel approaches to gain support, get people talking and ultimately inspire action in support of Catholic schools.

- **The power of our ambassadors is significant.** Imagine – more than 6,000 students and their families, parishioners at 82 parishes and at 32 schools – consistently and frequently extending compelling Catholic school messages! The viral impact of that will undoubtedly move market share up and potentially beyond expectations.

- Media relations. The universal strategy should be rounded out with **year-round media relations** that feature Catholic school results, human interest stories, trends, statistics, innovation and strategy. The credibility of news articles via year-round publication is priceless and an important complement to all other strategies.

- This Catholic schools marketing plan is **holistic in its approach** – more than a marketing plan, it features strategies that are systemic, curriculum-focused and culture-specific. The plan is designed to be **a living, breathing document**. While it is intended to keep us focused, on task, on goal and accountable, it is also designed to flexibly adapt to new opportunities and challenges. The plan, vision and its impact should be reviewed annually with revisions made to future years taking into account results, feedback, the environment and the economy.

**Getting started checklist**

- **Know.** Read this plan and review all tools.
- **Meet.** Schedule a meeting with your marketing volunteer or committee.
- **Log on to the Print Portal** to start the process.
- **Delegate to a marketing professional or committee.** You cannot do this alone. With this plan and tools they do not need previous experience.
- **Calendar dates** – event dates, mail dates, annual report card distribution, etc. so that you can stay on time and focused year-round.
- **Measure success.** Keep track of how many respond to each communication; how many attend open houses; and, ultimately, how many students you retain each year and how many new students you welcome.
- **Evaluate.** Review measurements and results so that you can add, delete, fine-tune or change up your timing, approach, tools or events as needed.
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<td>Gather your marketing committee</td>
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<td>Place posters in hallways and public venues</td>
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<td>Gather and update mailing and email lists for school families and prospects</td>
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<td>Empower ambassadors (teachers, parents) with talking points cards</td>
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<td>Start your baptismal strategy – folders; welcome letters to newly baptized year-round</td>
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<td>Send prospect postcards to “lost prospects” in public schools K-grade 4</td>
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<td>Plan Catholic Schools Week events and promotions</td>
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<td>Invite pre-school age families with 3- and 4-year-olds to your open house</td>
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<td>Call or mail other prospects with personal invitations</td>
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<td>Send news releases to local media highlighting Catholic Schools Week activities</td>
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<td>Distribute middle school letters and fact sheets to 4th – 5th grade families</td>
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<td>Distribute “annual report card” to all families/prospects</td>
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<td>Send letters to all pre-school families</td>
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