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Social Media Ambassadors: Today's Approach to Generating Positive “Word of Mouth”

What any Catholic school hopes is the outcome of a well-coordinated marketing effort combined with the delivery of a high quality Catholic education is that the “word of mouth” regarding the school will be positive. Regular and enthusiastic endorsement of your school from the lips of respected recommenders is one of the greatest supports to meeting goals for both enrollment and resources. “Word of mouth” marketing has long been known as a staple for Catholic schools, and understanding how to achieve positive “word of mouth” in today’s market requires looking at current marketing realities.

Marketing has always been about getting a message to people, and, in order to do so, knowing where the people are, and especially where they engage in conversation, is a foundational necessity to a marketing plan. In 2018, it is well known that many conversations are happening on social media. Having programs established in a Catholic school to reach families on the social media communication platforms that they utilize on a daily basis is imperative to being competitive in today’s marketing climate. An innovative approach that has proved successful for clients of Catholic School Management is a Social Media Ambassador program.

Utilizing data-driven techniques, an ambassador program can leverage the natural virality of social media to market schools for image, enrollment, and resources. In addition, a Social Media Ambassador program can begin as a component of a school’s traditional Parent Ambassador program and grow to include a student division, thereby expanding audience and reach.



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Why should schools utilize social media as it relates to an Ambassador program?

The use of social media continues to grow on a daily basis. Having the ability to connect with target audiences on these platforms allows schools to clearly communicate desired messages in a timely and efficient manner. For example, recent research shows that Facebook continues to show strong annual growth in user numbers and to be the most widely used social media platform with 2.13 billion active users worldwide as of the fourth quarter in 2017. Many of today's elementary, middle, and high school parents, grandparents, prospective parents, donors, and businesses look to this platform to gather information and to engage in two-way conversations.

The use of Instagram also continues to grow, with a current estimation of 59% of 18-29 year-olds utilizing this photo sharing site. In addition, Instagram has a large business segment, with 71% of U.S. businesses having a profile to showcase their products; subsequently, 80% of Instagram users also follow a business page (sproutsocial.com and wordstream.com). Schools are a business, and having a page to share information intentionally to prospective middle and high school students, and their families, is a wise investment of a school's resources.

Twitter has 330 million monthly users, a smaller user group than Facebook and a slower growth rate of only 4% over the last year. Yet, understanding the demographic of Twitter users is important in terms of how to position this platform within a marketing plan. Many Twitter users have a college degree, are in college, and are likely to have an above-average income (hootsuite.com). Why is this relevant? Schools can maintain a respected presence by being a part of trending conversations and sharing news with alumni, parents, high school students, donors, businesses, and those who engage on this platform.

How do you make your social media sites successful before you launch an Ambassador program?

Before starting a Social Media Ambassador program, it is suggested that schools audit their social media sites to ensure utilization of best practices. A powerful feature of social media sites is the depth of the analytic reports that can be obtained. By reviewing the data with regard to "likes," followers, post reach, engagement, profile views, impressions, etc., administrators can clearly see how pages are performing and systematically make changes to ensure increased success. For example, an important analytical data point that should be assessed is the timing of posts. Analytics will provide information as to when followers are most engaged, so taking the time to schedule posts during those times will help the information reach a wider audience.

Once analysis of page analytics is completed, a school's Social Media Plan should be updated accordingly. Specificity should be included as to who will be providing and approving the content, how often information will be posted, who has access and authority to post, and what are the marketing messages the school is seeking to convey in its use of each social media platform.

Another way to increase the virality of posts is for school administrators to tag any entities that may be mentioned. For example, if a middle school donates food to a local shelter, tag the shelter in the post to encourage the organization to share, comment, and "like" the information, too. (For more tips such as these, visit our Catholic School Management Facebook page.)



What is the most efficient way to create a Social Media Ambassador program?

1. Find four to six trusted stakeholders by watching your school's social media traffic. Look for social media users who post information about your school often, "like" or share news, and are well spoken. In addition, they should be trustworthy, believe in your mission, and use proper grammar. It is also important to look for potential Ambassadors who frequent different social circles or live in different areas from one another, too.
2. Meet with the potential Social Media Ambassadors who were identified to introduce them to the program. Have an agenda and supporting materials in order to be prepared to answer questions about the goals of the Social Media Ambassador program, how information will be shared, what the job duties of the Ambassadors entail, etc. Convey the importance of the role and how the Ambassadors are a branch of the school's marketing team.
3. Review the specific social media strategies in which you want the Ambassadors to engage. Explain the school's goals for them to "like" and share content that is posted on the school's sites. Encourage the Ambassadors to include their own words of authentic endorsement as to why they are sharing the content. For example, if the school creates a Facebook event for an upcoming gala, the Ambassador can share the event on their personal page and include a few sentences about how much fun they have had in the past and encourage their friends to attend.
4. Check-in on a regular basis by meeting with the Ambassadors once a month, or at least quarterly, so that school administrators can learn what is working and what can be improved upon for the program. By meeting regularly, school administrators can develop strategies that will make the system more efficient. For example, some schools email text directly to the Social Media Ambassadors to post on their personal pages, as well as photos to use in the post, because it was determined that this strategy would ensure a fast and accurate response from Ambassadors. In addition, connecting with Ambassadors fosters relationships and allows for these important volunteers to share valuable information about their thoughts and concerns as they relate to school marketing initiatives.
5. Watch what the Ambassadors post. It is recommended that the school's social media administrator(s) become "friends" on their social media sites with the Ambassadors. As an administrator, it is important to see what the Ambassadors are posting and the wording they use. This will allow for positive reinforcement or constructive suggestions for the administrator to use when meeting with them.





About the author ...

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Jennifer M. Trefelner has been the Director of Institutional Advancement at John Carroll High School in Fort Pierce, Florida, since 2003. She currently manages the integrated functions of fundraising and friend-raising, public relations and media relations, marketing and advertising, electronic communications and website development, community and parent relations, alumni cultivation, enrollment management, and institutional planning. Jennifer also works on a part-time basis directly for the Diocese of Palm Beach as the Online Communications Consultant for the Office of Catholic Schools. Through this position, she serves as a resource to help assess, develop, and maintain online communication tools designed to support initiatives and activities undertaken by the schools and that of the Diocese of Palm Beach's Office of Catholic Schools.

6. Keep studying your analytics. It is important to remember the power and logic of using data-driven initiatives to improve the virality of any content shared. In addition, watch the analytics as they pertain to engagement and reach. For example, schools can host contests during the year as a strategic means for increasing followers prior to purchasing advertisements on social media for an Open House. With more followers, the likelihood of more “shares” also increases. Most schools find that once a program is established, the reach of posts grows exponentially.

7. Add more Social Media Ambassadors. After the first year, it is suggested to grow the program with four to six additional Ambassadors, following the same successful procedures from the prior year. After systems have been refined, there is also an opportunity to start a Student Ambassador Program. Students in middle and high school can share their thoughts as to how to make the social media sites more vibrant and popular among their own peers, many of whom are primary decision-makers when it comes to enrolling in a Catholic school. Students are typically happy to share their thoughts, ideas, and suggestions, and they appreciate being included in the conversation about social media planning.

Establishing a Social Media Ambassador program for your school is a wonderful tool to reach families on platforms that they use on a regular basis. Utilizing the data-driven initiatives mentioned above can help school administrators market their schools for image, enrollment, and resources. Capitalizing on a Social Media Ambassador's authentic endorsement of a school's marketing pillars can be extremely beneficial and, if done properly, reach a wider audience than other marketing methods. By leveraging the potential for virality of growing sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, targeted marketing messages can reach a broad spectrum of stakeholders and create the kind of positive “word of mouth” desired.

For more information on Catholic School Management's social media audit and training programs, and for additional tips for these platforms, follow us by searching #CathSchoolMgmt or finding us online!



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