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Marketing Your COVID Superiority

“Hats off to Catholic schools!” “Catholic schools did it better!”

It has been wonderful to listen to the litany of acclaim for how well Catholic schools made the pivot to remote learning and maintained an exemplary experience of academic excellence and faith formation throughout the last school year. The toil and exhaustion that stood behind the responsive, caring, and innovative switch have paid off with increased levels of satisfaction and, in many schools, increased enrollment and financial support.

Congratulations!

Despite the enormous challenges that descended so quickly with the onset of COVID-19, Catholic schools remained true to their spirit of mission and ministry. On almost every level, Catholic schools reported creative solutions that offered unique benefits. Moreover, the crisis brought school communities closer together as new practices helped faculty and staff gain fresh understanding of the students and families they serve. Despite physical distancing, social connection grew stronger than ever.

Recognition and appreciation are more than due to the teachers, administrators, and staff who worked heroically and ceaselessly through spring and summer. CSM salutes you and thanks you.

But basking in the glory of responding so well to the crisis at hand must now make way for ensuring that those brilliant maneuvers and inspirational activities are leveraged to impact enrollment, fundraising, satisfaction, and advocacy.

Now, Sell It

It is essential that each school tell the story of its COVID countermeasures in meaningful ways, especially to those who are not yet reaping the direct results – new families, prospective families, alumni, donors, etc. It is time to trumpet your success not only on the academic front but also those dimensions that make Catholic schools unique.

With some schools still limited to remote learning, and the constant worry that those on site may not be able to remain due to changing conditions, there is a pressing need to articulate your strengths so that no matter the model, the advantages offered by Catholic schools reign supreme.

Messaging and Methods

Each school will have its own story to tell, but there are some common guidelines for telling it effectively. Think in terms of benefit, impact, what was learned; and impart those insights within the overall marketing message. Tap into survey responses, comments, and conversations with parents, students, and teachers. Create an infographic of stats. Share examples of how the close knit, family environment of your school prevailed despite the mandated distance. Post and send word about the new partnerships formed with area businesses and cultural organizations. Reflect on multiple areas of school life – both up close and from afar – and feature the voices of all constituents.

Think in terms of benefit, impact, what was learned; and impart those insights within the overall marketing message.

Catholic School Management's client schools and those who participated in our recent Catholic School Advantage survey have kindly offered many options.

Academics, Outcomes

- ◆ Highlight the videos created to support remote student learning – and report how often they are still used even after the return to campus.
- ◆ Describe the individual student/teacher contact opportunities and the level to which they were accessed.
- ◆ Illustrate the new horizons conquered via virtual field trips, interaction with schools and students in other countries, master teacher lectures, etc.
- ◆ Celebrate the strengthened triumvirate of parents/student/teachers working together to ensure optimal outcomes and experiences.
- ◆ Display student work created during lockdown, number of books read, favorite virtual activities, etc.
- ◆ Publicize new accomplishments of teachers – advanced degrees, certificates, training, professional development – achieved despite the shadow of COVID.

Catholic Identity, Faith Formation

- ◆ Announce the new 1:1 program of prayer partners – one alumnus for each student.
- ◆ Tally the number of prayer requests received for whom the students prayed each day.
- ◆ Describe the opening prayer traditions that, despite occurring via technology, kept students grounded in the new reality.
- ◆ Post examples of the service and social justice ministries' work during the pandemic.

Activities, Athletics

- ◆ Cite the increase in club membership and examples of new experiences that emerged.
- ◆ Send clips of output – Photography Club submissions, Mock Trial opening arguments, Academic Decathlon training, Choir soloists, etc.
- ◆ Present each team's training regimen to keep the players in shape, and encourage parents and alumni to join.

Counseling, Guidance, Support

- ◆ Continue to send short surveys every few weeks so students can check in, privately, on their needs, their status, etc.
- ◆ Offer stress management tools and mental help apps and report on usage by students and parents.
- ◆ Maintain active listings of external resources regarding housing, SNAP, TANF, domestic violence support, etc.
- ◆ Document summer outreach – calls, visits, emails, text messages, surveys – to reveal that the caring culture of Catholic schools extends well beyond the school year.



What Teachers Are Saying

We MISS the kids!

I was delighted to see how much more reading my students were doing during quarantine. It became a weekly topic of discussion and even carried through to their social media.

We've all gotten so comfortable with this; snow days will be a thing of the past. We're ready to go virtual at any moment.

We've learned a lot more about what students live with at home – food insecurity, domestic violence, unsafe communities. This helps us help them in ways we would never have uncovered in the classroom.

Commencement – Then and Now

The creative options Catholic schools developed to celebrate and recognize the Class of 2020 were stunning. While it's hoped the need for that is one-and-done, the mileage you can get remains. These should be featured on the school website, on the premises, in virtual tours, videos, etc. What happened and how speaks volumes about the level to which faculty, staff, and administrators sought to make '20 students and families feel honored and celebrated.

Parades, videos, home visits, lawn signs, small gathering liturgies, drive-by diploma pickup, last visit photo shoots, ceremonial locker emptying, countdowns, doorbills, mascot arrivals, blessings, school songs, grad masks, class t-shirts and posters, time capsules, alumni welcome calls – these are just some of the methods deployed to make students feel special. Show how you made a splash on their behalf. It will telegraph your commitment to the student experience no matter the obstacles. (N.B.: Given that our society typically calls for both/and rather than either/or, it's likely that many of these hasty but ingenious ideas will be sought in subsequent years whether other limits apply or not. Good luck!)

Saying Thank You

Catholic schools are sometimes virtuously modest and not entirely comfortable with trumpeting their greatness. However, there are

ways to let the community see the good that is going on while maintaining that modesty. Rather than bragging about a roster of science-career alumni who spoke to students each week to help explain the intricacies of the pandemic, it may be easier to do so by saying thank you to those graduates and explaining what they did.

Likewise, school administrators may prefer to say, “We’re so proud of our faculty. Check out Miss Kula’s video with *her* grade school English teacher as they debate the merits of diagramming sentences.”

Many schools opted to increase substantially financial aid availability for the coming year by releasing reserve or endowment funds, conducting special appeals, etc. By now, that grand gesture may be a distant memory, but it can be kept alive by sharing the parent thank-you messages and indicating the number of students who would have been forced to go elsewhere were it not for the new funding.

Some schools discovered that where parents had lost jobs, high school students were able to find them, but this prohibited their daytime participation in remote learning. Tales of teachers who met online with students in the evenings, after each had put in full days, need to be not only shared but held up as living examples of Catholic school commitment to student wellbeing.



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What Parents Are Saying

I loved that our school held the students accountable during this time. They said “There seems to be some confusion based on media accounts that attendance is not being tracked and school work doesn’t count. We are and it does.” Excellent.

Asking different students to record the readings for Mass at home, outside, near the school sign – it made them feel so important and they made sure we attended the online Mass each week.

The weekly contests were a hoot and made a big difference, especially during the late spring when it was clear this was going on and on.

It was so smart to use the spring and summer to get the new flooring in without disrupting classes. The kids loved coming in and seeing all the improvements.

The teachers were so creative. Even I started watching for Mrs. Fox’s Food Math class each Monday.

The remote learning environment gave my daughter one-on-one time with her teacher, something she’d never have asked for on her own. And now, she’s more comfortable seeking out help.

LOVED that the President called each kid. They were all texting wildly about what was said.

This is not the time to be shy about reaching out to donors.

The list of what was done, the level to which it is impressive, knows no bounds. Telling the story of how your school reacted, what was learned, and plans for the future is essential to retaining students, attracting new families, and justifying the financial commitment of benefactors.

Connect Before the Ask

This is not the time to be shy about reaching out to donors. Though some may have been affected by the financial impact of the pandemic, many have not and are eager to help. Let them!

By now, most schools have conducted wellness checks on all their donors and have ramped up communication to cultivate a spirit of working together. (*If not, it's not too late – begin today!*) Direct contact via telephone and video calls, emails, text messages, letters, flyers, handwritten notes, postcards, prayer cards, and door hangers added to a robust, up-to-date website and social media presence, keeps your school top of mind at a time when not-for-profits are seeking greater support.

Moving into the fourth quarter – statistically the most generous quarter from a philanthropic standpoint – requires strategic communication and solicitation protocols to ensure sufficient funds for not only annual operating efforts but also newly emerging needs. In fundraising, specificity leads to increased results, so talk about necessary enhancements – portable sinks, cameras, providing laptops and internet access to families without, extra staffing, etc. But don't just focus on the features, link to the benefits each student receives. That's what inspires the prospective donor – knowing the gift will benefit a child at your school.

Above and Beyond

It's oft said that Catholic schools go above and beyond, and never so much so as this year. Your marketing endeavors need to do the same in order to benefit from the extraordinary experience that has been provided to the students and families. The Catholic School Management marketing mantra is to deliver the right message, to the right person, in the right manner, at the right time. In other words, don't hide your light under a bushel! Let it “...*shine before others, that they may see your good deeds.*”



About the author ...

Mary J. Foley Managing Director

Mary J. Foley brings 35+ years of experience to the not-for-profit world and offers a wealth of strategic leadership skills and insights. A Catholic school graduate and parent, Mary is a zealous advocate for the mission and ministry of Catholic education. She has worked with hundreds of not-for-profits, internally as a director of development, at the board level, and through a wide variety of consulting engagements.

She joined CBS in 2017 as Managing Director of Catholic School Management and Mission Advancement. Mary is a lead presenter for Catholic School Management and speaks nationally with NCEA, ICSC, RCRI and other professional development organizations.

The students asked a lot more questions at this year's virtual Career Day than when I was in person last year. And now that we have this option, we can involve other grads who live further away.

Being invited to sit in on some of the classes, from afar, made me realize how much more is expected of students these days and how much is required of the teachers – even without the pandemic. It really IS a vocation.

We had such a huge response to the Prayer Partner program that now each student has THREE alumni praying for him.

**What
Alumni
Are Saying**



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