
LEADING TRENDS

The Question That Matters Most



Finishing a joint board/administration strategy session, we asked if there was anything else we should keep in mind when helping plan the school’s future. One division head in the room said, “Of course! We have to do more marketing. People don’t know what we do at this school and if they did, they would want their child to be here.”

In the hours prior to the division head’s statement above, we had walked through, among other things, searingly critical feedback from a stakeholder

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value proposition and Net Promoter survey. The school's Net Promoter Score was low, as low as any we have seen in quite a while, and the reasons why were excruciatingly clear from the free-text questions. Parents (whose score was the lowest of any stakeholder group) simply didn't see how the school's approach to education was doing the job they were hiring it to do. Some even thought the program was doing some other unrelated job—one that teachers value but that these parents didn't want done at all.

The problem is an old one: school people tend to talk about their work in terms of what they do to students while parents tend to evaluate a school based on how well it does the job they are hiring it to do. Parents who hire the school to get their child into a highly selective, elite university will evaluate the place on the basis of the placement list or, in the lower grades, evidence that their child will achieve such a placement when the time comes. The kind of curriculum or brand of pedagogy means less than the ultimate effect it has on students in general and their child in particular. The same can be said for any "job" that parents hire the school to do, from overcoming learning challenges to developing athletic talent to producing a graduate who will change the world.

[For a deeper dive into "Jobs To Be Done" (JTBD) Theory, see Ted Levitt's seminal Harvard Business Review paper, "[Marketing Myopia](#)," from 2004, or the recent [NAIS survey](#) of JTBD in private, independent schools in the United States.]

“More marketing, if it fails to address the only question that matters, is just going to produce lackluster results and frustrate everyone in the process. What is the only question to which marketers of your school absolutely must have an answer? Simple: Will the school do the job I (the parent) am hiring it to do?”

More marketing, if it fails to address the only question that matters, is just going to produce lackluster results and frustrate everyone in the process. What is the only question to which marketers of your school absolutely must have an answer? Simple: Will the school do the job I (the parent) am hiring it to do? Quite simply, the job is the output not the input.

It is a hard reality to look at this. And it is true that many parents choose your school in the beginning for things other than or in addition to the actual job they want done. It is also true that in the early years, parents are less intentional about that "job" as they really want their child to be happy and safe and cared about and for. This does not last! And, at whatever age/grade it begins to wane, then the importance of the actual job to be done emerges. This is why a family who has loved and supported the school in second grade begins to be a grumbler in third and is talking about leaving the school by fourth grade.

The same thing holds in a middle school or high school setting, although as the child gets older it is clearer what the job is that the parents want the school to do.

A better marketing campaign would aim straight at this question by saying to parents, "We know the job you are hiring us to do. You want us to [get your child into a great university/help her overcome learning challenges/help you raise a decent, moral human being]. Now let us tell you how we are

going to do that job.” Skipping the first part renders the second pointless; they won’t care how you educate unless they know it is connected to the job they want to do.

What if your school can’t or isn’t intended to do a particular job? Say that, too, as in, “We know the job you are hiring us to do. You want us to help your child develop her talent as an elite field hockey player. That’s an important job, but it’s not one we do at this school. Our sports program values participation more than championships and really elite players (and their parents) are just going to be frustrated. If you (and your daughter) can accept less playing time and few championships, we would be happy to [insert a job you can do well].”

Our analysis is that if few schools address the jobs to be done, even fewer are clear about the jobs not being done. Both omissions frustrate parents and the second creates an angry backlash from thinking that the school was not honest at admission. Simply marketing more is not necessarily marketing better. Better means connecting your message to what matters to the listener, and what matters most to them is the job they are hiring you to do.

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