

# MARKETING FOR INCREASED ENROLLMENT

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## KEY POINTS

- Is your school the best kept secret in town?
- Are you responsible for increasing the number of students enrolled at a classical Christian school?
- Does your school need more “mission-appropriate” students?
- Has your school’s enrollment been declining or flat the past 3–5 years despite knowing you have the best private education in your area?
- Have the number of prospects for your school declined or remained static for the past few years?

If the answer is yes to any of these questions, then this article will help you evaluate your marketing approach and make strategic adjustments, so that your marketing efforts produce the desired results. I believe that Christian schools need to rethink their current marketing paradigm and consider an inbound approach because this approach provides a unique opportunity to impact school enrollment.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP FOCUSING ON MARKETING

The responsibility of growing a school typically falls on the shoulders of the head of school but it is not uncommon for that role to be delegated to others such as the director of admissions and/or advancement. In the case of start-up or smaller schools you often have committed volunteer parents and board members who assist with the headmaster in planning and executing a marketing plan for enrollment growth.

The reality is that marketing a classical Christian school is a challenging task that ought to be a constant daily part of the life of the school. Marketing a school takes vigilant daily focus on details as adjustments are constantly needed. With the increased use of social media and internet marketing these adjustments are even more critical. A healthy school recognizes that enrollment is always a priority and there is never an “off-season.” This healthiness is obtained from the top down with the leadership focusing time,

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talent, training, and finances to build admissions systems with the right qualified people to establish and maintain high quality enrollment practices. These practices range from gatekeeping to actively attracting the right prospects to your school so that the mission of the school is not compromised. This dedication to building a culture within the school that focuses on enrollment marketing is critical for the long term sustainment of the school.

The following three reasons for changing how you focus on marketing is meant to challenge you as a school leader to dig deeper and not assume that what you have done in the past (five years or longer) in marketing your school will work in the future. Here is what I am assuming in this brief article in order that I can focus your attention on details about inbound marketing which I will explain shortly. I am assuming that as a school leader, you know the basics about enrollment marketing and understand the importance of weekly and monthly managing a prospect funnel, applicant funnel, and retention funnel. I also assume that the board is well informed of the enrollment marketing data on a monthly basis, not just once a year in September after school starts.

My focus is to help you understand that if you want to reach prospective parents and no longer be the “best kept secret in town” you need to start by changing how you think about marketing in general and adapt and adjust to the rise of inbound marketing as a cost-effective and result-producing approach to school marketing to attract new mission appropriate prospective parents.

## REASON #1: WITHOUT ENROLLMENT YOU DON'T HAVE A SCHOOL

The implications of not having enough students enrolled in a school are fairly obvious. Without an adequate number of students you don't have tuition

revenue that can sustain your budget. Most schools rely on tuition revenue to fund 80% or more of its annual budget with the remaining 20% or less gap being made up by fundraising via an annual fund. Without a funded budget you cannot accomplish the educational goals of the school and ultimately you will disappoint your parents and your school will lose more students. It is even more important for start-up schools to focus on enrollment in their early years. This is because start-up schools will often have a window of opportunity as donors help to support them through the first few years. Start-ups can usually work with very limited budgets due to the “sweat equity” of passionate teachers and administration who are all in on the mission and vision of the school. Despite the passion and devotion, this start-up scenario typically can only be sustained for so long and thus it is even more important for a new school to focus its attention on enrollment marketing so they can reach a point of long-term sustainability.

Mature and longer standing schools that have existed over ten years need to recognize the importance of adjusting to changing their marketing approaches. These more mature schools' leadership can grow lazy when it comes to enrollment if they have reached their ideal number of students and mistakenly think that year after year students will keep returning to your school without adjusting your marketing. The problem for this type of school is that it can be too late if the school starts experiencing a decline in the number of new applicants and prospects and have not invested in the future of the school. The reality is that if a school's leadership does not diligently pay attention to enrollment patterns, data, and trends the school could be hurt or worse.

## REASON # 2: SCHOOL MARKETING IS CHANGING OR HAS CHANGED

**The traditional “spray and pray” strategy is ineffective and expensive.** “While traditional marketing models have not completely dried up, we found they are dramatically devalued by all marketers in 2013. *17% percent of marketers say both traditional advertising and direct mail have become less important in the past six months.* Traditional advertising and Pay per Click will deliver the least amount of leads for marketers this year, with just *6% originating from each of these categories.*” (Gayle Williams, “**Top 5 Lessons from the “2013 State of Inbound Marketing Report,”** Vision Inbound Marketing Consultancy, Sept 12th, 2013, found online.)

Traditional marketing is the process of telling prospective families about your school by trying to interrupt them through a direct mail piece, radio ad, billboard, television ad, a magazine or newspaper ad, or other means. *Interruption* is the keyword in this approach as you are competing for their attention as they listen to the radio, drive on the road, watch TV, read the paper, check their mail, etc. One extreme but well-known example is the millions of dollars spent every year on Super Bowl commercials by major corporations to disrupt the Super Bowl and grab your attention. Or a more common experience as you drive everyday are all the billboards you see on the freeway as advertisers try for a split second to get your attention as you speed down the road. This approach to marketing is what some marketers call a spray and pray marketing tactic. That is, you buy a significant amount of disruption-focused ads and spray them out into your target market praying that the right people will be disrupted and respond.

How does this look for a private Christian school? For a private school with an enrollment ranging from 100 to 300 students and trying to attract new students, they will have a marketing budget (hopefully) ranging

from \$10,000 to \$40,000 a year. Sadly, many schools large and small don't even have marketing budgets and wonder why they are not growing, or worse, they believe that what has happened in the past will continue in the future. The school marketing decision maker will spend most of the school's marketing budget on traditional marketing tactics that include a direct mail campaign, flyers, radio ads, bill boards, magazine and newspaper ads, and other high cost but low response approaches. Likewise, schools will spend a significant amount of time and money designing, printing, and distributing these ads in the hopes that a prospective parent will stop what they are doing and call the school to schedule a visit. Recently, I had a well-meaning headmaster tell me that if his school could only afford to have a billboard in town off the major freeway they would surely increase the number of students who enrolled as he knew his school was the best-kept secret in town. The belief is that once the marketing message is sprayed out into the community like a crop duster spraying a field with fertilizer, the seeds will sprout and the harvest will be plenty. Though filled with a sincere desire I am afraid this is hope in a flawed approach to marketing especially for a school.

## PROBLEMS WITH SPRAY AND PRAY MARKETING

There are three problems with the spray and pray approach to marketing that headmasters and administrators responsible for marketing need to realize. The first is that spray and pray marketing has become less effective due to the seismic shift in how prospective parents learn about your school due to the increased use of wireless internet access via smartphones, tablets, and other mobile devices. This is coupled with the growing reliance on search engines and review sites for finding out information about your school.

The second problem for traditional marketing methods is that the ability to disrupt the prospective parent has decreased and the message is not being heard due to the use of technology to block out these attempts to get their attention. For example, when was the last time you picked up a telemarketer's phone call at 6:00 p.m. to your home phone? Telemarketers go to voicemail, direct mail goes in the trash, and commercials are avoided through TIVO and very skilled uses of the remote control. Radio ads can be avoided through Pandora, satellite radio, and i-Tunes, and as for billboards, when was the last time you pulled over on the side of the road to write down the number found on a billboard? Day in and day out, prospective parents just like you use technology to ignore disruptive and annoying advertisers who spend thousands on these mediums.

This leads to the third problem with traditional marketing. For schools on a limited budget, it is too expensive. Marketing statistics for general business reveal that the average cost to acquire a lead through traditional marketing channels is \$350 per lead. In contrast, inbound marketing costs \$125 per lead. These stats might not be exact for your school, but I am confident you will find the difference in cost very similar between traditional and inbound marketing.

Most schools have the problem of not even knowing how many prospects they attract each year through various channels and thus don't know the cost per lead. Often times the best results are very subjective as it is claimed that it is very hard to know the originating source for the prospective parents. However, there are ways to track the results of traditional marketing through tracking phone numbers, offer codes, tags, etc. However, these vital statistics are seldom known and thus the ability to determine which marketing approach is working boils down to a best guess. Knowing your cost per lead and the return on investment is a critical benchmark

in establishing an effective marketing plan.

For example, which marketing program would you choose if you knew the outcome would produce these results with quality leads, Program A or Program B?

*PROGRAM A: Spend \$10,000 and acquire 35 quality prospects.*

*PROGRAM B: Spend \$10,000 and acquire 80 quality prospects.*

Of course, the easy decision is to choose Program B. The reality is that Program A is traditional marketing and Program B is inbound marketing. Before I explain exactly what inbound marketing is and is not, I want to make it clear that I do not think a school ought to stop doing all traditional marketing. I want school leaders to recognize the necessity of establishing marketing benchmarks and knowing what their cost per lead is and which channels are effective and ineffective. In some cases traditional marketing can be very effective if it is tied to the strategy of inbound marketing. In my marketing with schools I have used direct mail, radio, and banner ads but all of them have been focused on complementing the inbound marketing strategy.

So, I want to challenge school leaders to rethink how they approach their marketing and consider implementing this alternative approach that is making a major impact in businesses and schools. Sadly, many businesses and schools fall into this spray and pray mentality because they have not yet realized what you now know. Prospective parents are no longer shopping and approaching schools in the same ways that they did five to ten years ago.

So far we have looked at the fact that without building an enrollment-minded culture from the board on down to the teachers, a school will suffer. Focusing on enrollment is essential for a school to sustain itself long term. We also discussed the declining effectiveness of traditional spray and pray marketing as its ability to disrupt and gain the attention of

prospective parents has decreased significantly with the rise of wireless technology and easy accessibility to the internet. Let's turn our attention to a solution to the problems of the traditional by understanding the philosophy and approach of inbound marketing.

- Inbound marketing practices produce 54% more leads than traditional outbound practices.
- Inbound marketing costs 61% less per lead than outbound marketing such as direct mail and radio, etc. (HubSpot, "State of Marketing Report 2012").

### REASON #3: INBOUND MARKETING IS NOT JUST A PASSING FAD—IF YOU DON'T ADAPT YOU WILL MISS OUT ON ATTRACTING PROSPECTS TO YOUR SCHOOL

Imagine a radio ad sales rep called you and told you they could play your custom radio ads for their listeners who fit your target demographic precisely at the time when they wanted to hear your radio ad. Additionally, you would be able to know when and for how long they were listening to your ad. In fact, the sales rep even promised that listeners who were not interested would not hear the ad! Then to make the sales pitch even more ludicrous, he said you would only have to pay for each ad that the listener heard! If I received such a call I would have asked for the sales rep's supervisor so I could report him for false advertising as I know this to be impossible.

The reality is that today with the accessibility of the internet and in particular the power of search engines like Google, you can do exactly what I just outlined above through the use of various inbound marketing strategies. Inbound marketing can even take this a step further in that your "listeners" online

can inquire about a particular question or topic and that ad, blog post, e-book, and other content will be offered to them through a search result via Google, Bing, or other search engines. Amazingly, HubSpot, a company which offers inbound marketing software for businesses, recently rolled out a product which can alter the home page of your website based on the person visiting your website and their history with a business! This means that two different prospective parents, based on their search activity and prior interactions with your school, could view two different home pages! They call this context marketing and many believe it is the future of online marketing.

**Inbound Marketing Defined.** Let's get back to the basics and clarify exactly what inbound marketing is and is not. Inbound marketing at its heart, from a school's perspective, is meeting a prospective parent where they are in the buying process and not disrupting them like traditional marketing does. You are engaging the prospective parent with high quality, targeted, meaningful content that fits them where they are by answering their questions as they ask them. Typically these questions and content are connected with the prospect through searches the prospect performs. The result of this approach is that you are no longer forcing them through a sales/admissions process and dictating to them when they can get answers to key questions. The reality is that a prospective parent is going to get most of the answers about your school well before they ever visit you either through you, a friend, or a review website. Wouldn't it be wise to offer them answers to all of their questions about your school and how it compares to the other schools in your area? This is the secret power of inbound marketing using online technology to meet your prospective parents earlier in the buying process as they evaluate and educate themselves. Inbound marketing allows you to reach them with answers to



their questions before they even ask the questions and position you as a trusted thought leader as you provide valuable content to educate them. Later on when your prospective parent has been nurtured and decides to make some buying decisions on a school of choice in the area, your school will be one of their first choices.

It is critical that your school dig deeper and research if inbound marketing is for you. Inbound marketing is growing in influence and your competitors are likely to be adopting an inbound marketing strategy soon. Unfortunately, schools are traditionally late adopters when it comes to technology changes and even more so when those changes impact the traditional ways that schools have operated doing their marketing for many years. The reality is that marketing has changed for schools and those that do not adjust and adapt how they approach marketing will miss opportunities to attract qualified prospective parents to their schools. However, before jumping in and adopting an inbound marketing strategy, it is important to recognize what inbound marketing is not.

**Inbound Marketing is NOT Pay Per Click (PPC) Advertising.** Inbound marketing is hard work and is not just running a Google Adwords paid search campaign to drive people to your home page. Google Adwords is a paid online advertising approach where you as the advertiser pay for each click on your ad that comes up when a prospect searches for a keyword such as “Christian Schools in Maryland.” The ad appears on a Search Engine Result Page (SERP), at the bar at the top or side of the screen as a sponsored ad. When someone clicks on it they are sent to the page you have programmed it to. Most of these paid search campaigns are not run well by schools. Often a school will invest a thousand dollars into a campaign and not see any results. They will mistakenly assume that this is inbound marketing and that it does not

work. This is due to a limited understanding of the logic and rhetoric of how search engines work. While inbound marketing is not paid per click advertising PPC is a useful tool in a comprehensive inbound marketing campaign when used with inbound strategies. A properly run paid per click campaign that uses an inbound marketing approach will include landing pages, calls to action, and forms centered around providing a prospect with attractive meaningful content that is tied to the purpose of the ad they clicked on.

**Inbound Marketing is not Search Engine Optimization (SEO).** Search engine optimization is the process of constructing your website and the content found on it so that when a prospect types a keyword into a search engine, your website comes up in the organic search results. Organic search results refer to the search links that are not paid ads as mentioned above. Typically, in a Google organic search they are found in the middle of the page. SEO is a critical component of inbound marketing but the technical process of optimizing your website is not inbound marketing. This means that you can add some keywords into your web page and even page titles, but this in itself does not constitute inbound marketing.

I am going out of my way here to explain this because I want you to understand that inbound marketing is a mindset and philosophical approach to marketing that is much different than traditional marketing and not just a few tactics and tricks to use internet technology. This was probably the hardest part for me in understanding inbound marketing when I was first introduced to it back in 2008 via a HubSpot video. This confusion was tied to all the acronyms and terms that are thrown around online such as SEO, SERP, landing pages, social media marketing, SEM, CSS, PHP, Keywords, AdWords, Twitter, Facebook Ads, Instagram etc. Hearing all this

jargon is probably what a 6th grade transfer student from a public school feels like when entering a Latin class at your school for the first time. It is intimidating, confusing, and bewildering.

At its basic essence, a robust inbound marketing plan is focused on discerning who the ideal parents are in your school and what solutions to provide for their challenges, questions, and objections. The focus is on developing content that addresses these ideal parent profiles so that you can attract prospects to your school like these ideal parents and convert them into leads that visit your school and eventually enroll. The heart of inbound marketing is creating meaningful content. Meaningful, valuable, and fresh content comes in the form of blog posts, parent guides, e-books, how-to articles, and tips that compellingly address the needs of those ideal parent profiles. The content as it is written is centered around keyword research that is tied to search engine optimization. This makes it easy to find when a search is done on a particular topic by a prospect. For example, if you are a new K–8 classical Christian school, you do not want to be writing articles about choosing the right MBA program for the local university. That would be ridiculous. Instead, your focus would be on writing a parent's guide to choosing a kindergarten in Denver if you are classical Christian school in that area.

Here is an example of one application of an inbound marketing strategy as it relates to an organic search using a parent's guide. The parent's guide to choosing a kindergarten in Denver would likely show up in an organic search for a young 27-year-old mother living in Denver who types into Google the keyword "Christian kindergartens in Denver." Then imagine her seeing a search result near the top 3 organic results that looks like this: "Parent's Guide to Choosing a Christian Kindergarten in Denver" Download this guide to learn about key considerations a parent needs to make when examining the multiple

choices they have in picking a Christian school for a young child at [www.abcclassicalchristianschool.com/Landing Page/Parents-Guide-Kindergarten/](http://www.abcclassicalchristianschool.com/Landing Page/Parents-Guide-Kindergarten/).

After the young mother clicks on the page she is sent to a custom targeted landing page that further tells her about the importance of downloading this parent's guide. There is a form on the right hand side of the page that reads: "Complete to download the parents guide now." Then she gives her email, name, age of child, and zip code. After she clicks on the button that reads "Submit to Download" she is taken to a thank you page where she can download the guide in a PDF format. On that page she is given the opportunity to complete another form if she wants to have someone contact her about ABC Classical Christian School in Denver to answer her questions. The guide typically would be about 10–15 pages of important tips, statistics, and details about choosing a Christian kindergarten and it would be authored by the kindergarten teacher, principal, and headmaster of the school. This entire process, whether the parent has a one-year-old or a child ready to begin next year, will catapult that classical school as a thought leader when it comes time for them to really make a buying decision. The process I just walked you through is just one component within an inbound marketing plan.

**Count your cost in implementing an inbound strategy.** What does it take to do inbound marketing? Ultimately, your school needs to commit to writing on a regular basis and viewing your website as a primary marketing asset now and in the future for the sustainability of the school. The reality is that if you don't make this shift you will be missing out on the young families who are making judgments about your school based on their first impressions of your website and how helpful it is in answering their questions. I recently read a blog post from an inbound marketing advertising agency that requires its clients to sign off in the consulting agreement that

if the client does not invest ten hours per week to inbound marketing, it will not produce the results that others are experiencing.

The primary focus of inbound marketing is producing content that gets found by prospects online because search engines love fresh and relevant content that is optimized based on the keyword searches. Therefore, it is essential that if a school commit to doing inbound marketing they recognize the time dedication needed for success.

I encourage you to learn more about inbound marketing through reading blogs, books, and watching videos about it online. Inbound marketing is a worthwhile investment of time, energy, and resources that does produce results. However, it is important you educate yourself about it further before taking the leap and committing to it. If done right it will produce results. I recently implemented an inbound marketing campaign for a school and saw a 340% increase in the number of prospects and a 64% increase in the number of applicants over a period of ten months. What does it entail? In many cases, it can involve a wholesale redesign of your website; but in other instances, it is a restructure of it so it is optimized for the best practices of inbound marketing. Success entails writing quality content on a regular basis that addresses the needs of your prospective parents. In the end, implementing an inbound marketing strategy will make your school more appealing because you will understand your parents better and be able to meet their needs effectively as you try to attract parents just like them.

In order to continue your education on inbound marketing I encourage you to:

1. Subscribe to this LinkedIn group: Enrollment Growth Strategies for Classical and Christian Schools.
2. Subscribe to and follow these blogs:
  - a. Schola Inbound Marketing Blog at [www.schoolinboundmarketing.com](http://www.schoolinboundmarketing.com).

[schoolinboundmarketing.com](http://www.schoolinboundmarketing.com). Download the “Headmaster Guide to Growing Enrollment through Inbound Marketing.”

- b. Schneider Blog: Social Media Marketing for Schools at <http://schneiderb.com/>. Download the “Social Media Marketing Guide for Schools.”

- c. HubSpot Inbound Marketing Blog at [www.hubspot.com](http://www.hubspot.com).

3. Watch several videos on inbound marketing that can be found on YouTube under the search term: “inbound marketing.”

Inbound marketing is a powerful approach to marketing that can help your school pursue its mission in providing quality Christian education to future Christian leaders. It is not a quick-fix approach to your marketing problems, but with focus from your leadership, a clear understanding that marketing has changed, and a lucid understanding of what inbound marketing is and is not you can be on your way to growing your enrollment by attracting the ideal parents to your school.