

MARKETING GUIDE

Marketing Your Independent School

10 Tips for Maximum Effectiveness

INTRODUCTION

Here's the reality: Most independent schools need to compete for students who are a good fit for the school's pedagogical values, its personality, and its approach to learning. Our experience is that while a school may receive a large number of admissions applications, the ones it gets from prospective "right-fit" students make up a too small percentage of that total. The challenge, then, is not simply to fill open slots, but to attract the families likeliest to find a match for their child's needs and enroll them.

Most independent schools we have worked with face one or more of these challenges:

- Convincing right-fit students to take a close look and then apply
- Converting applications from right-fit students into actual enrollment
- Establishing a reputation among prospective independent-school families that accurately reflects the unique benefits their school offers

Ensure your school is known for what it really is and these problems will dissipate. If you have a reputation—what we call brand—that misses the mark, changing it will take time.

But never fear, Mission Minded has ten helpful tips your school can put into action immediately. By incorporating these ideas into how you present your school, you will be on your way to strengthening your reputation so that it is both accurate and appealing to the families you wish to attract.

1 Don't Try to Be All Things to All People

Many schools are exceedingly similar and many of them claim that they “have it all” or are “just as good” as another highly regarded school. But each school does, in fact, offer something unique. It’s your school’s “something” that makes it right for certain families and not for others.

Not every independent-school family is going to value your particular approach. Once you accept this reality, you’re freed from trying to appeal to all families and, instead, can concentrate on how to attract the ones who are most likely to choose and appreciate your school. Don’t worry about the students or families you can’t reach. There are schools that are right for them and plenty of other students and families who are right for you.

Focus your efforts. Reach out to the students and families who are good matches **based on the values they hold and the way your school supports those values**. For example, if your educational approach focuses on collaborative projects rather than individual achievement, it is unlikely that your school will appeal to a family who values competition. Accept this. Don’t waste time and resources trying to persuade this type of family to buy into your educational approach; you won’t succeed. Their values and the values of your school do not align. Concentrate on families who do appreciate your approach and want what you provide, and everyone will be more successful.

2 Break Away from the Pack

It can be hard for prospective families to understand the sometimes subtle differences among the schools they are considering. That’s because so many schools use similar language to describe themselves. People want to know the truth about what makes your school special—so tell them! This is no time for modesty or generic language. Be clear about how your approach differs and illustrate **how it helps students learn and succeed**. (See Tip 3.)

3 Get Specific

There are four factors by which you can distinguish your school from others: price, prestige, pedagogy, and personality. By clearly understanding your school’s position in the community in regard to these four dimensions, it will be easier to specify how your school stands apart from the rest.

Price

Is yours a great school at a great price or the most expensive and worth every last penny? How much financial aid do you provide? What percentage of your budget goes to financial aid, and what percentage of your students receive it? How you answer these questions will set you apart on price.

Prestige

Has your school been around for centuries, graduating political leaders and captains of industry or well-known artists and Pulitzer Prize-winning poets? Is your school freshly minted and creating or advancing exciting new pedagogical methods? Do most of your graduates go on to elite private schools or state universities? Does your school urge students to accomplish great things even while they are still in school, like making an Olympic team, touring with an orchestra, or

“This is how we’ve always felt about the school, and now we can see ourselves in the brand in a way that we never could before.”

Jennifer Gabriel
Director of Strategic Marketing
Brookwood School

starting a nonprofit organization? Some students and families are drawn to schools with a prestigious history or competitive atmosphere, while others are put off by that or prefer a less formal one.

Pedagogy

What kind of education does your school provide: traditional, progressive, or something in-between? Is your school a model for a certain pedagogical approach? Do students learn mostly by listening to teachers lecture or through guided discovery, working collaboratively? Each child learns differently, so it is critical to ensure a good match between their learning style and your teaching approach. Parents need to understand how your school supports their child in learning.

Personality

If your school were a person, would it be a cool art teacher who takes the class out for ice cream? Or would it resemble a solemn Latin teacher who subtly reinforces big ideas with each conjugation? Take honest stock of your school’s personality attributes and base your marketing on those. Personality matters and can be the sole dimension on which a family chooses one school over another.

4 Determine and Build Your “Brand”

- Brand is really just another word for “reputation” and every organization has one—not just big corporations. Your school has a reputation, whether you like it or not. Its brand is the sum of the facts and emotions that come to the minds of your audiences (students, parents, faculty, staff, alumni, and others) when they hear or read about the school.
- Your logo is not your brand. Your name is not your brand. Your mission statement is not your brand. Those are just elements of your brand that may or may not be doing their jobs in reinforcing the reputation you want.
- Brand building—discovering a brand’s essence, determining what factors constitute a compelling brand, and working to create a great brand—is as important for your school as it is for Nike or Apple. Articulating how you want your school to be perceived will prepare you to create compelling and effective communications that reinforce that reputation.
- When you communicate your brand clearly, you help the right group of students and families to understand and be attracted to your school. And you also increase the likelihood that they will choose your school, stay loyal to it, and support it now and in the future.

Brand Promise

- A** All the other elements of your brand architecture—values, value proposition, positioning, and personality—should build up to the brand promise. Your brand promise distills what’s most important about your school and serves as an internal rallying cry.

Sample Brand Promise:
World-sized hearts. World-class minds.

St. Mary’s School, Aliso Viejo, California

Brand Values

- B** Values are the essence of your brand. They are the code by which your brand lives—the principles upon which you make your decisions. They are the heart and soul of your school and tend not to change over time.

Sample Values:

- *Wonder, inquire, and discover answers with determination*
- *Be open to diverse ways of thinking and being*
- *Always act with compassion and maturity*
- *Be responsible for yourself and each other*
- *Share your gifts with the world*

St. Mary’s School, Aliso Viejo, California

Value Proposition

- C** Your value proposition is the unique emotional value your stakeholders receive in exchange for what you ask of them. It’s not something physical, such as a diploma or access to facilities; it’s how they feel when they engage with your school. Nor is it intended as a public message: your value proposition is an internal guide for what should be conveyed about your school.

Sample Brand Value Proposition:

Choosing St. Mary’s School makes us feel proud because—by actively fostering skills and sensibilities in tandem—we develop the critical, creative, and compassionate leaders on which global society depends.

St. Mary’s School, Aliso Viejo, California



Brand Positioning

- D** Positioning describes how your school distinguishes itself from other schools. It identifies the key elements that make your school unique and the core ideas for which you seek to be known.

Sample Brand Positioning Statement:

The only school that teaches kids to ask “what” and “why” in a way that demonstrates that they’re an essential part of the answer to “how.”

St. Mary’s School, Aliso Viejo, California

Brand Personality

- E** Personality presents the distinguishing characteristics of your school. It recognizes who you are now and who you aspire to be.

Sample Brand Personality:

- *Open*
- *Uplifting*
- *Joyous*
- *Conscientious*
- *Wise*

St. Mary’s School, Aliso Viejo, California

5 Write an “Elevator Pitch”

- An elevator pitch is a short, conversational description of your school that is both emotional and factual and helps build your reputation. It’s what you would say to a curious stranger in the time it takes to ride an elevator. At Mission Minded, we believe that an effective elevator pitch needs to speak to what you, as an organization, believe. Tell people what you’re here to accomplish—instead of the details of what you are—and see the difference in their reactions.
- What misperceptions about your school exist in the community? To create an effective elevator pitch, you must understand your audiences’ biases about your school so you can overwrite them with your true story.
- Make your elevator pitch sound natural, so that anyone who represents your school feels comfortable saying it.
- Avoid jargon. The more conversational your elevator pitch, the more likely it will take hold and be repeated—not just by school representatives, but by others when they talk about the school.
- Use simple, descriptive, emotional language that leaves your listener with a clear idea of what is special about your school.
- Avoid working through a large committee to draft your elevator pitch. Groups tend to water down good writing.
- The goal of the elevator pitch is to provide an honest definition of your school and what it offers, not to say everything there is to say. A good pitch is both a synopsis and a conversation starter; it should lead the listener to ask to hear more.

Sample Elevator Pitch:

Children can make an impact on the world right now. That’s what St. Mary’s School is all about. We’re teaching students to ask “what” and “why” and insisting they learn that “how” depends on them. Because when students are guided by compassion and critical thinking, they take responsibility for the world without hesitation.

St. Mary’s School, Aliso Viejo, California

6 Train Your Ambassadors

- Everyone associated with your school is an ambassador: your faculty, staff, board, students, parents, and alumni.
- Once you have determined your brand and developed your messages, train those who have the most contact with prospective families, such as your administration and admissions staff, how to use them.
- You should inform all faculty and board members about your communications efforts, encourage them to become familiar with the messages, and recruit them to help spread the word.
- Students and parents who represent the school on tours or at open houses should also learn the messages and be asked to use them.

7 Put Your Audiences First

- Tell your audiences what they need to hear, not just what you want to say.
- Prospective students want to hear about the day-to-day life and culture of the school. How much homework will they have? Will they have time for a social life and extracurricular activities? What sports are offered and how hard is it to get on a team? Remember to explain the benefit of your school’s approach as part of each answer. “You can expect about two hours of homework each night. We’ve found that this allows students the time they need to master their material and enjoy life outside of school.”
- Prospective parents want to know whether students at your school are happy and what their tuition buys them. Are the students supported by their teachers, the administration, and other students? How experienced is the faculty? What kinds of kids does the school enroll? Where do graduates go on to high school or college and beyond? Be clear and honest so the right families for your school recognize you as the best fit for them.
- Current parents want reassurance that they have chosen the right school for their children, that their tuition and contributions are being wisely spent, and that their children are getting the promised education and experience. Don’t treat current parents like insiders who already get it. They need to be frequently reminded about the value your school delivers.

8 Be Consistent

- Bring your brand to life, creating messages that sound natural and believable, and that are easy to say and understand.
- Brainstorm a list of sound bites—short phrases that reinforce your school's brand. Use them over and over in written materials and when you talk about your school.
- Repetition drowns out competing messages. Reiterating a consistent message again and again is the best way to communicate what you really are.
- Decide on the messages that best represent your school and then stick with them for a long time. Don't change them when you get bored. Your public hears your messages only a fraction of the number of times you do; for the messages to take hold, they need to be repeated. Often.
- Develop a look and feel for your communications that reflect your school's brand and apply it consistently. Your website and all your printed materials should look cohesive.
- Be true to your brand. Reinforcing the attributes of your brand in the way you speak, look, and act keeps you authentic. For example, if your school wants to be known as intimate and nurturing, don't publish a stuffy annual report and fill it with photos of wealthy board members attending your black tie gala. Look for ways to reinforce "intimate" and "nurturing" at every opportunity, and that's how you'll be known.

9 Use Personal Stories

- Tell stories about your teachers, students, and alumni on your website and in your publications.
- Where possible and appropriate, let members of your school community share their stories in their own words, perhaps through short videos posted on your site.

10 A Picture Beats a Thousand Words

- The image people have of your school is formed primarily by how you look, not by what you say.
- Make sure the photos and illustrations used on your website and in printed communications—posters, brochures, fundraising materials, etc.—all send the right message about you.
- The best photos are close-ups of faces and of groups of students and faculty engaged in school activities. Avoid wide-angle shots of the campus, large groups, and photos of someone at a podium.
- Give any piece you're developing this test: If you didn't read a single word, what impressions would you get about the school? Does the piece reflect the brand you want to reinforce?

"I remember wondering how we'd know if our project was a success. And when I heard one of our messages repeated back to us by a parent, it was incredibly rewarding. Our work with you has resonated with so many new (and old) families."

Joel Weiss

Head of School
Crane Country Day School

Learn More

Mission Minded is a branding firm that works exclusively with nonprofit organizations.

We believe that a brand that sets you apart is essential to a nonprofit's success. Every day we guide nonprofits to uncover the big, bold idea that will attract more people to their work. Because in today's world, a worthy mission is not enough. You've got to communicate what makes you unique at every opportunity.

Our clients successfully raise more money and attract the support they need to achieve their goals. To find out how Mission Minded can help your organization, call us today at 415-990-9360.