



MAKING THE GRADE:

7 Ways Catholic & Private High Schools
Can Boost Enrollment and Raise Funds



Introduction

For Catholic and other private high schools, reaching prospective students and alumni is becoming more of a challenge. The broader non-profit landscape is continuing to grow, and every organization is vying for the attention—and money—of the same core audience of donors. As a result, today's Catholic and private schools can no longer rely on the generous funding and competitive enrollment rates they once had.

On top of that, religious affiliations are on the decline. In 2019, 20% of Americans identified as Catholic—a 3% drop since 2009 (Pew Research). People are freely exploring other religious denominations, and simply being “a Catholic school” is no longer a selling point for parents with young kids.

To avoid failing in this crowded non-profit marketplace, schools need to study evolving best practices and invest in their fundraising and marketing communications. In this white paper, we're sharing some of the key tactics that Catholic and private schools can use to attract prospective students, build relationships with donors and raise valuable funds.

Let's dive in.



1. Know Your Audience and Messaging

Having a solid fundraising and marketing communications strategy is important for schools. But it's only effective if you know your target audience. Catholic and private high schools probably have a few different groups you want to reach, like parents of prospective students, enrolled families, recent graduates and older alumni.

Once you know who you're talking to, you need to figure out what message you want to send. Your messaging is crucial because it will serve as a call-to-action that encourages your audience to take the next step.

Remember that messaging should be highly personalized for the group you're targeting. For instance, messaging to prospective parents should not only tout the benefits of the school but prove why the education is worth the investment. If you're targeting older alumni, reminding them of how the school shaped their personal and professional success is a more effective way to solicit a potential donation.

Once you define your message, figure out which channels are going to resonate with your different audiences. For prospective parents, an email campaign could have high engagement. Recent alumni who are social media savvy will probably connect with messaging on Facebook. For older alumni, offline strategies like phone outreach and direct mail tend to be effective.

2. Create a Strong Narrative

A good marketing strategy invokes an emotional response from your audience. For educational institutions especially, playing into that emotional component is critical. A parent's decision to send their child to a certain school, or for an alumni to donate a significant amount of money, is largely driven by emotion.

The problem is, many Catholic and private high schools today simply state the facts about why their organization is the best. While it's impressive to say that a certain number of graduates attend Ivy League colleges, relying on numbers alone isn't enough to convince a parent or alumni to support the school.

The non-profit schools that raise the most money have one thing in common—a great narrative. You need to tell a compelling story about what makes your school special and why it matters to students today.

For Catholic schools, your narrative will likely reflect the organization's religious ties. So explain how your school develops students to be good Catholic citizens, rather than it just being a stepping stone to a great college. Or, tell stories of how students give back to the church and to their community after they graduate.

Impressive statistics are always going to be important. People naturally want to associate themselves with organizations that are leading the pack. But telling the right narrative in addition to those facts will make your messaging more impactful.

3. Use Experience as a Selling Point

A Catholic high school is a brand, just like any consumer product or service. There are certain brands that you go back to, and others that you don't. It's a similar concept for schools, and brand loyalty can directly impact retention, enrollment and fundraising.

When communicating with prospective parents, your messaging should reflect the fact that a student's experience doesn't end upon graduation. Your school isn't just somewhere to get a high school diploma, but rather an institution that will shape their son or daughter into a successful young adult.

If you're speaking to alumni, remind them of the experience they had as a student. Maybe they met their future spouse, or had a teacher who served as an important mentor. If an alumni has a positive experience, they'll be more likely to send their kids to the same school. Over time, your school becomes an integral part of their family—a place where future generations will send their kids.

Telling a story about what your school does for youth now and in the future will go a long way for your brand. Putting experience at the heart of your messaging builds brand loyalty over time, which will boost your enrollment numbers and help you raise more money.

4. Use the Right Fundraising Strategies

There are dozens of ways to raise money for your school. But keep in mind that the best fundraising strategies start with the right message. Before making a donation, people need to be convinced of why your school is essential to young adults in their community.

For many Catholic and other private high schools, events have become the go-to strategy to raise funds. But while events are a great opportunity for building connections and getting people on campus, they're not significant when it comes to raising meaningful dollars. They also require valuable staff and volunteer time and resources on the development side.

If a consistent event schedule is working well for your school, then keep at it. But generally speaking, it's more effective to hold a few signature events that people truly enjoy, rather than hosting a dozen small events throughout the year.

Major annual events, like ticketed galas and auctions, tend to generate the most money for a non-profit organization. These events become something that people look forward to every year, and they attend expecting to make a significant contribution.

5. Leverage Your Annual Fund

Annual funds are a proven way to generate money for non-profit schools. While the individual donations tend to be in smaller increments, you can usually count on a high volume of people to contribute.

People are more willing to give upfront when you're asking for donations of \$100 or less. It's also a relatively affordable way to make money. Rather than throwing a formal event, email campaigns, phone trees and direct mail are effective ways to get annual fund donations.

However, many high schools aren't leveraging their annual fund to its highest potential. The annual fund is a key point of entry for donors, so it should be used to build relationships that result in larger gifts in the future.

Part of growing those relationships is understanding who your annual fund donors are. Figure out what they're interested in, and why they continue to support the school. Express your appreciation by inviting them to speak to students on campus, or have a conversation with the head of the school about upcoming initiatives.

6. Cultivate Personal Relationships with Donors

Asking for money is a sensitive topic, and having wealthy graduates isn't enough to guarantee a sizable donation. How you ask for money is critical, and it starts by establishing a personal relationship with your donors.

A lot of Catholic and private high schools make the mistake of going after the richest alumni in their network. But it's hard to ask a billionaire for money when they've never donated before, and you haven't heard from them since they graduated. A less affluent alumni who has donated to the annual fund or attended a reunion is actually a better prospect.

In order to get a major gift, you need to earn the right to matter to your donors and eventually make your way onto their philanthropy list. It requires you to invest in the relationship in the years leading up to the eventual ask.

As donors grow in their career—and in their wealth—you create an opportunity to solicit major gifts by laying a foundation of trust and support over time. Show your donors appreciation and make them feel like an important member of the school community - no matter the size of their gift today, to earn their future buy-in.



“Show your donors appreciation and make them feel like an important member of the school community”

7. Invest in Video Content

When you're trying to raise money or attract prospective students, there are a variety of ways to communicate with your target audience. But you can only do so much storytelling in writing. Videos, on the other hand, allow you to expand on key messages and provide visuals.

If you're running a direct mail campaign, invite your target audience to a landing page with a video of a parent or student testimonial. If you have access to their email addresses, follow up with the video in an email campaign.

Social media is also a powerful platform when it comes to videos. By posting the video on the school's social channels, you're encouraging people to like, share and comment, which promotes engagement among your audience. You're also exposing other users to the school's mission and building awareness with people who aren't already familiar with the organization.

Integrating as many touch points as you can—somewhere between four and six—is ideal in any marketing campaign. People need to see something multiple times before it resonates, so being consistent and redundant in your messaging is the best way to be seen and heard.

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The image features a hand touching a smartphone screen displaying a video player. The video player has a large red play button in the center, a progress bar at the bottom showing 1:03/2:56, and an HD icon. Below the video player, four social media icons are arranged horizontally: Facebook (blue square with white 'f'), Twitter (blue square with white bird), Instagram (purple and pink gradient square with white camera), and LinkedIn (blue square with white 'in'). Red lines connect a central point above the icons to the top of each icon.

Conclusion

Modern day Catholic and private high schools are facing a unique challenge when it comes to enrollment and fundraising. The competition is higher than ever before, and the tried-and-true strategies of the past are falling flat. To stand out in the crowded non-profit landscape, these schools need to reinvent their fundraising and marketing communications strategy.

Even then, having a great strategy doesn't mean you'll start landing million dollar gifts overnight. First, you need to get better at telling your story, knowing why your school matters, and building relationships with your donors. It's about understanding where you want to go and what it takes to get there.

If you're struggling to tell your school's story, the team at Brand Inspiration / TripleOne Consulting can help. We specialize in helping Catholic and private schools build their brand and create effective fundraising strategies that work. Our firm is led by Michael Desroches and John Cunneen, industry veterans with a combined 40 years of experience in the non-profit marketing and funding sector.

If you want to supercharge your school's enrollment marketing and fundraising programs, visit our website, brandinspirationonline.com to learn more about our firm or contact us today.



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