

MARKETING

Responding to Change in a Changing Environment

Suppose you are looking for a school and you see this advertisement. It sounds ideal. Unfortunately, when you arrive at the school you discover that *small* has been allowed to become “rundown,” “neglected,” and “inferior”; international connections have been ignored; the global outlook may only be a coloring lesson in a workbook of maps; individual attention means “work alone”; specialized curriculum means “do the workbook”; healthful living means a list of don’ts; there is little environmental awareness, and meaning in life translates into “avoid involvement, you’ll never fit in.” So the advertisement should have read:

A rundown, neglected school offers an inferior program focusing on internal problems where students work alone, mostly in workbooks, preparing them for a life of avoidance and isolation.

This is certainly not ideal. In fact, it is not even a reasonable choice. Any price would probably be too high. How would you market such a school? The advertising copy in the first instance looks

SCHOOL

A small local school with international connections and a global outlook offering individual attention and a specialized curriculum emphasizing healthful living, environmental awareness, and meaning in life.

good, but it is obvious that additional promotion would not be enough. Could you possibly make this school match the first description? The answer is yes. And furthermore, the first description could fit any school in the Seventh-day Adventist system. Theologically, it is on target; philosophically, it is sound; and the potential for this to be achieved is greater for an Adventist

school than practically any other school in the world.

Marketing Was the Answer

In the 1970s, when the first wave of enrollment decline was felt in private colleges and universities, the concept of marketing was touted as the answer. In the eighties, it was considered paramount that schools at all levels “get into marketing.” The Seventh-day Adventist Church invested considerable time and effort in educational marketing—first, with data gathered from the North American-wide Seltzer-Daly study, then through Project Affirmation committees and subcommittees, which developed a workbook on marketing and a series of workshops on marketing strategies for Seventh-day Adventist schools. Administrators responded with increased advertising and promotions. This may in some cases have increased enrollment, but for many schools it proved disappointing.

A Second Look at Marketing

To meet new challenges, many marketers have had to rethink the old concepts. At first, marketing simply meant advertising and promoting existing prod-

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ucts—creating the need for products designed by the manufacturer. Then, marketers began to investigate what consumers wanted, and manufacturers modified their products to satisfy that need. But now, the consumer is demanding more—more choices, more information, and more control. Consequently, manufacturers must develop partnerships with clients and suppliers in order to meet their customers' more demanding standards.

These trends in the marketplace also apply when families make educational choices. To find the best buys in education, students and their families are shopping around. This is no longer the world of the 1970s (when many SDA schools experienced their highest enrollments) or even the 1980s. Admittedly, the SDA schools of the nineties look different than in the previous decades—but so do many public schools. They are working to change their image. In addition, other private schools offer Christian education alternatives. Consequently, the Seventh-day Adventist school may look less distinctive. If consumers see few important differences between products, price becomes the crucial issue. No wonder price is one of the reasons cited most often for not choosing an Adventist school.

The Adventist Advantage— Making Schools Distinctive in the Marketplace

Obviously something has to be done—the environment is changing, students and parents are more demanding—and enrollments are declining. To improve the marketability of Adventist schools will require some changes in current thinking, in teaching methods, and in curriculum. Change, of course, is difficult. It seems much easier to maintain the status quo. But staying the same

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may be impossible. So, what can be done?

The answer, at least in part, is to capitalize on the Adventist advantage. Just take four descriptors of Adventist schools at the beginning of the article and see how these can become an advantage in the marketplace. Let's review these strategic elements of Adventist schools:

1. They are small.
 2. They have local control, international connections, and a global outlook.
 3. They emphasize healthful living and environmental awareness.
 4. They provide for meaning in life.
- Seventh-day Adventist schools at all

levels—elementary, secondary, college, and university—should find many ways to emphasize these points. Not only do they fit nicely with the SDA philosophy of education, but they also match the other choices that people are making today.

Small Is Good

Small can mean individual attention. It can mean a place where parents and students are important, well-treated, safe, and comfortable; where the child, classmates, teacher, and parents are all part of the learning team; where the office is friendly and helpful and a place where problems are solved, not created. These impressions can be strengthened all day, every day.

When change is needed, small schools can respond differently and more quickly than large bureaucratic organizations.

- It is important to start right—horror stories abound about registration, which is just the moment when a person needs to feel encouraged. Could registration be done some other way—at a home visit, during the summer, or over the telephone?

- What happens when people call the school, visit the office, or stop by the school? A parent once told me that he decided to send his child to a particular school because the school secretary had such a sweet, kind voice on the telephone when his family initially inquired about the school.

- How about during the school year—are persons available to answer questions? During lunch and after hours may be the only time some parents or students can call or visit the office.

Being small allows an organization to respond in individual ways. A family stopped by an academy late one night—shopping for a school. They were from out of town and had already visited several other schools. They did not have any children of high school age—their

oldest child was just beginning the eighth grade. It had been a long day, and by 10 o'clock the principal was tired. But even at that hour he kindly gave them the "grand tour." Based upon that individual treatment, the parents decided the next year to send their oldest child to that academy and the following year, two children. Being small and good means sincere individual attention.

Small can also mean a specialized curriculum. Most people think of themselves as unique—they believe there is something special about them. Consumers are influenced heavily by this concept—just witness the number of shades of lipstick or varieties of styles and sizes in a shoe store. Small can mean that students are able to study the essentials—things that are important for them and their future—not just what is in the textbook. Sometimes small schools act as though they are a large paralyzed bureaucracy. This can cause them to lose students. For instance, a family withdrew their child from an Ad-

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ventist school because the teacher insisted that the student do every page of the math workbook (it was "required"). The student was gifted in math, and her test results showed that she comprehended well beyond the workbook level.

Smallness can mean that one does not have to study something just because 50 or 100 years ago it was an important part of the curriculum. Adjustments can be made to better prepare students for the present and the future. In 1990, it was estimated that information doubled

every 900 days.¹ How can the teachers (and students) ever keep up? How should teachers instruct young people who will live in an even faster-paced world? Several parents recently threatened to withdraw their children from an elementary school when they discovered that the science textbook was so old it suggested that it might be possible to land a man on the moon! Being small can mean that the teacher becomes the "lead student"² in a classroom where the *process of learning* is important—perhaps more important—than the content, where learning is student-centered, not teacher-centered, and where learning means discovery—individually or in groups, inside and outside the classroom. Small schools can do this using teachers, parents, community persons, computers, and interactive television. In fact, small schools do this better and with more custom-design than large schools. If they don't, they will look like the second wording of the school advertisement at the beginning of the article.

Local Control, International Connections and a Global Outlook

This is an ideal combination, and follows several of today's trends. The Adventist school system has elements of all of these characteristics. There are obvious relationships with the local conference and union administration and school system. But there are also many connections on the national and international level. Although part of a larger system of schools, each SDA school has a local board comprised of members representing the local constituency. This arrangement provides for local decision-making within the larger organization. The local school board can determine many aspects of the school program. They help to set the tone and direction of the school. They can encourage and support teachers and fund activities. Working together with teachers, the local school board can provide opportunities for both the teacher and students to take charge of their learning environment.

Students want to feel safe and comfortable and to have some control over what is happening to them. But they also want the adventure, the glamour of

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Even small schools can develop an international curriculum, which may include corresponding with sister schools in many lands.

participating in something different. Even though the school is located in a rural area, students can correspond with English language students in China, support an orphan in Argentina, send food to Bosnia, and adopt a sister school in central Africa. An academy might develop an exchange program in which North American students trade places with their counterparts in England, France, or Indonesia.

At the college level, student missionary programs and Maranatha projects can be incorporated into the International Studies curriculum. A degree in Environmental Studies might include a year in Brazil or Romania. Business students would profit from studying in Tokyo, Singapore, or London. The Adventist Church has great potential for internationalizing its school system and developing a global outlook that permeates the entire curriculum—kindergarten through university. We should take advantage of our multinational connections. Few other educational systems have so much to offer in this high-demand area.

Furthermore, with the increased competition in the educational marketplace, Adventist young people should receive every advantage our denominational system can provide. Rather than acting as competitors, Adventist schools and colleges around the world should develop partnerships—such as an education network—providing Adventist students with a variety of choices within the church framework.

Healthful Living and Environmental Awareness

For years, many Adventist schools have been almost apologetic about health. But the business world has developed a great interest in health and healthful living. Many of the old “standards” of the Adventist Church are now major movements in North America and elsewhere. As a result, businesses are

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Now is the time to market the healthful choices in our schools.

cashing in—marketing all-natural products, caffeine-free drinks, and foods with no cholesterol or animal products—just to name a few. For too long, Adventists have marketed their schools as the “We Don’ts”—“We don’t drink alcohol,” “We don’t smoke or chew tobacco,” and “We don’t eat meat.” Now is the time to market healthful choices—not the don’ts. The trends show that consumers—both young and old—are concerned about health and want to know

the facts. Adventist young people are sometimes heard to complain about the non-meat diet served in school cafeterias. But with the right spin—emphasizing health, not the don’ts—this could be a strong selling point for the school. Some non-Adventist nursing students recently attended a short, intensive course on an Adventist campus. They had been struggling to improve their diets and to live more healthfully. When they saw the extensive array of non-meat foods in the cafeteria, they were enthralled—one said that she felt as if she had “died and gone to heaven.”

Seventh-day Adventist theology emphasizes God as Creator and human beings as caretakers of creation. Somehow our eschatological focus has eclipsed our responsibilities for the care and maintenance of the earth. Older people may resign themselves to the destruction of the earth by human carelessness, but young people—those who will live most of their lives in the next century—feel concerned.

Seventh-day Adventists, through their school system, are ideally set to work for God’s creation. This needs to be integrated into the curriculum rather than tacked on as an afterthought. Chemistry can be taught from taking air and water samples. Students can learn composition and communications while participating in a drive to save the whales or dolphins. Cooperation, civic responsibility, and teamwork can be taught through participation in a community clean-up drive. This way of teaching, involving participation in currently important activities, makes a difference in the community and creates positive perceptions of the school in the eyes of church members and the public. A non-Adventist family learned about the local Adventist school through its involvement in community projects. The family was baptized and the children enrolled in the school. The school thus combined religion and recruitment.

Putting Meaning Into Life

One regularly hears about top executives who leave a high-paying, fast-paced life to seek something more meaningful—perhaps growing grapes in California. Others, finding their life meaningless, simply write a note and end it all. Reading the newspaper or watching the news only emphasizes the apparent randomness of life. People are ready to try almost anything to fill this void. But even in this, they are consumers—seeking something relevant to their needs. Old-time religion—which was good enough for Mama—may not be good enough for them. New religions are springing up everywhere—customized in, as they say, scratching where it itches. Weekend retreats, designed to help busy people find meaning in life and taught by consultants, gurus, and would-be messiahs, are more popular than ever.

Adventists have something to say about life. It is not a never-ending, downward spiral, but a linear progression with a purposeful beginning and a meaningful end. And what is more, it has practical applications now. Helping people find meaning is a valuable commodity, and people are willing to pay for it. For example, not long ago in an Adventist school a student was doing poorly in his coursework and appeared to be failing in several classes. His father was contacted about the problem. His response was surprising as well as instructive. “Please do anything you can to keep him in school. I don’t care if it takes him an extra year or two. I will pay whatever it costs to keep him here.” The reason: recently the father had seen a change in his son—not in academics, but in attitude. He was much happier, kinder to his parents and brothers, and was even helping with chores around the house.

Parents will pay well for this kind of educational program. Some parents have wept when they heard their preschool children come home from school singing about the love of Jesus. Others have taken a second mortgage when their son or daughter came home from college announcing that he or she has found a Christian partner and together they plan to devote their lives to Christian service.

Responding to Consumer Demands

Marketing means responding—responding to change and to customers, developing new products and new relationships. Enrollment figures suggest that fewer students and parents are choosing Adventist education. If you ask why, price may seem to be the reason. Yet, the issue may not be price, but the service (product) offered by SDA schools and colleges.

It comes down to this: To make a product worth the asking price, the value received must be equal to or higher than the cost. When an item is worth more than its price, it is called a bargain (and everyone these days is looking for a bargain—even in educa-

the cost of education. But when rightly emphasized through the development and delivery of the service (product), their value will be recognized, and SDA schools will be seen as a bargain. And they will live up to their advertising:

A small local school with international connections and a global outlook offering individual attention and a specialized curriculum emphasizing healthful living, environmental awareness and meaning in life.

Sponsors and donors like to support these kinds of programs. Parents and students will travel across town, to the other side of the state, or around the world for a school like this. Yet, for Adventist schools this is within reach—and it is the Adventist advantage. ☞

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tion!). The “high price of education” must be exceeded by the superior quality of the educational service given. It is time to cash in on the Adventist advantage.

Even with this new approach, Adventist schools will still have to advertise and tell prospective students and their parents about the possibilities. They should not hide their candle under the proverbial bushel. Conferences and other sponsors will still have to assist in

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REFERENCES

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2. Kyle Peck, *Touching the Future*, video number 36541, University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University, 1993.