



INSTITUTE OF SCHOOL & PARISH DEVELOPMENT

Bringing People, Process, and Ministry Together to Build the

Kingdom of God.

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Development Directions

BUILDING THE FOUNDATION ON COMMUNICATION

by

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Through the years here at ISPD we continue to have the privilege to work with many Catholic schools, parishes and dioceses throughout the country. A lot of our consulting and educational processes center on long-range planning plus teaching a Catholic institution how to attract and retain the many resources that are available – based upon a pro-active Catholic Development system. In all of the efforts with which we have been involved, prioritization always seems to center around five areas: engaging more people; financial resources; quality programs and ministries; governance and leadership; and *Being Catholic*.

As we dig down deeper, we come to the realization that the key to the above five areas is the word *communication*. These are questions and statements we hear all the time:

- “Does the right hand know what the left hand is doing here?”
- “When did they decide to do that?”
- “The parish and the school are just simply not on the same page.”
- “No one really knows what other groups are doing around here.”
- “Why do they always send so much direct mail? So many people simply do not read that stuff anymore.”
- “When is anyone ever going to talk face to face with someone so we can understand what is going on?”

Talk with most Catholic leaders today, and they will say that communication is the most important thing they can do. Yet, when push comes to shove, many Catholic institutions resort to the least effective communication vehicles, and that is usually general announcements, bulletins, websites and direct mail.

Years ago, as we often tell the story, ISPD was asked to conduct a survey among three parishes who were geographically very close to each other. The parish leaders wanted to find out a bunch of things, but one of the questions had to do with communication. Here was the question:

Please rank in order of effectiveness (“1” being the least effective and “5” being the most effective) the following communication vehicles:

- _____ *Personal letter from the pastor with a personal note in the margin*
- _____ *Fellow parishioner speaking from the pulpit*
- _____ *Pastor speaking from the pulpit*
- _____ *Parish bulletin*
- _____ *E-mail to parishioners*
- _____ *Flyers posted outside of church*

Based upon approximately 1,000 surveys that were returned, here is how the parishioners voted, ranked from most effective to least effective:

- # 1: Personal letter from the pastor (most effective)
- # 2: Fellow parishioner speaking from the pulpit
- # 3: Pastor speaking from the pulpit
- # 4: E-mail to parishioners
- # 5: Flyers posted outside of church
- # 6: Parish bulletin (least effective)

Interesting indeed. Now, we are not saying that the above is right or wrong; we are only pointing out that in these three parishes, the parishioners voted and that was the priority order.

To drive our point home, the parish bulletin came in last. And, when we ask parish leaders all over the country what is the main vehicle for communication, 95% will always say, “The parish bulletin.” And, to carry it even further, the only people who get the parish bulletin are those who come to celebrate liturgy on the weekends, because most parishes do not mail the bulletin home. And, parish leaders say, “I got you though! We post it on our website!”

And, our response is always, “Do you really think that those people who do not come to Mass on the weekends are going to rush to your website to read the bulletin?”

Because of time, money and personnel, many Catholic institutions are not able to effectively communicate to all key constituents. Many Catholic leaders

believe that parish bulletins, pulpit announcements, website postings, emails, direct mail, flyers and posters, recorded messages, and newsletters (electronic or hard copy) are going to carry the messages that will be understood, acted upon, and move people to action. We find that the above vehicles are good for three things:

- They announce.
- They position.
- They reinforce.

With parish bulletins, a person has to be at Mass to get it and furthermore that person has to be motivated and interested enough to read it. With pulpit announcements and messages, people have to be sitting in the pew, and furthermore, they have to be actively listening. With website postings, folks have to know how to get to your website and furthermore, it has to be interesting enough to drive them to action. With e-mails, they have to know who is sending it, and furthermore, they have to want to open it. With direct mail, people on your database have to wade through all the other pieces they receive in their mailbox. With flyers and posters, people have to be physically present to read them. With recorded messages, they have to make sure they check the machine and the message is timely, based upon when they check it. And, with newsletters, there has to be information (both visually and in the written word) that is interesting and relevant to their situation.

All Catholic institutions are challenged to communicate effectively. That is why ISPD always recommends that the parish and/or school actively communicate with every stakeholder at least seven times per year, and two of those times should be face to face. So many of the suggested communication vehicles listed above are passive and indirect. They require the stakeholders (parents, prospective families, parishioners, new families, alumni, key donors, students, past parents, grandparents, friends, etc.) to take an active role in getting the information. In other words, the school and/or parish is not going out to the stakeholders. And, ISPD believes that if we are going to communicate our vision, mission, values, goals and quality, we need to be pro-active. We need to engage; we need to drive to action; we need to do everything possible to interact and build long-lasting relationships. And, quite simply, that usually does not happen when we churn out information that requires the recipient of that information to make a move to receive it.

It all goes back to people. Over and over again, even though it takes time; even though it requires more personnel; and even though it may require more

resources, we are going to become much more effective when we can use all of the above vehicles to announce, position and reinforce, and then use “eyeball to eyeball” work to move to action and build relationships. It is this second part of the communication equation that is missing!

To build relationships through direct mail, most Catholic leaders will be effective 2% - 4% of the time (hence the personal letter). Over the phone, leaders can be effective 15% - 18% of the time (hence the value of phone outreach). But, when we want to make sure that the message is getting across and we are actively seeking to engage someone, then we need to move to “eyeball to eyeball”. One on one meetings, small group discussions, and even large group meetings can be effective.

If we build our Enrollment Management efforts totally around direct mail, Open House, and visits to feeder sources, then we are not going to be as effective as if we interact with prospective families by getting them on campus for activities, games and events. Or, have our parents and students call and engage the prospective parent and/or student in a conversation. Or, invite prospective families on our campus to participate in a planning process or offer educational opportunities about student life in high school or in elementary school. PEOPLE GIVE TO PEOPLE. They give their time; they give their energy; they give their wisdom; they give their children to a Catholic school where they can trust those who are the leaders. They give their families to a parish where they believe they can spiritually grow and be part of a Faith Community.

There are so many ways to move to “eyeball to eyeball” communication, but it takes a commitment to and an understanding of the value. Here are some very effective ways to interact and connect:

- Interviews
- Breakfast/Luncheon/Dinner meetings
- Visits in the home
- Planning sessions
- Input sessions
- Class by class parent meetings
- After Mass gatherings
- Alumni reunions
- Town Hall Meetings/Convocations
- Informal cup of coffee meetings at your “shop”
- New parent visits
- New parishioner visits
- Neighborhood meetings

- Pastor, Principal, President Cabinet meetings twice per year

The list goes on and on. If we want to move people to action and convince them of something, then we need to do it “eyeball to eyeball.”

Are we saying that “eyeball to eyeball” is the only way and everything else is ineffective? No. What we are saying is that we need a good mix of all of the communication vehicles. And, that becomes our challenge: Building the foundation of our Catholic institutions with a seamless, relationship-building communication system.