

CASE  
STUDY  
#001



REVAMPING MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS  
FOR INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS:

# A BOARDING SCHOOL CASE STUDY





## ABSTRACT

An independent school, a grades 9-12 boarding/day school located in a nontraditional market, faced issues with attracting full-pay families. The boarding school was under-enrolled generally. Communication AMMO and True Digital Communications partnered on the engagement, completely redirecting the marketing and communications strategies to focus more precisely on full pay, and consequently moving strongly into digital marketing tactics and content marketing. The school saw dramatic increases in full-pay and realized significant cost savings on traditional marketing, thanks to robust planning and research at the outset of each engagement.

## THE PROBLEMS

### Difficult regional market, decline in full-pay, lagging reputation

At the boarding school (70% boarding, 30% day), the main problem was low enrollment, particularly from full-pay families, complicated by the location of the school, well outside the main market for boarding schools, and a local market mired in poor economic performance and corresponding outmigration that reduced the pool of available students. An illustrative data point: between 2000 and 2010, the state lost some 150,000 people, a large proportion from the school's 40-mile radius. Further, with only one other traditional boarding school in the state, the knowledge of boarding as a viable option was low. Finally, administration had bet big on sports to attract families regardless of academic ability, leading to admitting marginal students who were great athletes, and a reduction in the perception of the value of an education at that school. Even the higher visibility as a consequence of the sports-focus did not translate into inquiries, applications or admits.

## THE BOARDING SCHOOL RESEARCH COMMUNICATION AND MARKETING PLAN

### No current plan, measurement, or connection to admission

The school last had a written plan five years previously, drawn mainly from generally available census data from within a four-hour radius of the campus. In particular, the emphasis of that plan was to do direct mail and advertising inviting families to attend an open house. The admission department had little input to this plan and had worked in parallel, making personal calls to feeder schools and attending selected school fairs. The school spent \$60,000-\$70,000 annually on advertising and direct mail, with no metrics or calculation as to yield from that spend, or calculation of cost per prospect. The admission team did not have a formal database of prospect families, and inquiry-application-admission-enrollment data was spotty. The school undertook a brand refresh a few years earlier, but the effort was limited to colors, typefaces and logo.





### **Competitive analysis reveals distinctive programs**

Research showed that competition, other than in general terms, was dependent on specific programs (such as equestrian or sailing), and location often held sway, even for natives of the school's state and region. Quite simply, the fact that the school was located outside of New England was a detriment, with families often believing that New England boarding schools were better than anywhere else. To establish the pool for analysis, five institutions were acknowledged as those most likely to "beat" the client school in competition. A few boarding schools also located outside of New England and which were advertising heavily, and several local day schools also were included in the competitive set. The substance of the analysis included their websites and social media, and signature programs. These data were gathered in ongoing fashion rather than at once to conserve financial resources.

### **Website evaluation shows need for improvement**

Compared to these five competitors, the client school's website design was dated (though it had been refreshed just a couple of years previously), and much of the content was geared toward parents. SSATB and NAIS research concluded that in the main, students were the primary information-gatherers and decision-makers for boarding school, leaving the subject institution at a disadvantage. Social media in particular was inconsistently used, and was mainly one-way rather than discussion-oriented. A blog, often considered a best practice in view of its impact on Google search results (regular content updates are noted by Google's algorithm), was also inconsistent,

and most often featured faculty and staff voices rather than those of students, a huge deficit. As compared to other schools, student-related stories were confined to the alumni magazine (and its online equivalent) and rarely present on the sites' main pages. The Viewbook, too, while elegantly designed, focused on a few students and conventional activities – the arts and sports – while not representing student life in an interesting or appealing fashion. Metrics for the Viewbook were not available.

### **Advertising and direct mail need distinctiveness**

Advertisements and direct mail pieces were conventional and not particularly distinctive. One certain color dominated, and although this color had historical significance, it was the exact same color as two other schools in the local market, and similar to colors used in several traditional boarding schools elsewhere. Photography, too, was not distinctive or compelling. The same freelance photographer had been used for years, and the quality of art direction highly variable. Ads carried either no call to action, or several calls to action. Selecting media for these advertisements was ad-hoc rather than strategic, overly general rather than explicitly targeted. There was no connection to the digital realm – no specific web pages assigned to given ads, nor special telephone numbers or email addresses to help assess the efficacy of the ads.

Direct mail over relied on inexpensive lists with little targeting on the most salient segments. Production was often "rush" at additional expense, with little effort made to track specific prospects to specific campaigns. For the local market, no segmentation was used in direct mail.





### **Social media ad-hoc, not strategic**

The client school maintained Twitter and Facebook accounts, but there was no use of a content calendar or other content management system, nor did the school use Instagram, a social channel used primarily by students. The frequency and quality of posts varied, and sports and other events would be featured only sporadically. Photography, a clear best practice for social channels that drives engagement, was rare and not distinctive. Social tools were not used to create dialogue with followers or to comment on trends, or to bring attention to specific pieces of content. This is a major deficit, as social media is often a direct channel for families to understand the life of the school.

## **SUMMARY AND SOLUTION**

### **Need a comprehensive integrated plan**

The school had lost its way in terms of marketing and communication. With no foundation of data and research for its plans, and no plan, the school was in trial-and-error mode. Communication AMMO assumed the position of outsourced head of communication and marketing, conducted a strategic planning

session with the five senior-most administrators, and created a summary plan on which to base specific initiatives. The first of these initiatives was to enlist True Digital Communications to establish a digital plan, including search and display, and social media advertising. The two companies collaborated with the school's in-house resources on website content improvements, including new video content and campaign-specific text and photography. The plan called for concentration across a radius of six hours from campus, enabling enhanced outreach in several new markets, including direct mail in markets where the admission team would be conducting visits to school fairs and feeder schools. Use of digital as a primary advertising vehicle was essential to specific targeting – not only were families with appropriate-age children included, the targeting was limited to the likely full-pay audience. Further, exploratory markets were limited to those which contained at least one of the following:

- Fortune 500 company headquarters
- Major regional medical centers
- Universities

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## RESULTS

First year results stabilized and began to reverse inquiry and application trends, with increases in web traffic and social media engagement noted. Responses to direct mail improved, and the percentage of full-pay did also.

Concurrent with the changes in marketing and communications, the admission department improved its prospect management strategy, increasing the number of “touches” from approximately six emails during the fall campaign, to some 26 touches, including specific content elements by student interest, more telephone calls, customized video, and direct mail, also focusing on specific interest areas.

After two years, website visits increased, with visitors from social media the most engaged. Search advertising heavily targeted to higher-income regions and the employer criteria noted above, which yielded higher engagement online and continued improvement in the prospect base. Advertising costs were down more than 11%, but conversions (request for information or inquiry) up more than 700%. Admission inquiries topped 1,000, the highest total in five years, and up 30% since the onset of the engagement. Full-pay boarding apps were up 14%; full-pay domestic boarding and day apps were up 49%.

## KEY LEARNINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

- Schools rely too much on “traditional” marketing methods, including print advertising and general awareness actions. Targeting full-or near-full pay families requires more sophisticated media buying (advertising and lists) and strong digital campaigns, often several in the course of the academic year.
- Schools do not have strong links between their communication and marketing strategy and the admission prospect management strategy. Admission revenue remains by far the predominant means of funding the school, so marketing must focus sharply on this need.
- All communication activity must be integrated. Social, digital, offline, public relations, content marketing and admission communications must be professionalized and conducted under a strong strategic plan.
- Students make the decisions in boarding school. Schools must reach them where they are and in the language they commonly use. Accurately representing life at the school is the single most important element of content for this purpose.
- Mobile-friendly communications – including social, website and ease of contact are crucial. More than half of all searches are mobile, and students are on their mobile devices much more frequently than on a desktop.

For further information, please visit <http://bit.ly/CommAMMO-Schools>, or contact:

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