Strategy

Four Enrollment Lessons from Four Unlikely Sources: A Vest, a Video, a Waffle, and a Magic Trick

by Hans Mundahl, Director of Professional Development, The Enrollment Management Association
What do these four things have to do with enrollment management? Each can teach us a valuable lesson from outside the independent school world.

Please Stop Telling Me What You Do

The feature list of “what schools do” can easily become either an undifferentiated mess or jargon so dense even an educator struggles to make sense of it. Have you ever described your school the following way? “We are a caring community where we balance rigor with support following 21st-century globally oriented, innovative teaching practices on a beautiful campus where each child will be nurtured but challenged.” If so, you have a problem. Who doesn’t have this problem? The outdoor clothing company Patagonia, that’s who.

Patagonia makes expensive outdoor gear. But why should consumers select this brand over, say, Eddie Bauer or Walmart? If that question sounds familiar, it should: It’s the same question parents are asking when considering independent, parochial, or public school. Of course the clothing needs to pass a threshold of warmth, functionality, and style. But more than that, Patagonia stands for something. At its core, the company exists to do something more than sell clothes. What does it stand for? It spells it out boldly and succinctly on its website:

“Build the best product, cause no unnecessary harm, use business to protect nature, not bound by convention.”

What does your school stand for? Why do you exist? If you went away tomorrow, what would the world be missing? These kinds of essential questions are at the heart of Simon Sinek’s thesis that people don’t buy what you do, they buy why you do it. Dr. Americus Reed, brand identity theorist, EMA board member, and the Whitney M. Young Jr. Professor of Marketing at the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, takes this one step further when he argues that consumers want to make your why a part of their who. In other words, we adopt brands as parts of our identity.

We don’t only select a Patagonia vest because it keeps us warm. We select a Patagonia vest because our values are in alignment with the brand.

You Be You

In a blog post titled “The Three Mistakes That Have Defined Our Company,” Chris Savage, co-founder of private-label video player Wistia, describes how their first mistake was hiding who they were by wanting people to perceive the company as legitimate and professional. The result? The website featured a bland management page and sales were flat. When the company grew to include a few more employees, they created a hidden Easter egg on their website for friends to discover. If they knew where to look, they would find an employee page with the entire team dancing. The page was shared on social media, created buzz, and converted leads to customers. The founders realized being honest, open, and speaking with a personality created trust.

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The lesson for schools is clear: When you speak with a human voice and lead with your heart, you create empathy. Social media posts don’t need to be breathless declarative sentences and news stories don’t need to be written as press releases. This is a lesson many schools have taken to heart in their COVID-19 communication. When a head of school is on a Zoom call with parents and speaks from the heart about what they care about as an educator, parents trust the school to navigate the future, as uncertain as it may be. Do your news stories have a byline? Can I tell when a different person at your school is posting on your Instagram account? Have you hosted a parent coffee Zoom call with no agenda? You already have a unique personality at your school...let it out!

We don’t select a private-label video player because the company has a distinct personality, but we are much more likely to trust a company that is honest and open, and speaks from a place of authenticity.

Be Customer Obsessed

Last weekend I was at a farmers’ market (socially distanced, of course) and had one of those amazing waffles you can also get at ski areas. I was officially on a mission. By Wednesday of that week, I had a recipe and I was ready to make my own. Small problem: I needed a certain type of Belgian sugar. A few clicks on Amazon, and fancy sugar arrived by Friday afternoon just in time for Saturday morning waffles.

Buying fancy sugar on Wednesday that arrives by Friday is so easy and painless it belies a simple truth: This is the outcome of a relentless pursuit by Amazon to become customer obsessed. The lesson for schools is to become family obsessed. Can you make the enrollment process seamless, painless, and delightful so the family can have their “waffle moment” when their child grows and thrives at your school? This is a lesson Paul LeBlanc at Southern New Hampshire University took to heart when he described the lengths they go to serve their students:

“We will do everything possible to make students’ journey easier except taking their classes. Making a transfer credit application shouldn’t be hard, so we’ll do it for you.”

The stakes when we are not family obsessed are extremely high. In EMA’s Ride to Independent Schools 2020-2021 we surveyed families about their independent school journey. The survey found that 29% of families reported that they chose not to apply to a school they had visited because they had a bad visit or didn’t care for the people they met. Perhaps these schools had not paid enough attention to their customer experience. Even with a great visit, the independent school enrollment and financial aid process can be confusing, complicated, and stressful. In the admissions world, being family obsessed means making every interaction one that leaves prospective families feeling welcomed and appreciated.

Amazon has raised the bar on consumer expectations. How would orienting your enrollment process toward becoming family obsessed change what you do?

Always Be Piloting

When Airbnb launched its “experiences” platform, it was a nice add-on to the already successful apartment sharing platform. If you were staying in a city you didn’t know, you could book an in-person experience like a city tour or a dog-sledding trip. Along came the COVID-19 pandemic and suddenly traveling to another city or sharing your apartment seemed like a pretty bad idea. In short order, Airbnb
pivoted its experiences platform from in-person trips to online experiences. Now, instead of visiting a vineyard, you could learn how to appreciate wine from a sommelier; instead of walking the streets, you could learn magic from a street conjurer.

Airbnb made it look pretty easy as it transitioned its platform from one modality to another. As Harvard Business Review put it when describing the move:

“A pivot must be a lateral extension of the firm’s existing capabilities, cementing—not undermining—its strategic intent.”

The best way to prepare for a pivot is to constantly be piloting tiny new initiatives. Airbnb didn’t know its offshoot experiences platform would suddenly become valuable, but the platform was ready because the company had already started work on it. The lesson for schools is to constantly be starting small pilot projects that have a limited scope, budget, and timeframe. New Hampton School’s Apple Distinguished School winning iPad program, Baylor School’s multimillion-dollar COVID testing initiative, Providence Country Day’s online-only program, and Lakefield College School’s online certificate program can all seem like windfalls in retrospect, but in fact each was the result of a pilot program that scaled up to meet the moment. Behind the scenes, it’s sometimes hard to see the other initiatives that didn’t scale or were sunsetted, but that’s the beauty of radical “skunkworks-style” projects: low risk, high ability to pivot, and flexibility to meet the pressures of the moment.

Airbnb made the pivot to online experiences look pretty easy because the company had a track record of starting small projects and scaling them up or down as needed.

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