

Pulling in the **same** **direction**

Everyone's role in advancing
the mission of the school



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Foreword

In 2011, when independent schools across the United States were largely siloed and hierarchical in structure, Mike Connor wrote the first version of *Pulling in the Same Direction*. Drawing on his experience in nearly every teaching and administrative position, Mike advanced a bold idea: long-term school sustainability required more than good strategy – it demanded a unified, interdependent school culture. Everyone, from the boardroom to the classroom, needed to collaborate to advance the school's mission.

More than a decade later, the challenges facing independent schools have shifted – but the core truth remains unchanged. At imageseven, we recognised the enduring relevance of Mike's message. Australian schools are not immune to the pressures of rising costs, shifting parent expectations, and increased competition. What we saw was a clear need for the same cultural shift Mike identified in the US: internal alignment that starts from within and radiates outward.

We approached this work not simply as a republication, but as a reimagining – adapted for Australian school leaders and their unique context. This version reflects our belief that school branding, enrolments, and community engagement all begin inside the school gates. Alignment is not a communications issue – it is a leadership imperative.

If you are a school Head, this guide is for you. It equips you to unite your team around a shared mission and build a brand that is not only seen – but truly believed.

Brad Entwistle

Founding Partner
imageseven





**Mike Connor, President,
Connor Associates**

Mike Connor is Founder and President of Connor Associates, a consultancy specialising in communication, marketing, enrolment management and fundraising advocacy for public and private schools, as well as non-for-profit organisations. With 16 Strategic Partners and Research Associates across the United States, he has worked with hundreds of clients spanning four continents and 26 states since 1998. Mike is co-author of the book, *Marketing Independent Schools in the 21st Century* (National Association of Independent Schools). Mike's work with schools has also been published in the Washington Times, Los Angeles Times and Education Week.

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**Brad Entwistle, Founding
Partner, imageseven**

Brad Entwistle is a recognised authority in school communication and marketing, with over 35 years of experience advising independent school leaders. As Founding Partner of imageseven, he guides Heads to shape strategy, strengthen brand positioning and optimise enrolments. Brad co-authored *Bold School Brand* and publishes the *School Marketing Journal*, providing valuable insights into challenges facing school leaders. His governance experience includes serving on Australian school boards, deepening his understanding of strategic and operational realities. Brad's expertise spans brand strategy, messaging and market positioning, enabling schools to communicate clearly and effectively, supporting informed decisions that contribute to their long-term success.

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The case for internal partnerships

Conventional wisdom tells us that up to 80 percent of all new enrolments will come from positive word-of-mouth. But where does word-of-mouth begin? Inside your school.

Even before the upheaval of the global pandemic, independent schools in Australia were facing significant challenges. Rising operational costs pushed tuition fees higher, while shifting demographics, declining inquiries and increased competition put pressure on schools to articulate and justify their value proposition. The reality is stark: if families do not perceive the value of an independent school education to be greater than its cost, they will look elsewhere.

Schools have responded in a variety of ways. Some have reimagined how they deliver education through on-campus, remote or hybrid learning models. Others have ramped up their digital presence, investing in social media, inbound marketing and data-driven enrolment strategies. These adaptive approaches are necessary, but they will only succeed if they are underpinned by a strong, unified internal culture that reinforces the school's value from within.

Although marketing is often seen as an external function – focused on advertising, promotion and public relations – its true power starts internally. Before any advertising, open day or digital strategy can be effective, the school must ensure that every internal stakeholder understands and communicates its value. Staff, leadership and even current families must be aligned in their belief in the school's mission and its unique offering.





The most effective way to build this internal alignment and generate positive word-of-mouth is by fostering strong partnerships across key internal stakeholders. These include the Head, board members, business and operations staff, campus heads and department heads, teachers, and teams responsible for enrolment, admissions, marketing, communications, development and alumni relations. The best independent schools understand that their strength lies in interdependence – when all departments work together towards a shared vision, the result is a compelling, authentic school brand that attracts and retains families.

By actively identifying opportunities for collaboration, listening carefully to the needs of prospective families, and ensuring all internal stakeholders appreciate their role in the school's success, independent schools can maximise their marketing potential and strengthen their long-term sustainability. After all, word-of-mouth begins inside the school, and it is only as strong as the partnerships that support it.

The role of the Head, campus and department leaders

School-wide cooperation and communication are essential for marketing efforts to succeed.

The single biggest influence on this is the school Head. Their personality, leadership approach, values, attitudes towards relationships, professionalism, collaboration and decision-making style all set the tone. That tone, when reinforced by the following six statements, defines the school. Everyone in the school must confidently and consistently communicate the school's response to these statements:

1. Who we are
2. Who we are not
3. What we stand for
4. What we will not stand for
5. Why we matter
6. Where we're headed as an educational 'cause' and what outcomes we want to achieve for you.

These statements define your school's brand and identity. The Head must model this brand and identity at every opportunity, ensuring that all staff and board members are aligned.

Model marketing

A Head is modelling marketing when they continually ask: "How can we make this better? How can we be more responsive? How can we anticipate challenges? How can we reinforce all the positive things we do?" If these questions are part of the school's everyday conversations, then it is clear that marketing is a priority. Keeping these questions at the forefront of every meeting ensures the school remains mission-driven and responsive to changing needs and shifting perceptions of quality.

Expect collaboration

The Head should expect collaboration among all staff members that interact with students and their families, including enrolments, business operations, academic staff, pastoral care, boarding, sport and development. Administrative and support staff should not be overlooked – they are often the first point of contact for prospective and current families, donors and referrers. Keeping them informed and engaged is critical, as their credibility and confidence in the school are invaluable.

Define the 'mission-fit' student

There must be school-wide agreement on the type of students and families your school best serves – and those it does not. By clearly defining what constitutes a mission-fit student or family, you will help families self-select your school and support the work of enrolments. The bolder you are in taking this stand and articulating where your school is headed, the more likely you are to attract families who resonate with that vision and want to be part of it.





Get a grip on reality

Leaders need to expect, endorse and fund market research to identify future mission-fit families, monitor reasons for conversions and non-conversions, and develop authentic messaging for retention. Research data should be interpreted into actionable strategies and tactics.

Understand where your best-fit families are now and where they are likely to be in five years. Base your programs, services and communication on this research. Recognise that your promotional materials should not simply reflect the personal values and aesthetics of the Head or Board; instead, they should be shaped by the intersection of your school's mission and what your community values about your school – in their own words. This requires regular, objective listening to those you serve and seek to serve.

Use insights gained from marketing research to ensure that your mission aligns with market realities, enabling you to promote the highest quality of teaching and learning possible.

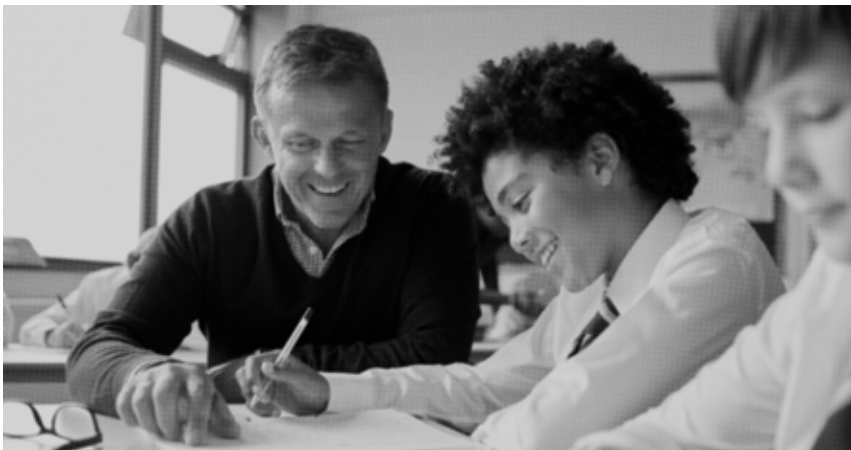
The role of staff

Your staff are on the front lines of demonstrating your school's value.

Teaching quality – the number one reason families say they choose and stay in a school – is measured by evidence of inspiring staff, inspired teaching and enthusiastic, fearless learners.

It's all about teaching and learning. Good school marketing recognises the critical role that staff – teaching and non teaching – play in enrolments and development. Teachers need to understand just how influential they are with prospective families and donors.

Why is their involvement in marketing essential? Without staff support, most external promotional initiatives will struggle to succeed. Families expect Heads, enrolment managers and development directors to speak positively about the school. But when staff members share their authentic experiences and perspectives, it resonates on a deeper level.



How staff can promote enrolment and retention

Encourage staff to reflect on the following questions and share their responses at admission events, parent conferences, and through videos, blogs or social media:

- Why did you choose to teach here?
- What do you enjoy most about teaching?
- What motivated you to become a teacher?
- Who are your mentors? What lessons from these mentors have had the greatest impact on you and why?
- What do you hope my child will gain from having known you?
- What is the most important life lesson you want my child to learn in this course or activity?
- What feedback do you get from current and past parents and alumni about the impact you've made?
- What interests you outside the classroom? What are you personally passionate about?
- What are your favourite moments with a student?
- How do you help students learn how to learn?
- How do you achieve the results you want each student to accomplish?
- How do you stay updated in the subject areas you teach and apply the latest learning research?

When staff embrace their role in shaping the school's brand, they strengthen its reputation, reinforce its value, and become the most credible advocates for its mission.



Tips for Heads to encourage staff support

Teach the staff

Educate staff on the importance of staying true to the school's mission while also listening and responding to those you seek to serve – your market. If there is no market, there will be no mission. Explain that marketing objectives must support the mission and align with the school's values.

Since marketing is essentially about connecting, building and deepening relationships and shared values, help your staff understand your goals and convince them of the critical role they play in upholding the school's reputation.

See the world through their eyes

Spend time with staff at school events. Ask what motivates them. Let them know you want to showcase what they do and why it matters. Ask how you can best communicate their goals for their students and what they hope students will gain from having known them. What's the most important life-long lesson a student will learn from that teacher?

Encourage appropriate staff to share their perspective

Parents look to staff for advice on educational, ethical and character issues. Encourage staff to participate in discussion beyond the school community, write opinion-editorial pieces for social media or newspapers, contribute to blogs, and record videos. Taking an appropriate stand on issues not only advances public debate about education but also reinforces your core values. A school's recognised leadership in education supports enrolment, re-enrolment and donor support. What can you do as staff to be recognised as the leader locally? Regionally?

How is your school viewed from the outside?

Share your plans for marketing research, such as image audits or alumni surveys, with staff before you begin. Then share the results, what they mean for the school, and the next steps. When staff can see how the school is perceived from an external perspective, it can be a powerful motivator for them to embrace their marketing role.

The role of the enrolment management and admissions officers

To a prospective family, the admissions officer represents the school.

To be effective and earn the respect of prospective families, it is important to consider the following:

Manage expectations

Be specific about what your school can and cannot provide. Ensure that prospective families' expectations align with what your school and your programs deliver – and with what the school expects from them as parents and students. A clear and open discussion about expectations builds confidence in your school.

Defining, managing and meeting expectations is the best way to develop a positive, long-lasting relationship with families. With input from teachers and other administrative offices, describe as specifically as possible:

1. Profile of a successful student/family – identify the common traits of students and families who tend to thrive at your school.
2. Profile of an at-risk student/family – recognise indicators that might suggest a student or family may face challenges in your school environment.
3. Learning expectations by year level or division.
4. The skills, attitudes and values a graduate should develop by the time they complete their schooling with you.

The more specifically you define these expectations, the easier it will be for families to decide if your school is the right fit. In your materials, interviews and all communications, confidently set and manage expectations from the beginning.

Treat your enquiries, visitors and referrers as if they were major donors

In terms of tuition revenue, philanthropy and referrals of new students, the value of the right enquiry over a lifelong relationship with your school is enormous. Enrolment management and admissions offices can benefit by learning from development professionals about the art of 'moves management' – the process of nurturing a relationship from casual interest to enthusiastic support for the school.

With enrolment management, there are often numerous key interactions (or 'touch points') between the admission officers and a prospective family, from the initial enquiry to when they officially become students.

Consider the following questions:

- Do you have a step-by-step communication plan for each significant interaction with prospective families?
- How do you guide prospective families through the enrolment process?
- Do you engage staff, board members, parents, past parents and alumni to help present your school's strengths?
- After a family enrolls, have you facilitated a comprehensive retention plan that involves school administrators, staff members and the development team?

Personalised communication and information focused on value are more important than ever to prospective families. This trend adds new responsibilities to enrolment management, admissions and school leadership, who must not only educate, but also demonstrate the outcomes and return on investment for families. Tracking alumni outcomes is crucial in this process. It is in the school's long-term interest to ensure that enrolment management, admissions and alumni relations work closely together.

Involve the entire school in student recruitment

The first visit to your school leaves a lasting impression, often significantly influencing enrolment decisions. This visit should be well-organised to match prospective students with a compatible student host and to ensure that the prospective student and their family have their interests and concerns addressed by relevant staff. Teachers, parents, alumni, students and other community members who follow up with prospective families should be well-trained, responsive and prepared. Events to connect current and new students, as well as family-to-family programs, need ongoing attention and evaluation.

Build a culture of philanthropy

Enrolment and admissions professionals play a major role in promoting the importance of philanthropy within the school. Some may feel hesitant to discuss fundraising efforts, such as the annual fund or capital campaigns, during the admission process, fearing it may deter potential families. However, failing to provide transparent information about these initiatives may lead to a 'bait and switch' perception later on, which can result in negative word-of-mouth.

From your promotional materials to admission events, interviews and tours, take every opportunity to inform prospective families about your school's financial structure and governance. Clearly explain the significance of the annual fund, how philanthropy underpins the school's mission, and the direct benefits it provides to every student. Reinforce that new families benefit from the generosity of those who came before and emphasise opportunities for involvement through both donations and volunteer work.

Create a smooth transition for new families

Collaboration with the business office and other school administrators is key to ensuring new families feel welcome and supported as they transition into the school community. The warm, personalised experience created during the admission process should extend seamlessly to the follow-up interactions with the business office, as well as to the handover with school leadership and campus heads.

The enrolment process focuses on building a relationship with new families and guiding them towards a commitment to join the school. When the business office becomes involved post-enrolment, it is important to maintain the same supportive tone, rather than shifting abruptly to compliance-focused interactions regarding agreement, forms and other administrative details.

By aligning efforts across the admissions, business and campus offices, you can reinforce new families' trust in the school and enhance the welcoming experience. This collaborative approach is particularly crucial in K-12 schools, where it is essential to foster ongoing engagement and enthusiasm as families progress through the school's divisions. This responsibility lies with staff and campus leaders.

Ultimately, the responsibility and success of retention primarily rest with the school Head. Junior School staff should encourage families to look forward to the next year group or campus, while Senior School staff should engage Junior School families by showcasing the opportunities that await them in higher years. It is all about 'cross-pollination'. Meanwhile, the admission office must track retention but remain vigilantly focused on 'incoming' families.

Retention begins as soon as the enrolment agreement is signed. It is all about reinforcing and validating value. Pay as much attention to the marriage as you do the wedding!

The role of the development professional

A primary role of the development office is to inform and inspire the extended school community.

Each fundraising event, communication and outreach opportunity should serve as a platform to educate everyone about the school's value – what you do and why it matters. When the community views the school not merely as an institution but as a cause, it fosters a deeper connection and motivates them to become loyal advocates and donors.

Cultivate and deploy all your school's human resources for fundraising

Everyone has the potential to build relationships with donors and communicate the school's mission and vision. The most successful fundraisers understand this and engage all members of the school community, including staff and students.

Work with your business manager to take ownership of the school's long-term financial health

Many development officers measure their success by achieving the financial and participation targets for the annual fund. However, it is more strategic to plan for at least the next five years, considering operational needs, facilities, new programs and capital requirements. What net assets need to be built over the next five years to help advance the school's mission?

Help donors understand how they can be most effective

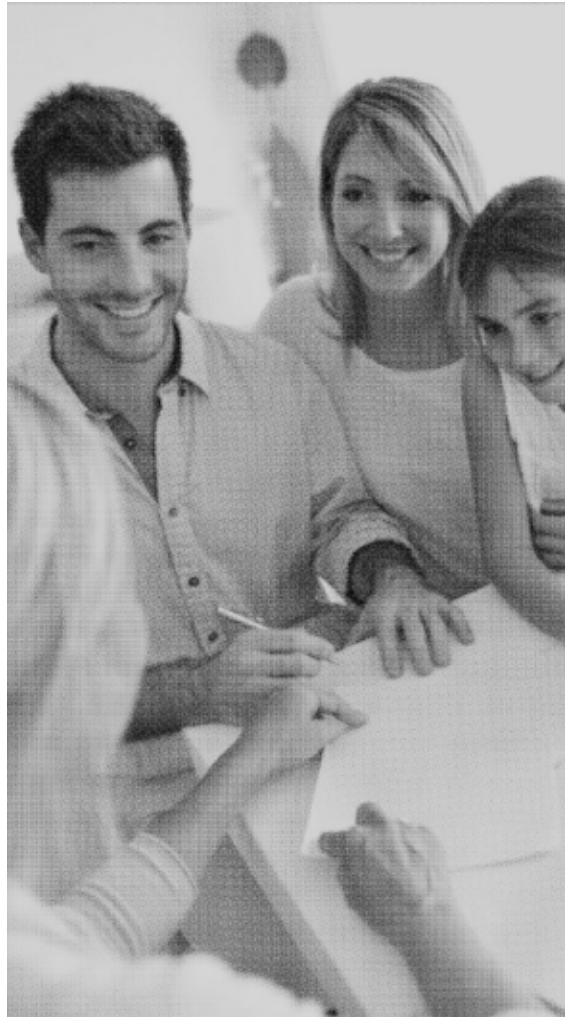
A school's assets include its reputation, curriculum, staff and financial resources. If donors insist on placing restrictions, assist them in moving towards the least restrictive donation option. Allow the Board to fulfil its role in determining how philanthropic funds can be invested for maximum returns, ensuring that each contribution goes further.

Confer with administrators and teachers

Discuss, recommend and facilitate suitable cultivation and stewardship activities. Students can be your most effective ambassadors when they communicate with donors to express their appreciation for a gift that personally benefited them. Ultimately, it is the students who directly gain from enhanced facilities, programs and other opportunities that donors help make possible.

Meet with leaders to discuss marketing

Set the coming year's events, publications and communication plan with school leaders, including the Head's schedule for outreach and cultivation. Additionally, establish the school's research agenda and encourage donor support for research that will keep your institution at the forefront. Based on this research, contribute to shaping the school's key marketing messages, which often become the messages you use in development.



Arrange travel plans or remote events with enrolment management

Prospective families want to see the outcomes of your school's programs, so encourage the connection of potential, current and past families along with alumni at your events.

Identify and encourage positive alumni and past parents to assist in enrolment

Make it easy for families in the admission and re-enrolment process to connect with alumni and past parents. Their stories about how the school or a particular teacher made a difference in their lives – their first-hand account of the benefits and value of the educational experience your school provided – can be the most compelling and credible reason for enrolment and donor decisions.

Develop relationships with key staff

Ensure they understand how your role in the school can positively impact their effectiveness as educators. Make sure staff understand the goals and rationale for fundraising and how development supports them and their objectives for their students.



The role of the communication and marketing professional



Those responsible for communication – and that includes everyone – should focus their messages on the four key elements of an educational value proposition.

These provide the structure that will support nearly all internal and external messages about the school. Remember: when value is not understood, price decides.

Demonstrate and promote value

You demonstrate value when you can prove you are:

- Making a difference in those whose lives you touch (ROI).
- Pushing the envelope of good practice (innovative and transformative teaching and learning).
- Providing unique solutions to a family's needs (customer intimacy, connection and convenience).
- Stewarding resources and running an efficient organisation (cost-consciousness and stewardship).

Communication needs to continually reinforce and validate a family's decision to apply, enrol and stay with the school through to graduation.

Build an authentic, differentiated identity

A strong school identity, which fosters pride of association, is a critical factor in attracting and retaining families and donors. Make sure that everyone within the school can personalise and share their experiences around these six statements. The clearer you are, the more you will appeal to the families and students you can best serve.

- **Who we are**

- **Who we are not**

- **What we stand for**

- **What we will not stand for**

What behaviours or attitudes may weigh against a long-term relationship with the school?

- **Why we matter**

The 'why' must go beyond a typical mission statement or vision. This is the cause you represent that will rally supporters, so it needs to be a bold call to action that will compel both current and future families. If your school didn't exist, why would it need to be created?

- **Where we're headed**

This represents not only a clear future vision for the school, but also where you are taking the family. Describe the journey and experiences you are providing them, and the intended skills, values and attitudes you want to instil in their child – skills they will master when they graduate.

A strong school identity is a critical factor in attracting and keeping families and donors.

The role of finance and operations personnel

For far too long, business officers in schools have been an overlooked and underappreciated marketing resource. Is the business manager or CFO only responsible for collecting receivables?

Years ago, the stereotypical business manager was an accountant buried in financial records. Today, they are evaluated on a broad range of responsibilities and the business office has an impact on customer service that can either positively influence or derail the success of enrolment and development. In both boarding and day schools, the business office typically oversees maintenance and grounds, housekeeping, food services, parking, signage, security, safety and event management. These are all, ultimately, customer service functions.

Even behind the scenes, business managers and their staff play a major role with both prospective and current families, donors and other constituents.

Business officers, COOs or CFOs can advance the mission when they:

Understand school culture

Schools don't move as fast as the corporate world. More consensus, more collaboration, and more consultation with others is expected.

Explain the budget

Equate the budget with the quantification of the mission statement and explain it to others in the context of your mission and vision. Demonstrate how the budget supports the school's mission and vision.



Promote shared responsibility

Help everyone develop a sense of responsibility for the long-term financial health of the school. Act as a consultant to other offices to help them become more entrepreneurial. Provide them with the big picture and a long-term perspective. Meet with budget centres (enrolment, development, summer programs and others), and proactively provide them with monthly reports on their expenditures and expected revenue.

Inspire

Be a supportive leader, coach and problem solver. Pay attention and ask questions, not to interfere, but because you're excited about what others in the school are doing to advance the mission. Get involved in the school community by visiting classes and attending sporting events and performances. Change the stereotypical image of the business manager as the one who says 'no' to the one who works with others to find alternative ways to say 'yes'.

Lead by example by not allowing anyone to fall back on phrases such as, "It's not my job," "That's not the way we do it here," or "We've never done it that way before." Encourage business office employees to stay with a parent's call until the problem has been resolved rather than passing the caller to other offices.

Communicate

Ensure there is a communication plan in place to keep the business office connected. Work with the enrolment and development staff to help plan a master calendar that lists production schedules, recruitment and fundraising events, enrolment and re-enrolment events and deadlines, and other important functions. Use electronic calendars and shared databases when possible.

Invest in research

Promote marketing research as an investment in future revenue rather than an expense, helping to ensure the ongoing viability of the school's mission.

Pulling it all together

To make everyone's role in advancing the mission more than an aspiration, we need to think laterally, transcending our individual job descriptions and roles.

We need to encourage discussion about our various offices' needs, expectations and priorities. We need to listen to the pressures facing our colleagues. We need to be willing to pick up the balls others drop. We need to let our colleagues know that our objective is to help them succeed.

Ensure that everyone in the school understands their important role in advancing the mission. Our constituents – past, present and future – expect nothing less than extraordinary!

Collaboration requires institutional as well as personal self-confidence. We must intentionally look for ways to make connections with our colleagues that will support and reinforce their efforts toward our common goal – the advancement of the mission.

Your school's brand doesn't live in a logo. It doesn't live in your prospectus or on your website. These help communicate your brand, but they are limited tools. Your school's brand, identity and value live in the minds of those you seek to serve. Great word of mouth and pride of association – the best promotional tools ever – originate inside the school and move outward. They are influenced by the quality of relationships created by teaching staff, non-teaching staff, grounds and maintenance staff, campus heads, administrators, board members, parents, alumni and everyone in your extended community.

Ultimately, it's all about relationships. Families enrol and stay, alumni donate, and foundations support your school largely to the extent that you have formed strong personal bonds with them. A marketing initiative that conveys a desirable image to the public is valuable, but it is nothing compared to how people experience your school. It's what's inside that counts.

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