5 ways to level up your open day

image seven
insight applied

For many prospective families, an open day is the first time your school becomes real.

Until then, their impressions may have been shaped by a website, social media, recommendations from friends or a prospectus on the kitchen bench. An open day changes that. Families can walk the grounds, meet the people, watch students in action and begin to picture their own child as part of the community. That makes it much more than a tour of the facilities.

A strong open day should give families access to something they cannot get online. It should help answer the questions sitting behind the school-selection process: Will my child belong here? Will they be challenged? What does this school really value? Can I see the value in what is being offered? What would life here actually feel like?

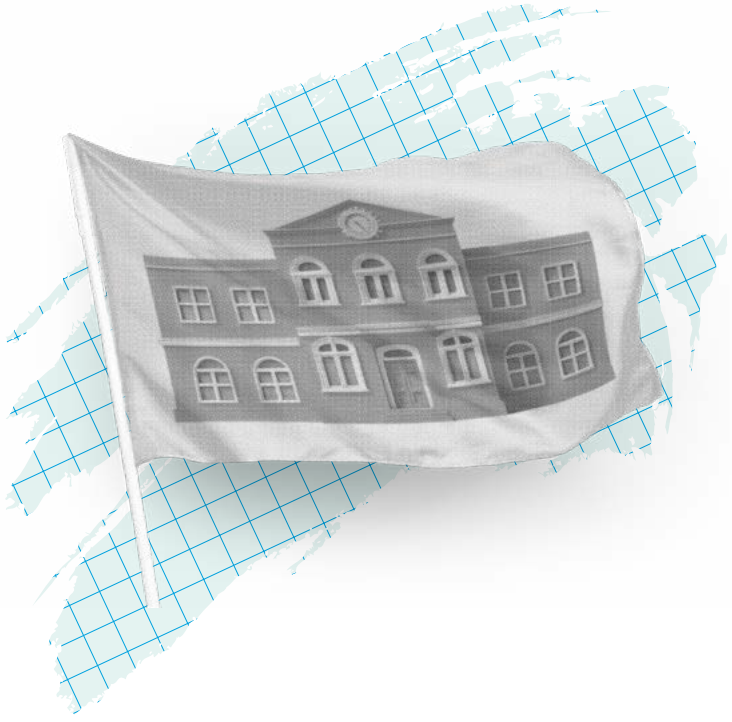
And, importantly, what should I do next?

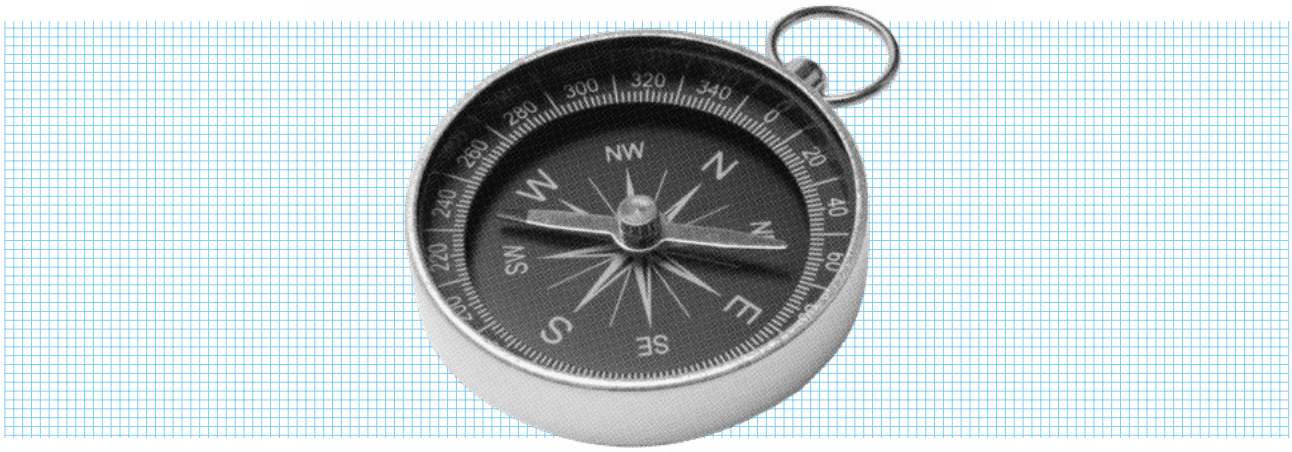
The most effective events are deliberately designed around those questions. That does not mean creating something elaborate or expensive. Often, the moments families remember are surprisingly simple: a candid conversation with a student, seeing a class come alive, hearing a compelling story from a current parent or having the Head stop for an unexpected chat.

It is not an isolated event in the enrolment journey, but it is one of the most important touchpoints.

The objective is not to put on a show. It is to give prospective families a genuine experience of your school.

Here are five ways to make that experience stronger.





1. Rethink the format

'That's the way we've always done it' is rarely a compelling reason to maintain a program or process. Schools encourage learning, curiosity and improvement every day. The same philosophy should extend to the way advancement, marketing and enrolments teams approach their events.

That does not mean changing a successful formula simply for the sake of novelty. If your current open day is attracting the right families, running smoothly and contributing positively to enrolment outcomes, there may be little reason for wholesale change. But when attendance is slipping, families are disengaged or the event feels indistinguishable from every other school tour in the area, it may be worth reconsidering the format.

There is no single model for an open day.

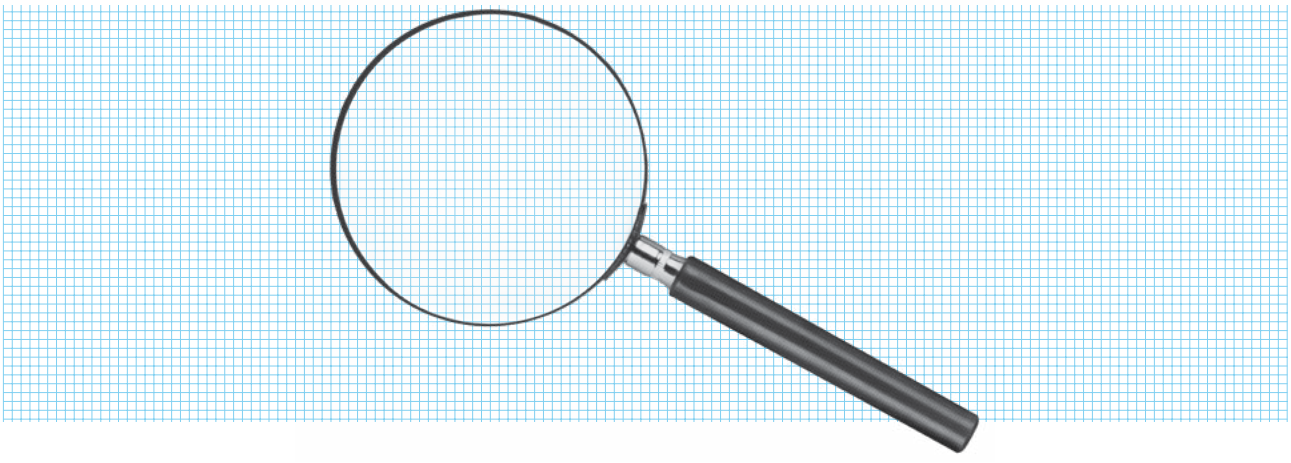
Whichever approach you choose should reflect your audience, resources and brand. If your school describes itself as highly personalised, academically ambitious, innovative, connected or community-focused, prospective families should be able to experience evidence of that during the day.

An expo-style event with information stalls can bring departments, programs and co-curricular opportunities together in one central location, allowing families to seek out the people and subjects most relevant to them. Alternatively, a school-day event can place greater emphasis on learning in action, with small groups visiting classrooms and seeing ordinary school life unfold rather than a specially staged version of it.

A self-guided 'choose your own adventure' approach gives families a map and the freedom to follow their interests, with staff and students stationed throughout the campus to answer questions. At the other end of the spectrum, some schools may benefit from a more formal event built around a strong presentation and Q&A that clearly communicates the school's educational proposition.

A weekend event might take on more of a fair or festival atmosphere, giving families time to move through the campus at their own pace while activities, performances and food encourage them to stay and explore. This can work particularly well when younger children and siblings are part of the audience.

When selecting a format for your open day, consider your audience, your capabilities, your brand and your goals. The characteristics of your event are themselves a message about your school.



2. Turn your promise into proof

Schools talk about opportunity, belonging, academic excellence, individual attention, breadth, character and community. An open day is your opportunity to move beyond saying those things and let families see them for themselves. Show, rather than tell.

School marketing is full of promises made real.

If creative and performing arts are a strength, let prospective families see student work displayed and encounter performances during their visit. If design, technology or practical learning matters to your proposition, allow students to demonstrate what they are making and explain the thinking behind it.

Create opportunities for participation where appropriate. Visitors might join a science demonstration, experience a short lesson, watch students debate an issue or take part in an activity connected to a particular subject area.

If your open day happens during an ordinary school day, you may not need to manufacture anything at all. Instead, identify classes where visitors can see lively discussion, collaboration or practical learning underway. Give students opportunities to explain what they are doing and why it matters.

Storytelling adds another layer.

A Head's presentation can explain the school's philosophy, but it does not need to carry the whole burden. A current or former student can show what that philosophy looks like in real life. A current parent can speak to the experience of making the same choice your prospective families are now considering.

Stories work particularly well when they are specific. Rather than simply saying students are supported and challenged, introduce families to someone whose experience demonstrates it.

The question to ask is simple: what evidence will families encounter during the day that substantiates the claims in your marketing?



3. Put students at the centre

Few people can explain your school quite like the students who experience it every day.

That makes students valuable well beyond the traditional role of standing at the front gate or pointing visitors towards the next building.

It matters because students themselves can play an important role in school choice – now more than ever. A 2025 *What Parents Want* survey from Independent Schools Queensland reports that 54 per cent of parents said their school choice was totally or highly influenced by their child's opinion.

Start by involving them in planning.

A group of student ambassadors can offer a perspective your marketing team cannot. Ask what they remember about choosing the school, what they think prospective students will care about and which parts of school life they would want visitors to experience.

On the day, give students meaningful jobs.

Let them demonstrate projects, perform, explain subjects and answer questions about daily school life. Encourage prospective students to speak directly with them rather than having every interaction mediated by an adult.

Students can also make excellent tour guides. School leaders and experienced ambassadors may be particularly comfortable speaking with groups, but authenticity matters more than polish. Prepare them well: explain the route, provide important factual information and make sure they understand what should be covered. Then allow them to talk naturally about their own experiences.

The objective is not to turn students into miniature marketing executives. Over-script them and you lose the thing that makes them persuasive in the first place.

A prospective family wants to hear what students enjoy, what challenges them, where they have found their place and what life at the school genuinely feels like. These perspectives can especially help potential students feel more confident that your school is a place they could see themselves, could belong.

Sometimes your strongest marketing message is simply a confident student who is happy to be there.



4. Make it personal

No prospective family arrives at an open day as a blank slate.

One may be looking for academic stretch. Another wants reassurance that their child will find friends. Another is interested in sport, music, a particular senior pathway or support during a transition year.

Yet schools often give all of those families exactly the same tour.

Registration data can help change that. Use your booking form to capture information that will genuinely improve the experience: anticipated year of entry, year level, particular subjects or activities of interest and areas the family would most like to understand.

That information can help you allocate families to smaller, more relevant groups. The simplest version might separate primary and secondary visitors. More sophisticated events could offer pathways around specialist interests, senior subject options or particular aspects of the school experience.

Personalisation does not have to involve redesigning the entire event for every attendee. Often, one thoughtful interaction is enough.

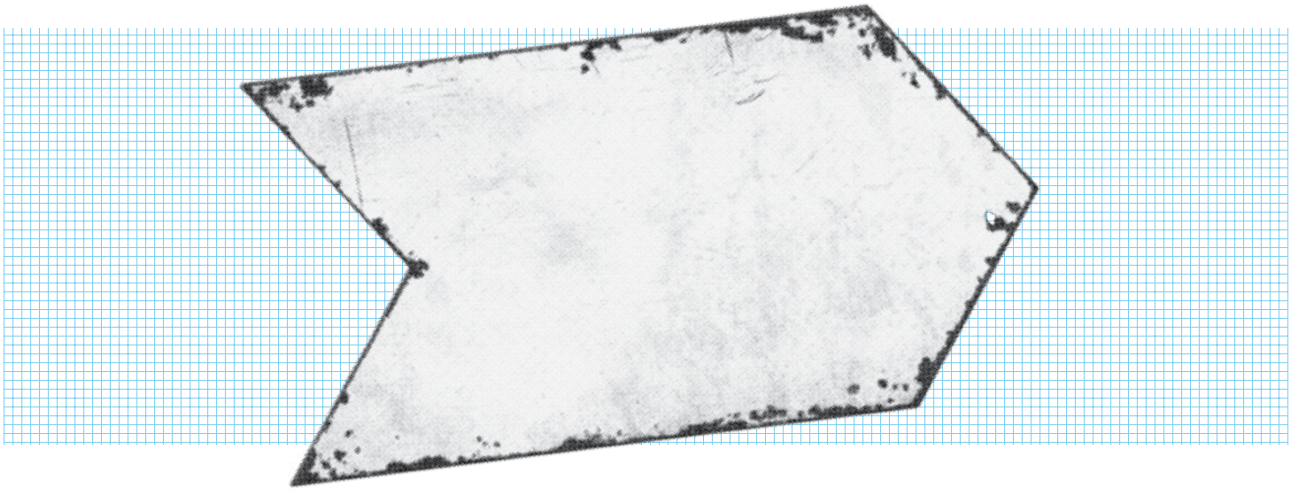
If a prospective student has indicated a strong interest in drama, perhaps someone involved in the current production can take a few minutes to show them backstage. A family interested in a specialist program might be introduced directly to the relevant teacher. Someone with questions about a particular transition point might meet a current student who recently experienced it.

At a large event you will not be able to create these moments for everyone. That is no reason not to create them where you can.

Even something as traditional as a name tag can help. It makes it easier for staff to address visitors personally and remember previous conversations. Colour coding could also help identify broad year-level or interest groups if that suits the structure of your event.

Just as importantly, capture useful information from those conversations. When staff identify particular interests, questions or strong enrolment signals, a simple method of recording them can make subsequent follow-up far more relevant than a generic 'thanks for attending' email.

Personalisation begins before the family arrives and should continue after they leave.



5. Smooth the process

A brilliant presentation will not compensate for an event that is difficult to book, confusing to navigate or frustrating to attend.

Review the entire experience from the prospective parent's point of view – and start well before they reach your front gate.

Can they easily find the event on your website? Is the purpose of the event clear? Is registration simple? Do they receive an immediate confirmation? Can they add it to their calendar? Do they know what time to arrive, how long they will be there and where to park?

These details may seem mundane compared with presentations and performances, but they shape the experience.

Before the event, give families the practical information they need without making them hunt for it. If parking is limited, tell them. If they should arrive 15 minutes before a presentation, say so. If coffee, food or activities for siblings will be available, let them know.

On arrival, make check-in quick and painless. Test digital systems properly in advance and have a contingency if they fail. If you are checking people in manually, make sure the staffing reflects the expected volume.

Then walk the route yourself. Is the signage clear to someone who has never visited the campus? Does the map make sense without insider knowledge? At every decision point, will a visitor know where to go next?

Pay just as much attention to the end of the experience.

Schools often invest heavily in arrival and the main tour, then allow the event to peter out. Think carefully about the final 15 minutes. Where will families finish? Who will be available to answer lingering questions? Are enrolments staff positioned to speak with families who are ready to take the next step?

Most importantly, does every visitor know what that next step is?

You might also give families something physical to take home — a prospectus, enrolment information or another useful reminder of their visit. If cost or sustainability makes printed collateral less attractive, a small card or magnet directing families to a useful digital resource may achieve the same objective with less waste.

Digital follow-up remains essential, but the principle is broader: make it easy to remember you, easy to reconnect and easy to act.

Make the experience matter

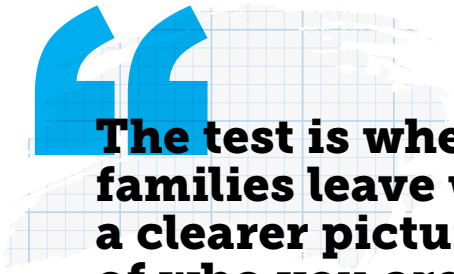
After the banners have come down and the last tour group has left, there are some useful questions to ask:

- What will families talk about in the car on the way home?
- Will they talk about the buildings they saw, or the people they met?
- Will they remember a long list of programs, or the student who spoke passionately about one of them?
- Will they leave knowing more about your school, or actually understanding what makes it different?

A great open day does not need to be bigger, louder or more elaborate than the one before it. Levelling up is not necessarily about adding more. Sometimes it means removing friction. Sometimes it means giving students more of the microphone. Sometimes it means showing rather than telling. And sometimes it means reconsidering an event structure that has gone unquestioned for years.

The test is whether families leave with a clearer picture of who you are, confidence about what their child could experience there and an obvious next step if they want to continue the conversation.

Give them privileged access to the real school. Then make that experience worth remembering.



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Are you getting the best out of your enquiries?

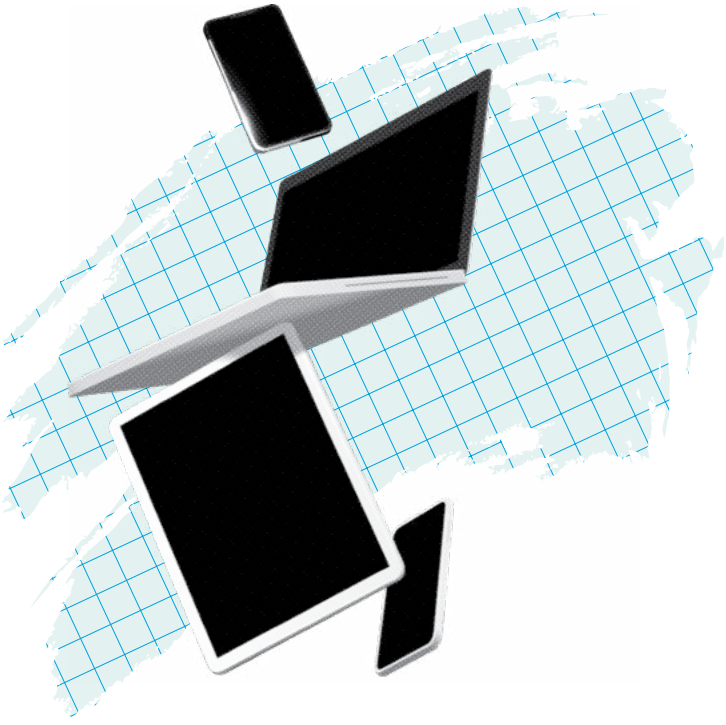
Unsure whether your enrolment experience is meeting the mark? An outside perspective can reveal friction points that are difficult to see from inside the school.

imageseven offers Mystery Shop Reviews designed to examine the prospective parent experience from enquiry through to engagement with the school.

An Online Mystery Shop Review examines the prospective family enquiry journey, including the online experience, communications and service they encounter.

An In-Person Mystery Shop Review, available in selected Australian states, includes the same components as the digital review, as well as attendance at an open day or school tour to assess the experience first hand.

If you're interested in a Mystery Shop Review, email hello@imageseven.com.au for more information.



contact us

imageseven

1 outridge crescent
subiaco wa 6008
+61 8 6500 7777

hello@imageseven.com.au
imageseven.com.au

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