

Tailoring the Parent Experience

A Journey to Enrollment Success

BY CHUCK ENGLISH



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Everyone at your school is responsible for the parent experience because it is shaped by every interaction that parents have with your school.

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INTRODUCTION

When new parents register with your school and make all the appropriate financial arrangements, what have they bought?

You might answer by saying, “An education for their child.” While that would not be incorrect, there is much more at play. If we accept the premise that sales are a transfer of emotion, we would be led to concepts like hope, potential, or dreams as the objects of a parent’s buying decision. Those are much closer to the heart of the matter, but what’s missing is the vehicle by which they are delivered.

All of the emotion—validation, frustration, challenge, pride, and support—as well as all of the functional benefits—knowledge, perspective, character development, and future choices—are part and parcel of the experience a parent has with your school. In fact, when prospective parents conduct their research with your current parents, teachers, and alumni, what they are really finding out about is the experience that each of those stakeholders has had with your school.

What are the components of the parent experience, and what steps should you be taking to ensure that you’re providing the best, most comprehensive experience possible? In this eBook, I’ll outline how you can create an experience that builds parent satisfaction, fuels positive word of mouth, and drives recruitment and retention results.

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CHAPTER

01

Putting More
Focus on the
Parent Experience

Considering other buying decisions that consumers make may be helpful in understanding the importance of the parent experience. For example, people don't buy smartphones simply for the functional benefits they provide. Purchases are made on the basis of anticipated experiences, like enhanced travel, exercise, communication, and even parenting. In their advertising, brands like Apple® focus on those experiences as opposed to more functional, competitive factors, like better construction, electronics, or durability.

According to Patti Williams, associate professor of marketing at [The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania](#), “Typically, [marketers are] concerned with identifying and selling the best features and attributes of a product for a particular target market, but don't stop at features. Instead, think about the experience those features will deliver to consumers, and think about features that you might not have considered very important before.” She suggests going deeper than the competitive advantages connected with various attributes and exploring how you are pertinent to customers—what do customers really want? What goals and needs do they have?

Perhaps more to the point, companies like Nordstrom®, Zappos®, and Amazon® view positive customer experiences as an integral part of the product they offer. There is an ever-present focus on meeting and exceeding customer expectations. Not surprisingly, companies that focus on the customer experience generally fare better in both consumer perceptions and sales.






Why? Consider this perspective from strategy and consulting firm Bain & Company[®]: “The logic that connects [the] customer experience to bottom-line results is simple. If people love doing business with you, they become promoters.” The firm explains that promoters are customers every company wants more of because they’re less likely to desert the company, they buy a greater number of products and services over time, and they speak positively about the company to their peers and through all channels.

How does this relate back to your school? Because your parents are your customers.

Schools have typically eschewed business models because of the valid fear that the integrity of the educational product they are offering is compromised when it’s subject to the whims of the marketplace. However, independent schools find themselves in increasingly competitive positions, having to battle with charter schools, magnet schools, public schools, and other private schools. Accepting that parents have—and are availing themselves of—many educational choices demands an approach that sees parents as consumers and is inherently more customer focused. Beyond that, schools that view parents as customers not only improve recruitment results, but also increase parent satisfaction rates and advance retention results. Interestingly, this approach is not at odds with a school’s core principles. In fact, it is enhanced by promoting the school’s mission, vision, and philosophy.

The final argument in the case for adopting an approach that is focused on the parent experience is that consumers are demanding and receiving customer-focused interactions with other companies and organizations, whether those are banks, utilities, governments, consumer products companies, or even colleges. Consumers aren’t paying extra for this type of attention. Rather, businesses and organizations see it as the cost of doing business in competitive markets. Considering what parents are willing to pay each year for their child’s education, we can see how there is often a perceived gap between the tuition paid and the experience received. Factor in the reality that new parents are increasingly millennials and are more concerned with included benefits, and it is clear that to maintain enrollment success, independent schools today have no choice but to focus on the parent experience.

A photograph of a woman with long brown hair hugging a young child with freckles. They are outdoors, possibly on a beach, with a blurred background of water and sky. The image has a green-to-blue gradient overlay.

CHAPTER
02

Defining the
Parent Experience

If we are going to explore the parent experience, we need to know what it is. Wikipedia[®] defines customer experience as “the product of an interaction between an organization and a customer over the duration of their relationship. This interaction is made up of three parts: the customer journey, the brand touchpoints the customer interacts with, and the environments the customer experiences (including the digital environment) during their experience. A good customer experience means that the individual’s experience during all points of contact matches the individual’s expectations.”

Translating that into the independent school setting might sound like this: Parent experience is the sum of all experiences at various touchpoints a parent has with a school over the duration of their relationship with that school. This can include awareness and investigation through online channels, including social media and websites; inquiry, visitation, tours, registration, and tuition; contact with teachers, educational leaders, and administrators; attendance at assemblies and programs; and interaction with other parents and parent leaders.

The parent experience is all-encompassing. It is the composite of every interaction a parent has with or within a school.

The parent experience is all-encompassing. It is the composite of every interaction a parent has with or within a school. But there is a dimension to the parent experience that we have yet to deal with—it’s subjective. The experience is in the eye of the beholder. Adapting a definition from Forrester[®], we can now say that the parent experience is “how parents perceive their interactions with your school.” In other words, to really get a handle on the parent experience in your school, you have to step into the shoes of your parents and see it through their eyes.

But what about the student experience?

When parents choose a school for their child, it’s really a situation where the parent is the customer, but not the user. However, the experience of the student (the user) will have a profound impact on the perceived experience of the parent. The parent’s experience is influenced by their early contact leading to registration and by all of their interactions as a parent of a student and as part of the school community. If a child is learning and developing in the way and to the degree that was anticipated, the parent experience will be positively affected. When a parent chooses a school, they are anticipating both their child’s experience at the school and their own. In many ways, the student experience is a part of the parent experience.



CHAPTER
03

Attributes of the
Parent Experience

With that in mind, we can ask: What do we want the parent experience to be? Clearly we want it to be positive, but what are the attributes that would create that positive parent experience? Here are five to consider:

1. Validating

In every interaction, you want parents to feel like they made the right choice in sending their child to your school. This doesn't mean that you can't have challenging conversations with a parent, but it does mean that those moments should be supportive and not adversarial. In your partnership with parents, you might not always agree, but you have to make certain that they know you are on their side.

2. Consistent

The overarching message should always be the same. Interactions should be mission and brand-based. While different touchpoints will create the need for different interactions, parents should always have the sense that they are reflective of the same school. The meeting with the business office should mirror the same principles as the initial visit to the website or the parent-teacher conference.

3. Engaging and Empowering

You want parents to feel like they are part of the process of educating their child and part of the school community to whatever degree they are prepared to commit. Beyond that, you want parents to be capable and motivated ambassadors for your school. Their experience should be inviting, informative, and inspiring.

4. Respectful

At every turn, it's essential to remember that parents are paying to send their child to your school. On a deeper level, there is a sacred trust that parents convey in allowing a school to educate their child. All of this requires a deep level of respect from the school toward the parents, which includes the willingness to listen and the patience to empathize. That respect should be obvious in everything from social media posts to contact with the front office staff.

5. Personal and Relevant

While parents may become active or generous members of your school community, you can never forget that their primary concerns are their child and themselves. For example, the discussion accompanying the initial visit should clearly relate to the child and allow parents to imagine what it would be like to have their child at your school. Likewise, the best school assemblies or programs allow parents to witness something about their own child's progress.

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CHAPTER
04

Developing the
Parent Experience

A parent experience that embodies these attributes doesn't happen by accident; it doesn't just fall into place. Let's look at the steps necessary to creating a positive parent experience:

1. Defining and Designing

You have to start by articulating the attributes you want the parent experience to have. This almost requires a kind of backward engineering. In order to arrive at interactions that exude these desired qualities, thought has to be put into each of them. This will likely happen sequentially over time, but each interaction must be looked at from the parent perspective and thoughtfully planned and designed.

2. Training

It's not reasonable to expect that administrators, faculty, staff, and parent leaders will intuitively know how to create parent experiences that meet the aforementioned criteria. Meeting those conditions may require scripts, talking points, or even role-playing. It's also likely that faculty will require specific processes that establish respect for the educational process while demonstrating the need for a positive and uniform parent experience.

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3. Aligning Your Organization

Every department—from marketing and communications to IT, new media, and the business office—must have a common understanding of the parent experience your school wants to deliver. Unanticipated circumstances will arise and will require responses that must be governed by a common understanding of the target parent experience. Your school should be prepared for these circumstances.

4. Engaging Your Stakeholders

There has to be buy-in from staff members and lay leaders. They all need to agree on the importance of creating a positive parent experience and be prepared to contribute. Even more to the point, you want them to be part of the process, to help develop the mechanisms and have a sense of responsibility for their success.

5. Communicating

To be successful, you need feedback mechanisms so parents can tell you how they perceive their experience. Likewise, you need to capture the opinions of those on the front lines, such as teachers, coaches, and advisors. What are they hearing in response to attempts to create the right experience? Outbound communication detailing successes and challenges is equally important.

6. Defining Expectations

What do parents want from their experience with your school? What do they dream their children will become? What do they want most from faculty or from the administrative staff? To develop a parent experience that is focused on what parents really want, it's essential to be able to answer these questions.

7. Using Metrics

To be strategic, it's critical to assess whether efforts to create a positive parent experience are being successful. This will likely require some kind of survey mechanism, but could include focus groups, informal conversations, and social media monitoring. Clear documentation is key to establishing whether parents perceive any change. To be effective, metrics need to be outlined in advance.

A photograph of two young women with long dark hair, smiling and looking at a laptop screen. They are sitting on a light-colored carpet. The woman on the left is pointing at the screen. The background is a bright, indoor setting with a window and a plant. The image has a green-to-blue gradient overlay.

CHAPTER
05

The Parent
Experience
Journey Map

Many organizations that focus on the customer experience actually map the customer's journey from initial contact to satisfied customer. Schools would be wise to create a parent experience journey map that charts the journey a parent takes from initial investigation to becoming a past parent.

Let's take a detailed look at how the parent experience might be reflected at various points along the parent experience journey map. We used some of the nomenclature normally found in literature about the customer experience and punctuated this section with descriptions of best practices being used at various independent schools.

DISCOVERY AND RECRUITMENT

From the very first point of contact, parents should begin to sense what their experience at your school will be.

1. First Contact

The most likely first points of contact with your school are its website, social media platforms, and in some cases, a phone call. This means that each of these channels should reflect the experience a parent can expect for their child and themselves.

2. Personal Contact

Once parents are on campus, the stakes are raised and the potential to provide a clearer picture of the school experience also increases.





SPOTLIGHT: BEST PRACTICE

Proctor Academy is a coeducational day and boarding school in Andover, New Hampshire. Scott Allenby, the school's director of communications and marketing, says that his team has gone to great lengths to ensure that the school's website and the entire admissions process communicates an authentic perception of Proctor. The school's blog, The Buzz, presents an effective glimpse into school life and the principles upon which the school is run. One of Proctor's unique qualities is that it offers academic experiences customized to each student's needs and interests: There are no tracks. The admissions section of the website and the inquiry form in particular brilliantly reflect this aspect of Proctor Academy is a coeducational day and boarding school in Andover, New Hampshire. Scott Allenby, the school's director of communications and marketing, says that his team has gone to great lengths to ensure that the school's website and the entire admissions process communicates an authentic perception of Proctor.

Sewickley Academy[®] is an exemplary prekindergarten through grade 12 school in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. While Brendan Schneider, the director of advancement, has assembled an impressive inbound marketing program, one component stands out in terms of conveying the Sewickley experience. The follow-up to an online inquiry involves a number of emails. In the first, recipients are provided with a link to a document titled "27 Questions to Help You Evaluate a School for Your Child." That's an empathetic approach to the challenges parents face in choosing a school. However, in the next email, prospective parents can download a document that provides the Sewickley response to each of the 27 questions, covering topics ranging from tuition and athletics to academics and support services. The emails that follow increasingly focus on the Sewickley experience, with access to documents—such as "Reflections on Our Mission and Core Values" and the "Academic Program Chart"—and blog posts that explain the details and benefits of the academic program.

3. Validation

The impact of word of mouth is well documented in generating inquiries, but its greater value could be in what happens after the visit. Parents want to ensure that the tour wasn't just a sales pitch and that the school walks the talk.

For example, at Second Baptist School, current parents personally invite prospective parents to a variety of admissions events, opening important lines of communication in conveying the Second Baptist School experience.

4. Decision Support

Once parents have chosen your school, it would be wise to make them part of the school experience well before their children attend their first day. You can ensure that they are subscribed to e-newsletters and have access to the parent section of the website, and parents and their children can be invited to participate in school events.



SPOTLIGHT: BEST PRACTICE

Houston's Second Baptist School services more than 1,100 students from prekindergarten through grade 12. Andrea Prothro, the director of admissions, feels that it's vital to have the admissions process be a reflection of the school experience. For example, the school's focus on technology dictates that the admissions process must mirror that focus in its use of the Internet and social media. Second Baptist School's tours and visits are brilliantly planned to showcase the school experience, and there are three aspects especially worthy of consideration. In the upper school, prospective students are invited to participate in everything from arts exhibits and music concerts to athletic practices and game-day experiences. Parent shadow days are offered so parents can appreciate the school day from a student's perspective, and the day culminates with a roundtable with administrators. Finally, every tour visits a bible class to emphasize the value the school places on Christian education. Prospective Second Baptist parents and students are quite obviously given a clear picture of the Second Baptist School experience.

ONBOARDING

The early interactions that parents and their children have with your school are critical in establishing the quality of the experience.

1. Orientation

First experiences at a school are confusing and often overwhelming for both the parents and their child. What can you do to be empathetic and ease the transition? An orientation video would be a great idea and an opportunity to creatively introduce the school experience.

2. Mentorship

Nothing can replace one-on-one interaction as a way of calming parents and making students less anxious. Relationships are a huge part of the school experience, so carefully choosing mentors and matching them to new families is critical.

3. The Tuition and Business Office


There is probably nothing more stressful for a parent than dealing with the financial aspects of independent school education. That includes tuition, any first-time fees, student activity fees,

and—most likely—a request to support the annual fund. Interaction with the business office is an integral part of the parent experience, and unfortunately, the expectation is that it's probably not going to be positive. The extent to which staff in the office can be calm, understanding, and patient might be a huge surprise to parents, and has the potential to have a large impact in their satisfaction.

4. Early Educational Contact

The most effective and influential conveyors of the school experience are your faculty members. Their early contact with parents is formative in establishing a positive relationship with your school. You would be wise to provide opportunities for faculty to have significant input into your deliberations about the parent experience and to maintain effective communication channels.

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SCHOOL LIFE AND RETENTION

1. Key Moments

While every interaction will to some extent shape the parent experience, there are critical moments in school life that will have a larger influence than others.

- **Events, Ceremonies, and Assemblies**

Some heads of school refer to these as tuition-validating opportunities, and they aren't wrong. These are often emotion-infused moments, and beyond ensuring that they are well organized and wonderfully presented, it is worth it to put yourself in the parents' shoes. Think about what they want to see. Is there an opportunity for students to demonstrate individual achievement? Are there common themes in all similar programs that consistently convey the school experience?

- **Parent-Teacher Conferences**

By nature, parent-teacher conferences are difficult meetings. Parents almost always feel that there is not enough time, and teachers have the challenge of being open with parents without being negative and while still providing meaningful information. But this is a very significant touchpoint and, to whatever extent possible, the experience should be considered and planned strategically. While leaving the actual conferences to the educators, you can calm nerves by doing things like having greeters at the front doors, attendants outside each classroom to welcome parents, a place for parents to meet and mingle, and educational administrators available for discussion.

- **Problem Resolution**

These are the moments when you want to ensure that your educational leaders understand the parent experience initiative. There is probably no greater potential for a parent-school relationship to go sour than when parents must discuss a problem

2. Communication

You can't be too expansive in thinking about communication. Everything—from e-newsletters to classroom communications and letters from the business office—is an interaction point that sets the tone of a parent's experience. Online channels, like your school's website and social media pages, also have to be consistently aligned. Be strategic and ensure that you have developed and put in place messaging that reflects the desired experience.

3. Front Office Contact

This area is so often overlooked, but the reality is that your school's front office staff is its first impression. It's also the hub for frantic parents, sick students, and busy teachers. These are all reasons to ensure that your front office staff members understand their role in shaping the parent experience and what they can do to make it better. Professional development sessions on customer service for administrative staff are one idea, but you would also be wise to involve frontline personnel in early discussions regarding experience. They probably see and hear way more than you do.


4. Student Progress

Anything related to how a child is progressing will be of great interest to parents and represents an important interaction point. Report cards and progress reports have to meet educational standards, but also convey important messages about the school and its relationship with parents. Documents, like guides that accompany report cards, similarly contribute to the parent experience. To be clear, this isn't saying that communication regarding student progress should be marketing-driven, but the degree to which it affects a parent's perceived relationship with the school can't be overstated.

5. Celebrations of Success

All achievements—whether they are athletic, academic, artistic, or communal, and whether they represent the whole school, a class, a team, a club, or individual students or teachers—are outstanding opportunities to make statements about the parent experience. Be sure to congratulate on collective and individual bases and widely communicate successes.

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CONCLUSION

TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE PARENT EXPERIENCE

Now that we have detailed the parent experience and its many facets, who should be responsible for tailoring and implementing the parent experience at your school?

On one level, everyone at your school is responsible for the parent experience because it is shaped by every interaction that parents have with your school. This means that every person with whom parents have contact should understand the implications of their relationships with parents. Beyond that, making the parent experience a priority requires multidepartment involvement and cooperation. You may want to create a parent experience committee with representation from multiple staff and lay stakeholder groups. Bringing together a multidisciplinary group will ensure a more holistic and consistent approach.

However, the reality is that it will take the active involvement and leadership of the head of your school to truly transform the parent experience. Only the head of your school has the reach and credibility to raise the prominence of the parent experience and demand accountability from every department and each staff member. It is only with the influence and authority that this individual brings to the table—as well as his or her knowledge, experience, and judgment—that a positive and pervasive parent experience can be established.

The days of independent school marketing being confined to a small list of tasks within a well-defined department are gone. Marketing happens everywhere—in meetings, online, in the carpool line, in the business office, and even in interactions with custodians. Every staff person and lay leader within your school has a marketing role to play. While taking this approach is much more challenging, taking the broad view has the greatest potential to create a parent experience that will positively influence enrollment results.

WORKSHEET:

The Parent Experience Journey Map

Many organizations that focus on the customer experience actually map their customer's journey from initial contact to satisfied customer. Your school can do the same thing by creating a parent experience journey map that charts the journey a parent takes from initial investigation to student graduation. Use this worksheet to brainstorm how the parent experience might be reflected at various points along your school's parent experience journey.

DISCOVERY/ RECRUITMENT	ONBOARDING	SCHOOL LIFE/ RETENTION	STAYING CONNECTED
<i>First Contact</i>	<i>Orientation</i>	<i>Key Moments</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Events, Ceremonies, and Assemblies • Parent-Teacher Conferences • Problem Resolution 	<i>Graduation</i>
<i>Personal Contact</i>	<i>Mentorship</i>	<i>Communication</i>	<i>Milestones and Life Cycle Events</i>
<i>Validation</i>	<i>The Tuition and Business Office</i>	<i>Front Office Contact</i>	
<i>Decision Support</i>	<i>Early Educational Contact</i>	<i>Student Progress</i>	
		<i>Celebrations of Success</i>	
CONCEPTUALIZE THE PARENT EXPERIENCE JOURNEY MAP FOR YOUR SCHOOL BELOW			

About the Author

Chuck English helps independent schools improve enrollment results by providing strategic branding, marketing, communications, and creative services. He has worked with many schools in the United States and Canada, and has presented his ideas at numerous conferences, workshops, and webinars, as well as in white papers and [his blog](#). Chuck is the driving force behind [English Marketing Works](#), a firm that has helped schools, businesses, and fundraising organizations achieve strategic goals through outstanding marketing and creative initiatives. He is also the coauthor of *The Philanthropic Mind*, a book based on comprehensive interviews with Canada's top philanthropists. Chuck's business experience is complemented by a strong record of community involvement, having served in leadership positions and on the boards of many organizations. He can be contacted at chuck@englishmarketingworks.com.



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