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ready-to-use NEWS

Marketing your online programs

Motivated students can learn anything anywhere through online education programs. Research indicates that today's students — Generation Z and the younger, upcoming Generation Alpha — either prefer online programs or regularly supplement instruction with online resources.

Schools understand that online programs are an important option for students — either through their own districts or through partners that offer aligned curriculum.

According to data from a teacher and principal survey, 21% of schools offered courses that were entirely online and not part of a physical school. The rate, from 2015-16, continues to climb by about 5% per year. <http://bit.ly/2PtWZN7>

Marketing your programs to students and families

Online education offers many benefits. These programs have special appeal to students who are seeking greater challenges, out of school due to illness, expelled for discipline, working, required to meet family obligations, or just seeking an alternative to the traditional high school experience. And the truth is that they do not have to enroll in programs in your district. The online classroom is accessible everywhere.

Your district should keep your students in your programs to help ensure that they can have a seamless transition back to your buildings, if they desire, or to allow a hybrid education that combines both physical and cyber instruction. And to keep the school funding in your schools.

The marketing plan

Your digital programs should be part of your marketing plan. Treat them like you would any of your schools, with a little boost to get them started and build an identity. They may not need a school mascot, but they should have a brand identifier — a school name and logo that is connected to the district and visible on district channels. There should not be any question from potential students and their families about where these programs are and who is in charge of them.

Although there are general best practices for communicating about virtual courses, it all boils down to identifying target audiences and tailoring your messages to each group. Is your online program mostly aimed at enrichment for high-performers? Is it for credit-deficient students at risk of dropping out? Are there offerings for both?

High school staff should be armed with brochures for meetings with credit-deficient students and their parents. All pertinent information should be on one page that can be left with the

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families of students who are considering dropping out or who have already dropped. Online courses may be just the approach they need to succeed after they have struggled in the traditional high-schools setting. In these materials, stress all the supports available to students and all the benefits of gaining credits with flexible schedules.

The competition for online students is greater than brick-and-mortar buildings, so it makes sense to budget for additional marketing. Inside Digital Learning, part of Inside Higher Ed (<http://bit.ly/2PmiYk6>), interviewed marketing officials for online university programs. The unsurprising recommendations are that digital campaigns work best, allowing analytics that show whether messages resonate with potential students.

Social media is also key to reaching interested students. Universities that want to reach non-traditional students may focus on Facebook ads for this older demographic. School districts may want to consider marketing through Snapchat or Instagram for their younger student audience.

Marketing messages

What do you want your audience to know about your programs? A key message is that online courses are more about student options than technology tools. Keep the focus on the students and teachers instead of the technology.

You want to attract students, but you also need to reach their parents. Messages that appeal to students and the adults responsible for them will also help you gain support from your school board and the community at large, who may not be familiar with or supportive of this education technologies.

Make sure they understand how these programs operate. Students still attend class, just not physically. They still work under the supervision of a trained teacher. Online programs don't take the human element out of teaching. Rather, they use technology to make the human interaction between student and teacher more accessible by breaking down barriers of time and place.

Regardless of the type of student you are targeting, there are a few points that should be emphasized in order to overcome reluctance on the part of students and their parents.

Avoid jargon

When spreading the word about your online courses, avoid focus on the names of products, technologies and software packages. Those unfamiliar names can lead your customers far afield from the real value in your courses — learning.

Be clear that online programs help students meet graduation or learning goals

Avoid the temptation to trumpet online courses as something new and different. Instead, present your internet courses as an integrated part of your high school program. Show them as just one of many options for students who need to earn credits toward graduation.

Talk about the teachers

To the unfamiliar, these courses may seem to be “made up” by computer geeks instead of teachers. Emphasize that they are subject to the same level of rigor and oversight as regular

courses. List all accreditations that apply.

Promote the quality of your teachers. Put their photos and quotes from teachers that emphasize real adults who care about kids using computers to interact with students. Use photos of parents meeting and interacting with students in person because that is a key part of online learning.

Describe the “classroom” environment

Many adults picture online courses like the computerized tests at the DMV. They envision a student sitting alone, clicking through screen after screen as his mind wanders. Be sure to describe the interactive nature of online classes. Be clear that there is a teacher and there are other students communicating and interacting with each other. The computer doesn't teach. A teacher does.

Tell them where to get technical and academic help

Parents and students may fear a lack of support — academic and technical. Be sure to show how students are supported in their coursework: discussion groups, phone conversations with the teacher and face-to-face meetings with students. Dedicate a phone line for technical support and promote it online and in your publications.

Address myths about rigor and integrity

Be sure to talk about rigor. There may be a mistaken belief that online courses are easier to pass and easier to cheat on. Communicate the rigor and supervision of the programs. Just as with regular classes, the teacher monitors attendance, attitude, citizenship and quality of work. Consider adding quotes to your materials from teachers talking about how they monitor classes and encourage students to do their own work. Let the public know that courses are structured to minimize cheating, and it is no more prevalent than in traditional classes.

Contributed by Marcia Latta, communications consultant