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The Emergent Catholic School Brand

A Galloping Momentum

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Dear Friends and Colleagues in Catholic Education:

In his brilliantly written exposition, *The Evolution of Everything*, British author Matt Ridley recently proposed that all of life and culture, including our most cherished institutions and religions, are in a perpetual state of change, and that all of this fascinating evolution is “the result of human action but not human design.” There is no master plan or omnipotent wizard at the controls, and we are where we are, he argues, by “accidental, unplanned, emergent stuff that gradually evolves.”

Such a fortuitous and splendid predicament seems to exist for many of our Catholic schools today. It is my belief, based on numerous consultancies, board room conversations, and anecdotal observations that many high performing Catholic schools are at such an exciting and promising “emergent” place today – ready to burst forth and dominate their markets!

A powerful new Catholic school brand is emerging almost spontaneously in communities across the country. Uncoordinated and with no master at the switch, this new emergent brand is built organically on three common elements shared by every high performing Catholic school:

- An unapologetic celebration of Catholic identity and mission
- A genuinely welcoming and inclusive community ethos
- An unwavering focus on the quality of the student experience in all its facets -- academic, spiritual, social, co-curricular – but with particular emphasis on academic rigor appropriate to the needs and capacity of each student.

Note the emphasis on rigor “appropriate to the needs and capacity of each student.” You can be a high performing Catholic institution doing exceptional work with moderately performing students. But you need to be capable of demonstrating the added value outputs of your various interventions.

If we could write the script and hang an expressive banner over the entrance lobby of these remarkable schools, it would carry the same uplifting message to visitors:

Welcome to our wonderful Catholic school!
- We are a premier, high performing institution
- With a joyful and faith-filled Catholic identity at our core
- And we are proudly welcoming of students and families from all faith traditions

This is a powerful value proposition and unbeatable market position.

To join this distinguished club, Catholic schools will need to be able to make the case – credibly and persuasively – that they are truly operating in an environment of best practice, and that their academic outcomes and standards are every bit the equivalent of the highest performing peer institutions in their markets. This is the greatest challenge. You must be able to make the case. But if you can do this and remain true to your Catholic identity and welcoming ethos, the future belongs to you.

How Did We Get Here?

Let me suggest that the reason for this emergent market position is a serendipitous confluence of several factors:

1. As I have referenced in other articles ([Fundraiser vs. Institution Builder](#), [Mirror or Lamp](#)), more and more American families – Catholic and non-Catholic alike – are expressing urgent concern about the coarsening of our American culture and the increasing secularization of our society. Our First Amendment freedom “of” religion has been perverted to freedom “from” religion. Prayer is no longer permissible in the public square, and faith is demeaned as a quaint and peculiar habit of the uneducated and superstitious in our society. The barbarians are not only at the gate but in control of the airwaves and our public spaces. Catholic schools today are among the only places where spirituality and ethical values can be openly explored, embraced, and celebrated.
2. Families have also become prudent, research-based consumers and demand high performance from their schools. They know the difference and they demand results. According to our research at Carney, Sandoe & Associates, 86% of families today choose a Catholic secondary school education for their children because of the equally aligned, twin elements of high academic performance built on a welcoming foundation of Catholic mission and identity. And this includes non-Catholic families. This is a major shift in consumer emphasis. A generation ago, families chose Catholic schools primarily for their apostolic mission and gospel values and not for their academic rigor. One without the other is no longer sufficient.
3. In addition, while families of all faiths may be declining in formal religious affiliations, they are holding fast to their abiding belief in a powerful transcendent reality. (Pew Research) They don’t necessarily attend church or temple with any regularity, but they know in their hearts that there is more to life than getting and spending, and they seek a high quality, belief-centered experience for their children. For these families, Catholic schools are rapidly becoming the educational institutions of choice – the only place where such spiritual reflection and practice are welcome. And it is happening spontaneously and exuberantly all across the country. Currently and on average, 35% to 40% of students in Catholic schools self-identify as non-Catholic. And the number is growing – in some schools as high as 70%.

This is the educational experience families of all faiths want for their children. This is core to the powerful value proposition of Catholic schools today. But to earn the continued trust and confidence of families, you must be genuinely committed to inclusiveness and you must be able to demonstrate best practice in teaching and learning along with extraordinary satisfaction and achievement in all facets of the student experience.

Making the Case As a High Performing Catholic School

Here are a few modest suggestions as you reflect on your market position and current status as a potential high performing Catholic school. These recommendations are based on our research at Carney, Sandoe & Associates as well as my experience consulting with dozens of Catholic schools over the last seven years:

Catholic Identity as Welcoming and Respectful Ethos

High performing Catholic schools unabashedly celebrate their Catholic identity and ideals. They do not apologize for their beliefs or dilute their mission and values in order to appear politically correct or accepting. But they are genuinely welcoming and inclusive, even when personal lifestyle choices

conflict with the established teachings of the Church. (See [Mirror or Lamp](#)) The strength of their Catholic conviction seems to inspire people of other beliefs to greater resonance with their own core values. In other words, the message seems to be, “Join us in respectful equipoise while we grow spiritually together as people of faith and community.”

Quality of the Student Experience

This is the most challenging element in the new branding mix. The quality of the student experience is paramount in this new branding identity but difficult to prove. We know it when we see it, and we know it when we walk the corridors of our finest Catholic schools. It’s the sine qua non of the new, emergent brand. But it is not just about test scores or college admissions. Anyone who has ever experienced the special joy of a Franciscan or Benedictine institution, for instance – where “Every child is known and loved” – understands what I mean. It is powerful and real. Catholic school leaders would be well served to keep in mind the quote often attributed to Albert Einstein: “*Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts.*” We should not confuse extraordinary outcomes with extraordinary experience. The going can also be the goal. That said, outcomes do matter as an element of the proof. Catholic school leaders will need to develop a culture of evidence and engage every member of the faculty and staff in persistently and vigilantly identifying and capturing the quintessence of your student experience and promoting it in dramatic and convincing ways. My considered advice is this: quantify wherever possible; but otherwise be prepared to “exemplify” – to show and laude your culture. Proof is often more convincing when felt or witnessed than merely calculated.

The Role of Governance

Boards play a critical role in developing a high performing culture and brand. Obviously, boards need to ensure adequate funding and resources to build and sustain the operational infrastructure needed to achieve exceptional outcomes. They must also provide the encouragement and incentives to leadership to accomplish massive and difficult goals. In addition, they must hold people accountable and require frequent reporting of activity and results, keeping in mind that exceptional leaders thrive on accountability and proof. This affirms their worth and performance. They like being “caught in the act of succeeding” and appreciate the opportunity to share their accomplishments often and in detail. In addition, boards play an extremely important public advocacy role in their communities. Given their privileged and often prominent presence on the social scene, they need to become what I call “fluent advocates” of the school’s mission and aspirations. (See [Becoming Fluent Advocates](#)) They need to know the story and how to tell it in compelling, persuasive scripts. The immense leverage of this kind of influence at the highest levels of community cannot be overstated in the formation of a resonant Catholic school brand.

If my observations above are correct, high performing Catholic schools in America are sitting in the catbird seat, with all the stars aligned and all the evolutionary forces identified by Matt Ridley creating a spontaneous moment of enormous opportunity and promise. This momentum is real, palpable, and pervasive. In these serendipitous circumstances, Ridley suggests that the role of leadership is to seize the fortuitous moment, hop into the waiting saddle, and ride the galloping horse where it needs and wants to go. The trajectory is steep and thrilling!

Ride with grace and confidence, dear colleagues. The emergent future is yours.

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