

NSPRA Gold Medallion Application – Special Communications Project

Place of Work Marketing Campaign - Clovis Unified School District

Assessment

Since it formed in 1960, Clovis Unified School District (CUSD) has seen an annual growth in student enrollment ranging from 300 to 1,200 students. This growth has been an integral part of the District's ability to maintain financial stability, even in the ups and downs of California's funding of public schools (which do not rely on traditional property tax revenue as is the case in many other states). In particular, this growth has helped make up funding inequities between CUSD and other school districts in Fresno County who receive a great deal more federal and state categorical dollars. To put this inequity in perspective, if CUSD had received the average per-pupil funding of other unified districts in Fresno County in 2007, Clovis Unified would have received an additional \$46 million annually. Because of these funding inequities, the District has relied on student growth to maintain high quality programs and services to its students; and over its 48 year history has gained a national reputation for academic and co-curricular excellence.

It was, therefore, a serious blow when the 2007-08 school year began and, instead of a 325 student enrollment increase as planned for, the District had a decrease of approximately 300 students enrolled in our schools. While Clovis Unified had always been careful to watch new residential permits and other indicators of development in our area, we quickly learned that while our attention was focused on new residential development and birth rates, a significant number of existing homes within our boundaries had entered foreclosure (750) and were standing vacant when the school year began. In addition, growing numbers of our students over the previous three years had left Clovis Unified to enroll in charter, home and online schools.

To compound these issues, we learned that a neighboring school district was denying its residents the ability to take advantage of California's "Allen Bill". A little known California law, the Allen Bill allows those working within the boundaries of a school district to use their business address for the purpose of enrolling their children in grades K-12, without requiring that the students first be released from their home school district. Up to this point, the law had primarily been accessed by our own employees, and was sometimes perceived as a "perk" only available to those working for Clovis Unified.

It was clear that if we did nothing, and the trends outlined above continued, we would be facing employee layoffs and a significant budget deficit before the year was out. However, given that we are a public school district, how could we quickly and effectively impact our enrollment numbers? It was at this point that our district made the unprecedented decision to market the Allen Bill enrollment option to employers and employees within our 198-square mile boundaries; and in so doing, market the benefits of a Clovis Unified education to students outside of our district. Given that we were charting new territory, it was difficult to set a goal for new enrollments based on the campaign but after examining the current enrollment numbers, a goal was set to generate 50-75 new enrollments. If successful, these enrollments would generate up to \$465,000 annual per pupil revenue.

Planning

While we knew that marketing our school district had a high likelihood of creating friction with neighboring school districts, we believed the need for public schools to aggressively market themselves in this age of school choice outweighed our previous hesitancy to tout our district's accomplishments. With the support of our Superintendent and Governing Board, we informed the school districts with boundaries adjacent to our own, and our County Superintendent of Schools of our intent to market the Allen Bill, and began an initially low key marketing campaign in September of 2007.

Elements of our planning efforts included the identification of our target audience - initially business owners and managers within the boundaries of Clovis Unified School District and in the second phase of the campaign, parent-employees within those businesses. Once we determined the target audience, previous research conducted by the District was used to determine the key elements used by parents when selecting Clovis Unified schools. Involved in this process was staff from the District's assessment office and school principals. Members of the District's leadership team assisted in compiling information about the District that would appeal first to business owners, and then to employees within those places of business.

A variety of communication channels were studied to determine which would be the most cost effective and targeted to deliver information about the campaign to only those businesses within our boundaries. Because of our desire to focus efforts solely within our district, and to respect the fact that this campaign would be unprecedented within California's education community, it was decided to use targeted mailings, our district Web site and face-to-face meetings instead of widespread radio, TV or other advertisements. Over time, this would be expanded to coverage in our own district newspaper sent to up to 58,000 homes and businesses, and to presentations by district staff when representing Clovis Unified at community events.

Communication - Execution

The CUSD Communications Office began the campaign in September of 2007 with a purely informational letter to all business addresses within our boundaries (attached). This drop mailing invited employers to share with their employees information about how to take advantage of the Allen Bill enrollment. It did not contain marketing information about Clovis Unified.

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In the spring of 2008, another postcard mailer was sent to all business addresses within our boundaries using the same drop mail format. This piece contained marketing information about CUSD's high quality educational programs and successes, targeting information that would appeal to the business community. In addition, a page on our district Web site was launched to provide more information about how to access the Allen Bill enrollment option. A link from our home page was directed to this site, and the Web address was included in this and all future publications. In order to ensure that anyone calling with questions about the Allen Bill enrollment option received excellent customer service, a special hotline number was created and staffed by members of the communications office. This allowed us to track the number of phone calls generated by our efforts, and to ensure those calling with questions or interest were immediately offered assistance. Beginning one week after the employer postcard hit mailboxes, staff members began scheduling personal visits to those employers with 100 or more employees to personally share information about the Allen Bill enrollment option and to provide employers with another marketing piece (attached) directed to parent-employees. Employers were asked to display these pieces in their break rooms or other employee gathering areas, and were provided a special display stand to be used with the pieces. Those businesses with employee newsletters or online marketplaces were provided with camera-ready text to include in their publications. Over the course of the year, staff members maintained contact with these employers to replenish their supplies of marketing material if needed. In 2009, this effort will be expanded to employers with 50 or more employees.

During the 2007-08 school year, the Superintendent began incorporating information about our Allen Bill campaign into business/community presentations made to local civic and realtor groups. A specific slide was created by staff in the communications office for use by the Superintendent and any other district official during community presentations to ensure message consistency. In addition, a stand-alone banner (photo attached) promoting the campaign was created for use at civic events and fairs. Camera-ready text was also provided to all CUSD school sites for inclusion in their parent newsletters, and information was published in a joint City of Clovis-CUSD publication (attached) that was mailed to every residential and business address within the City of Clovis and an additional 13,500 households in the CUSD boundaries but outside the City of Clovis. These communication points are continually under re-assessment to ensure ongoing efforts effectively balance the purpose of the campaign while targeting only those businesses inside the CUSD boundaries.

Outcomes

The results of this campaign have far exceeded our initial goal of 50-75 new students enrolled. During year one of the campaign, when efforts began after the start of the school year and were intentionally "low key", the District saw 191 new place of work Allen Bill enrollments. During the 2008-2009 school year, an additional 247 new students from 192 families entered Clovis Unified for the first time based on their place of work address. An additional 83 new Allen Bill enrollments were the result of siblings of existing Allen Bill students entering our district. These new students generate approximately \$3.2 million in per-pupil funding every year they remain enrolled in our district. With many of the new enrollments occurring at the start of kindergarten, there is potential for 13 years of additional revenue to support the District. This revenue, along with a small increase from residential enrollment, helped the District to survive more than \$12 million in mid-year budget reductions in 2008-09, and an additional \$9.6 million in budget reductions expected in 2009-2010 without issuing a single lay-off notice to teachers or classified employees, and without eliminating any existing program for students. These budget reductions were the result of California's economic condition and corresponding cuts to public education funding. To date, the cost of this marketing campaign is under \$15,000.

Over the past year and a half, media coverage of our efforts has also been widespread, given the unprecedented nature of our marketing efforts. In addition to coverage of the campaign by local broadcast and print media, wire stories about our efforts have been run in media outlets around California and across the United States. While some of this coverage has emphasized the concern of a neighboring district (which runs a charter school with close to 40 of our former students enrolled) about public schools conducting marketing efforts, the consequence of this coverage has been an increased number of inquiries from members of the public in pursuing enrollment within our district.

In February of 2009, a letter was sent to each new Allen Bill family from the Superintendent to reinforce their decision to join Clovis Unified, and encourage the submittal of a required annual employment verification form to renew their enrollment for the 2009-2010 school year. As more school districts in our area follow our lead to aggressively market themselves to families, we are in the process of re-evaluating the channels used to deliver the Allen Bill marketing campaign. It is expected that in addition to the communication channels now in use, this spring we will use selective advertising targeted to our own community (cinema screen advertising at multiplexes within our boundaries, community journalism sites targeting the City of Clovis, etc.) to continue promotion of the Allen Bill enrollment opportunity and the benefits of a Clovis Unified education.

This campaign was not undertaken lightly, and it is recognized that the idea of marketing public schools is uncomfortable to many. However, we have seen over the course of the past year and a half that our neighboring districts have also embraced the belief that America's public schools cannot sit by while families leave our schools for private, home, charter or online schools. Instead, we must create a quality educational environment for students, and then work to ensure the public understands the benefits of enrolling their children in our schools through effective marketing.