

Tempe Elementary School District
Community Affairs & Marketing Department
**Scales Technology Academy 2007-2008 Marketing Campaign
Project Summary**

Research

Strategic planning is a complex task for any school system, especially when facing the added pressures of declining enrollment, pessimistic demographic studies, aging facilities, and mediocre achievement in a number of district schools. Through a dedicated marketing effort initiated in 2000, the Tempe Elementary School District's (TESD) out-of-district enrollment had climbed from approximately 570 students in 2000 to 1,950 students in 2008-09, yet demographic data continues to accurately predict fewer school-aged children residing within district boundaries. School buildings are closing in on 50 years of age while achievement levels in a number of district schools struggle below state averages. Competition for school-aged children is fierce as Arizona is second in the nation in terms of the number of charter schools/charter students, along with open enrollment laws that allow students to attend any public school outside their home boundary provided space is available.

It's in this context that the Community Affairs & Marketing (CAM) Department was asked to be an integral part of a new strategic planning initiative to better position the district academically and financially. Specifically, CAM was asked to provide leadership in researching school choice attitudes, helping select the right specialty school concept to match with a district school, and finally create and implement a complete marketing plan to sell this new school to educational consumers living both inside and outside the district's boundaries. The outcome of this new strategy was clear — implement a specialty-school concept that would improve the school academically while also increasing its enrollment.

Planning/Analysis

In the fall of 2006, Tempe Elementary commissioned a market research study to better understand parent attitudes about school choice and which school choice options have the strongest appeal. Quantitative data was obtained through telephone surveys while focus groups were used to gather more qualitative information. The data clearly showed that school choice is important to the majority of parents. The two "choice" options that had the strongest appeal to parents, particularly those who place a high priority on academic standards were the School of the Future (Technology) and a Traditional School. These two types of schools also had strong appeal for parents who live outside TESSD boundaries and parents who indicated that they were "very" likely to consider sending their children to a school with a special theme.

Over a nine-month period of time in 2006-07, a team of district employees (including CAM) studied detailed information on school choice generated by the TESSD's Curriculum and Instruction Department, along with the results of the "School Choice" market research. The team also studied the district's Long-Range Facilities Plan that was instrumental in helping pass a bond election in 2005 that focused on rebuilding/refurbishing four district schools. It became clear to the team that the research, both market and academic, pointed definitively in favor of the "School of the Future." The technology needed to outfit a school like this drove the team to consider one of the schools being rebuilt/refurbished. Given its close proximity to downtown Tempe, Arizona State University, and several technology businesses, the team turned its attention to Scales Elementary School.

At first, plans for Scales called for refurbishing the existing structure, but construction costs brought facility administrators to a new conclusion — it would be less expensive to demolish and build new. This created an interesting scenario for the team — we could build in all the technological advantages needed, but we would have to move the school to portable buildings on a middle school campus during the 15-month construction timeframe. Everyone on the team liked this solution, but it created an interesting dilemma for CAM — how do we create an "image" or "brand" for a school that physically doesn't exist and won't exist until after we're well into our marketing campaign?

Aligning with the construction schedule for the school, a marketing timeline was developed outlining major dates and initiatives, leading up to the first day of school on August 4, 2008. Our final step before implementing our plan was coming up with a name for the school. In the fall of 2007, CAM developed a number of names for the team to consider given characteristics of the school's concept we had researched. In the end, we decided to keep the tradition of the school's name, add to it the focus of technology, and finally provide an exclusive academic feeling... and so Scales Technology Academy — A School for Innovative Learning was born.

Finally, CAM held several meetings with teachers and administrators of Scales Elementary School in August of 2007 to brainstorm thoughts and ideas that would best describe the curriculum and instructional practices of this new school. Key to these conversations was the realization that every child in the school would have their own laptop for learning — a first for a K-5 school in Arizona. This helped provide CAM with a starting point for the creative process.

Implementation/Communication

Our marketing plan kicked off in May of 2007 when ground was broken on building this new school. A "Groundbreaking Ceremony" gave us an excellent opportunity to feature this "School of the Future" in front of high-profile politicians and business leaders who served the Tempe community.

Given an August 2008 start for the school, we made the decision to wait until January 2008 to launch most of our marketing campaign, as educational consumers tend to begin shopping for schools during the third/fourth quarters of a school year. This put us in a production mode to develop logo/ads/products throughout the last quarter of 2007. Still, we felt it would be important to begin creating a buzz at the start of the school year by "teasing" the school's concept/name through full-page ads on the back page of the September 2007 issue of Wrangler News: Tempe Town Lake Edition, a brand-new magazine serving downtown Tempe businesses and the October 2007 issue of Tempe Town News, a monthly publication that reaches every residence in the TESSD.

In November 2007 the logo and letterhead design was completed, and then the marketing campaign began in earnest in January 2008 with the debut of the website, direct mail letter from the principal, online banner ads, email blasts, along with print ads in a number of targeted community sections of the state's largest paper, The Arizona Republic. Being a technology-themed school, we incorporated a number of online marketing techniques to help further the brand. All of our advertising directed interested parents to call a specific phone number (located in CAM) for more information, providing us an excellent opportunity to ask each parent how they heard about Scales Technology Academy and what particular aspects of the school appealed to them the most. Our public information coordinator did an outstanding job of working with the area's two largest newspapers to obtain positive news coverage of this new school, including valuable registration information.

Enrollment began in February 2008. Since the current Scales Elementary School was accepting registration forms for Scales Technology Academy but was being housed in the back of an existing middle school facility, signage was created to help parents locate the school's office. We began using Google AdWords to enhance our branding strategy by helping target customers at the precise moment they're searching for information about Scales Technology Academy. In March 2008 we began advertising in Arizona Parenting Magazine, a publication that catered primarily to charter and private schools. CAM began comprehensive planning for a Media Day and Open House Night on successive days in April, with the idea that media exposure would drive interested parents to see the school firsthand.

In April 2008, the new Scales Technology Academy facility was ready. Media Day was a unique event, organized around the concept that the media would be the student. Scales students sat next to reporters, some serving as mentors as three different teachers showcased how technology would be integrated into everyday lessons. Scales Technology Academy promotional items were debuted at Media Day and became a daily part of future branding efforts.

The Open House Night was an opportunity for the public to see this new building. CAM developed 15 different specialized posters (10 of each) that were hung around the school to help further the Scales Technology Academy brand. Teachers developed technology-driven lessons/presentations in their classrooms as the community toured the building. The entire CAM staff, along with district-level administrators was on hand in the hallways to answer questions and provide building directions. Our public information coordinator worked closely with the building's construction company to secure a number of in-kind donations for the evening, most notably two \$125 gift certificates to a local electronics store that parents were eligible to win in a drawing if they filled out a short survey. It was estimated that over 700 people attended Open House Night.

Advertising was increased in April to help play off the Media Day/Open House events. In addition to previously-mentioned advertising channels, we added a few more print publications that demonstrated high circulation numbers in out-of-district residential areas we had previous success in and wanted to expand awareness. Our marketing efforts continued throughout May and June with placement of online and print advertising.

In early July 2008 we put together a large, final marketing push that saw the direct mailing of over 8,000 Scales Technology Academy DVDs to parents with children between the ages of 5 and 13 living in targeted zip codes. At this same time, we ran a one-minute movie trailer on every screen in five targeted movie theaters (either right inside or within 10 miles of our attendance border) for four weeks, viewed by nearly 400,000 people. Additionally, we continued until school started in August with a steady stream of online and print advertising, along with a final news media push that resulted in additional favorable coverage right before and after the first day of school.

Evaluation

During the creation and marketing of Scales Technology Academy, CAM was asked to provide its leadership and creativity in a number of ways. We fulfilled the research component with a thorough study that was ultimately used as the foundation for making a "school of choice" decision. CAM played a strategic role in helping select the right school facility to house a "school of choice." We used our research and creative capabilities to name and brand this new school. Finally, CAM created a compelling marketing plan to sell the concept of Scales Technology Academy to educational consumers.

Our superintendent and governing board set an even higher evaluation bar — they wanted a specialty school that would improve the school academically while also increasing its enrollment.

Academically speaking, Scales Technology Academy and the infusion of technology have made a significant impact in every grade and all academic areas in just nine months of time. DIBELS reading scores this past winter compared to the same time in the 07-08 school year are up anywhere from eight to 38 percent across all grades. This is consistent with following the cohort of students from one grade to the next where Scales Technology Academy students showed increased and sustained growth with more students at benchmark than the previous year/grade. NWEA assessments in reading and math show the same pattern of growth. Growth is the key to achievement and these results are very promising.

Since the 2003-04 school year, enrollment at Scales Elementary School was in steady decline, falling from 526 students that year to 441 students on the last day of school in May of 2007. Today, Scales Technology Academy has 558 students enrolled, of which 93 students attend from outside district boundaries. The current kindergarten class is 128 students, up from 67 students the previous school year. CAM spent just under \$90,000 putting together this yearlong marketing campaign. Conservatively figuring the state of Arizona provides \$4,000 per child, the 117-student increase resulted in a net financial gain of more than \$378,000 to the Tempe Elementary School District.

Our success in turning a 38-year-old, inner-city school into a vibrant, successful specialty school is clearly an indication that with proper research/planning, strategic thinking, and creative communications, 20th Century schools can be transformed into cutting-edge, 21st Century learning environments.

