The Three Spheres of Influence: Constituent Relations

In the previous three issues of *I&P*, we introduced the three spheres of influence, then focused on the Market Position and School Culture spheres. This article focuses on the sphere dedicated to Constituent Relations.

“Constituent relations” refers to the manner in which you, as Admission Director, Development Director, or Marketing Communications Director, take care of your key constituents: parents, students, alumni, alumni parents, faculty, volunteers, members of the operational and academic leadership teams, and others. This sphere of influence focuses largely on developing a client-centered orientation. A robust and concerted culture of client service is an expectation of, and a real difference-maker for, private-independent school families.

Consider the graphic.

The highlighted factor positioned at the end of the list in the sphere represents the primary anticipated outcome from a careful evaluation and alignment of your interests in the other factors. Your success in the constituent relations sphere relies upon the extent to which you:

- **anticipate their needs**—this is achieved when you examine every aspect of your school’s operation and communications culture from your constituents’ perspective. Create a list of sample constituent needs, e.g., the need to speak with the Upper School Principal, Registrar, or school counselor, or get in touch with the parents’ association leadership—and then actually make the calls. Record your call outcomes—and perception of the call experiences. Make a list of typical web-based information needs, and then engage a family friend, someone not involved with the school, in searching your website for that information. Have the volunteer record and share with you every click/step of the search pathway for each search item on the list;

- **mitigate obstacles**—use the data gleaned from the above step to streamline your calling and website experience to optimize your constituents’ user experience. Your goal should be that nothing in their quest for information is frustrating, confusing, or off-putting. Mitigating obstacles also speaks to taking care of the full range of your constituents’ needs when you are designing events and other campus experiences. Employing a small group of your high school students to provide childcare during parent programs is a great way to bring students from multiple divisions into relationship with one another. Planning events that include both parents and children is a great way to build community. Pay attention to meal times and anticipated bed times for your youngest constituents to ensure you aren’t putting them in a double bind when inviting them to campus for educational programs and other events;

- **take a personalized approach** by offering substantive and meaningful feedback specific to each child, demonstrating each child’s incremental progress toward becoming the Portrait of the Graduate you’ve promised. Offer families choice, when possible, as to their communications preferences;

- consistently **share compelling stories** of student learning and experience in a way that validates your school’s mission; and

- when you well-attend to all the items above, the result will be enhanced parent and constituent relationships. The desired outcome is that your parents feel well taken care of—they perceive that you know them, and understand and empathize with their day-to-day schedule and family needs. When they consider you a partner in meeting those objectives—and not an obstacle or just another item/need in a long list of daily responsibilities—they will be more open to engaging you.

Parents must experience the full measure of your commitment to nurturing, educating, and loving their children in a manner that is audaciously student-centered and honors the importance of family. Truly value them as partners, and provide them a steady supply of substantive feedback about their child’s progress. Then you will, with discipline and patience over time, inspire the long-term enrollment commitments you seek. Ideally, parents and other key constituents should see you as a reliable partner in managing the competing demands of modern family life, not a primary contributor to family stress, driven primarily by overscheduling. In this era more than ever, private-independent school families need to see their schools as part of the solution in the culture of competing needs, not just another competing set of expectations.

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1 See “Admission and Enrollment Management: Spheres of Influence,” Ideas & Perspectives, 42-2-5; “The Three Spheres of Influence: Market Position,” 42-3-12; and “The Three Spheres of Influence: School Culture,” 42-4-14.