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Should Independent Schools Conduct Quantitative Market Research?

Many of our clients ask whether to conduct quantitative research to develop a deeper understanding of the attitudes and perceptions of prospective families who are not already in their inquiry pool. They are looking for answers to all the right questions, for example,

1. Attitudes, Objectives, and Decision Criteria

- What do qualified prospective families think in general about public versus private schools?
- Under what circumstances would they consider a private school?
- What are their education objectives for their children?
- What decision criteria will they use to choose an independent school or to stay with their neighborhood public school?
- How price sensitive (tuition and fees) are they?

2. Awareness and Perceptions of Local Independent Schools

- What do they think about the sponsoring school?
- What do they think of the competition, both public and private?

The promise and allure of quantitative research are understandable. When the sample size is large enough, it yields statistically significant data and confidence in decision-making. We routinely conduct national level quantitative research for our higher ed clients. The problem is that for independent schools it is nearly impossible to generate a large enough sample size to yield statistical significance. Not only is the relevant geographic radius around the school too tight, but then the qualifiers like wealth and the presence of school-aged children further shrink the pool. On top of that, only a small fraction will respond. Sample size also limits the types of quantitative analyses that are feasible. Cluster or segmentation analysis, conjoint analysis, and regression analysis are all off the table.

In addition to sample size, cost is also a consideration. Again, to ensure confidence, a professional market researcher must compose and field the surveys. Asking an untrained staff member “to throw together a quick email survey,” will not yield reliable information. You also must purchase a list of qualified email addresses from a reputable vendor.

All of these obstacles beg the question,

If the sample is too small, the data is not statistically significant, and it's costly, why bother? Well, you shouldn't.

Despite the allure of surveys, there is an easier and more cost effective way to answer these excellent questions for independent schools.

To answer the first set of questions *for free*, we recommend [the 2011 NAIS Parent Motivations Survey](#). The full report is a must read. NAIS surveyed a national sample of qualified families “who actively investigated school choices within the previous two years.” They then conducted a segmentation analysis to analyze parental attitudes and propensity to consider public and independent schools.

Below is a synopsis of their segmentation analysis, quoting directly from the NAIS website:

1. **Challenge Seekers** (10 percent of the market) are focused on ensuring their children get a high-quality education with a challenging curriculum at a reasonable cost. They tend to be in public schools currently but are not necessarily satisfied with them.
2. **Success-Driven Parents** (28 percent of the market) want to provide an education that will help their kids get into top-tier colleges and be successful in life. Half are currently in independent schools, and half are in public schools but are willing to consider independent schools.
3. **Right Fit Parents** (26 percent of the market) are searching for a school that can address their child’s unique learning or behavior issues. Most are currently in public schools but are willing to consider independent schools.
4. **Character-Building Parents** (17 percent of the market) want more than just superior academics; they want their children to develop strong moral character. Seventy-nine percent of this group is already in independent schools.
5. **Public School Proponents** (19 percent of the market) feel that public schools can provide everything their children need. They believe parent involvement can overcome school shortcomings, and that parents need to support their community’s public school

To answer the second set of questions and a whole lot more, we recommend qualitative research, meaning in-depth interviews (IDIs) and focus groups. Our Brand Development Process, honed over 30 years working with independent schools, includes IDIs and focus groups with the following external and internal constituents drawn from your own database and local resources:

- External audiences
 - Inquiries who did not apply
 - Inquiries who applied, were accepted but declined the offer of admission
 - Deposited families who have not yet started
 - Families who left the school for reasons other than relocation
 - Feeder schools
 - Incoming placement consultants
 - Admissions directors at outgoing institutions (high schools or colleges)
- Internal audiences
 - New current parents (involved for less than 1 academic year)
 - Experienced parents (involved for at least two years)
 - Faculty, staff, administrators
 - School leadership and trustees
 - Select current students and alumni
- Communications and brand audit of the sponsoring school and of key competitors
 - Print and digital collateral
 - Website and social media presence
 - Third-party reviews from sites like [greatschools.org](#) and local forums

Qualitative research enables us to dig below the surface of rational answers, to uncover the **emotional drivers or influences on parental decision-making – their hopes and dreams for their children**. These are critical to strong brand and cannot be adequately determined from surveys. We develop a deep, 360° view of the school and its competitors from the eyes of key audiences and our professional assessment. In fact, the resulting data is much richer than quantitative survey data collected from a small sample.

ABOUT EDWARDSCO

EdwardsCo is a brand consulting and creative design firm that works exclusively in education. Founded by educational marketing pioneer Mark Edwards, the firm has provided brand strategy development, communications planning, and creative services to many of the top independent schools, with independent schools, colleges, and universities in the country.

The firm's reputation for working closely with a select group of clients to implement unique branding strategies, highly-engaging communications, and beautiful creative has made EdwardsCo an in-demand partner as more and more schools look to stand out.

For information about our Brand Development Process, please visit edwardsco.com or call us at (617) 651-0522 to talk more.