

## Where Have All The Customers Gone?

*Robert Crux, Superintendent of Education, Alberta Conference of Seventh-day Adventists*

If you're going to mix business expressions like marketing and customer service with Adventist education you may be creating some discomfort since inherent to these terms is the idea of competing for students. Competition is not a good word to use in connection with Adventist schools since many of us as teachers and administrators have always believed that the parents and guardians of the youth of our church would naturally choose our own church system of education. We now know this is not the case for a significant number of Adventist families.



Something seems to have happened to the support of Adventist schools from one generation to the next. When grandfather sent his children to Adventist schools - it was considered the only option; when father sent his children to Adventist schools - it was the preferred option; and now for many in our generation - Adventist education is one of the options. It seems that in today's competitive environment, a school's success and, perhaps, survival may depend on how well we serve our customers.

How do we reclaim our lost customers? What can our schools do to make Adventist education more attractive than those other options? Whose responsibility is it to bring back these customers? Similar questions are pondered every school year as school boards work to place as many Adventist youth in our schools as possible.

I want to emphasize two practices that I believe effective schools use to not only keep the students they have but also attract new students. These practices are not innovative or new but are so important that they can make a decided difference where an Adventist family will send their child(ren) to school.

The first practice is to create a customer-friendly environment in our schools that welcomes and serves all the constituents. Chambers (1998) points out that A people don't care how much you know until they know much you care. Instructing all school staff in proper telephone procedures; greeting visitors with a smile and offering assistance; offering training when working with the public, particularly in difficult situations; and becoming familiar with the major cultural norms of any ethnic groups residing in your school community are some of the considerations for creating a customer-friendly environment. By providing customer service guidelines and training we help our employees (teachers) to effectively manage the multiple needs of their publics.

Perhaps the most important aspect of creating a customer-friendly environment is listening. Chambers (1998) suggests that we give our customers multiple opportunities to give feedback on our services (such as tear-off comment forms on school newsletters, phone or paper-and-pencil surveys, open forums, "coffee" with the principal, and so on). Too often, we become defensive and fail to take all ideas into consideration regardless of their merit.

A weekly classroom newsletter, a school-to-home envelope every Tuesday (or another weekday) with notices, student work, and a teacher-to-parent contact through monthly phone calls strengthens the ties between school and home. Should you encounter too many answering machines during your monthly phone calls try an open ended introduction such as: "Hi, this is Mr. Smith, \_\_\_\_\_'s teacher at \_\_\_\_\_Adventist School. I'm making my monthly phone call and wonder if you have any questions or anything you'd like to talk about." In most cases, parents will respond and you have gone along ways in building customer service.

A second practice that I believe contributes a deal to the customer satisfaction of our schools is the purposeful plan of ongoing and regular community service projects (particularly from the middle school to senior high grade levels). Both Adventist and non Adventist parents want to see their children involved in serving their community in a variety of ways. Whenever your school provides a service to its community (especially on a weekly or monthly basis) people notice and when they hear the name of your school, the usual comment is: "Oh, yes! That's the school that..." uses its acrobatic team to present a drug free lifestyle message; or helps at the soup kitchen downtown each week; or has it's grade 8 students visit public schools to present programs on why they choose not to smoke; or adopts needy families in the community each year. Because I have been associated with Adventist schools with similar service projects, I have seen enrolment and interest in these schools increase.

In reference to Adventist schools, Daily (1994) argues that "seventeen years (kindergarten through college) of required religion courses that emphasize the accumulation of knowledge and information about God, but do not generally include experiential and service oriented expressions of faith, do more harm than good." The next time your school board sits down to review its 3-5 year strategic plan - be sure there is a strong community service element that is integrated into the school wide curriculum.

Demonstrating how much we care about our customers and how we can be of service to our community are two important ways to grow our schools. You will not need to go and knock on doors to invite families to send their children to your school-instead, these families will come to you and you may have to put them on a Awaiting list.

## **References:**

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Daily, Steve. *Adventism for a New Generation* . (Portland/Clackamas, Oregon: Better Living Publishers, 1994). 233.