

Building the Buzz: Parents as Ambassadors for Jewish Day School

■ by **REBECCA EGOLF**

HAVE you kvelled over your children lately and felt a sense of pride at giving them a wonderful Jewish day school experience? Are their teachers filling their heads with more Hebrew and Judaic knowledge than you have, even though they are only in the first grade? Have you shared this with anyone else—grandparents, a neighbor, a colleague, or a friend?

If so, congratulations! You are already an ambassador for your Jewish day school! There is no form of marketing, public relations, advertising, or promotion, nothing that can be said or written that will have as much impact on Jewish day school recruitment as personal stories told by current day school parents to prospective day school parents.

Why is this so? The best person to promote any product, whether a restaurant, brand of car, vacation destination, or school, is a happy customer who is so proud of their purchase that they feel compelled to tell others about it. Research overwhelmingly shows that people seek advice, trust information, and make purchasing decisions for all kinds of products and services based largely on personal referrals and recommendations. We swap stories about products and services we like or dislike. We rate what we're reading on Amazon, read restaurant reviews and recommendations, complain about disappointing customer service we've received, and share what we know about a myriad of subjects with those we know well and those with whom we are barely connected through our social networks.

When it comes to choosing a Jewish day school, no other source is more effective than word of mouth at increasing interest and encouraging prospective families to apply for admission. How effective is word of mouth? The Solomon Schechter Day School of Greater Boston reports that as many as 80% of their inquiring families cite a personal referral as the way they heard about the school.

While marketing and sales used to be all about convincing or persuading a customer to buy something, today it is more about identifying or recognizing someone's needs and offering something that we believe will fill that need. Back when current day school parents were considering educational options for their children, they considered all of the various factors they wanted in a school, and chose a Jewish day school education. Now, months or years later, they have seen the incredible impact Jewish day school has on their children and family and are enthusiastic and passionate about their school. Without spouting facts or statistics or quoting the

school's mission statement, any parent can pass on their enthusiasm to others simply by telling them about it—in their own words.



Rebecca Egoif is a PEJE Coach and the facilitator of the PEJE Admission Community of Practice, supporting Jewish day schools with expertise in admission, recruitment and marketing. She can be reached at rebecca@peje.org.

When a parent tells a personal story, their emotions get involved. They tell it from the heart, honest, genuine and unscripted. Marketing expert Andy Goodman, in his book *Storytelling as Best Practice*, reports that “while we will always need hard facts to make our cases, we often fail to realize that the battle for hearts and minds starts with the hearts. The audience you seek will only give its attention to things it cares about, so it's incumbent upon us to make an emotional connection before we start feeding them facts. Stories are the most effective communication tool at our disposal.”

“I often ask myself how I became a parent ambassador,” says Rachel Wachs, who co-chairs the parent ambassador program at Perelman Jewish Day School in Wynnewood, Pennsylvania. “In many ways it is one of the easiest jobs for me to do. I became so passionate about day school education that I just started talking to anyone who would listen. And when I would hear parents say they were looking at other schools, I would simply say, ‘Here's why you need to look at my school.’”

Judy Schaffert, a board member and parent of a graduate of Jess Schwartz College Prep in Scottsdale, Arizona, agrees. She seeks to connect to people who might be open to the idea of Jewish day school. “While attending a back-to-school night a few years ago, my husband commented that in his entire education he had had about five teachers who were wonderful and made a difference in his life. But our child, who attended Jewish day school, had seven teachers every day who fit that description! That’s the kind of story that you tell people that makes them think, ‘I’ve got to check out this school!’”

There are many different ambassador roles a parent can take, both formal and informal. Every parent can speak about their positive personal experiences with a school. Informal conversations about school choice and other parenting concerns often take place over a cup of coffee at the Shabbat oneg, at the neighborhood playground, or in the checkout line at the supermarket. Board members have an additional responsibility, as supporting and promoting the school is part of their responsibility as a trustee.

Dan Levine, Director of Marketing and Recruitment for the Solomon Schechter Day School of Greater Boston, takes an additional step in helping parents and board members learn to be ambassadors. “We provide annual training sessions for board members and parents on how to be good advocates for the school. The emphasis is on being positive and talking authentically and passionately about the school. That’s usually effective in at least convincing someone to come and take a look at the school, and our admission staff takes over from there. It doesn’t matter what our advocates are talking about—we don’t tell them what to say—the goal is just to get people out there having conversations and talking positively about the school.”

Many schools also have formal ambassador programs, in which the admission director selects and trains a group of parents to support recruitment initia-

tives. The process of selecting specific parents to serve on this team involves strategizing about what demographics and characteristics will be most beneficial in reaching the school’s target audiences. Among the typical tasks for these ambassadors are participating in a variety of events for prospec-



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tive families, serving as tour guides, and making phone calls and sending e-mails to prospective parents to answer their questions and make them feel welcome. Ambassadors are great at making connections between the day school and other organizations, like their synagogues and the preschools their children attended, and helping identify new families to whom the school can reach out. Ambassadors also provide invaluable input and feedback to the admission director as events are planned and new strategies are tested. Each task and activity strengthens the positive connections between the volunteer, the school and the families of prospective students.

In trying to increase the enrollment of The Epstein School in Atlanta, Georgia, Director of Admission Susan Berk knew that the most effective way to identify and reach more prospective families was by increasing the number of people involved in helping promote the school. Several years ago, she created a formal parent ambassador program at the school, carefully selecting a small cadre of parents and training them to support her in recruitment initiatives. “My initial efforts in working with the parents were not completely effective,” Susan reported. “It’s all about getting the right people on the team. It was important that our ambassadors be selected, rather than asking for volunteers. We wanted parents to consider it an honor that they were

asked to serve their school in this way.”

Over time, Berk saw the fruits of her labor, increasing interest in the school and ultimately reaching the school’s enrollment goals. “What was interesting was that inquiries didn’t really increase, but application numbers and enrolling students did,”

Berk noted. “This is because we had been casting our net too wide, trying to reach a broader audience that wasn’t interested in day school. Our parent ambassadors were able to use their social networks to accurately identify those families that were better fits for our school, proving that more isn’t always better. Connecting to the right audience is what is important.”

Promoting the school as an ambassador has a number of positive benefits, both for the school and for the parents that do it. Schools should focus their attention on creating customer enthusiasm rather than pushing marketing messages, because the happier parents are, the more they talk. Over time, this leads to building “buzz” in the community, which both brings in new families and reinforces for current families that they made a wise decision in choosing the school. Schools with organized word of mouth initiatives report a marked decrease in attrition, since why would anyone want to leave a school that everyone is talking about? At The Epstein School, while ambassadors were helping increase the number of new incoming students, they also helped cut attrition in half over a two year period. Being an ambassador provides a great deal of personal satisfaction as well. “I am proud of my efforts in opening other parents’ eyes to the nurturing, excellent, diverse education offered at our school,” says Rachel Wachs of Perelman Jewish Day School. “Being a parent ambassador is simply being me.” ■