

2008 PEJE Assembly for Jewish Day School Education

Giving A Good Tour Under Less Than Ideal Circumstances

Is your day school an amazing school in a less than amazing facility? Do you face the challenge of explaining crowded, out-of-date or less than attractive classrooms? Do you share space with another tenant in a rented building? Have trailers out back to fit everyone in? Are you going through construction changes or anticipating the chaos of moving to a new building? This session is for you! A panel of experienced admission directors who have been challenged by their school's facilities will provide creative and constructive tips to help you understand that touring a prospective family around your school isn't about showcasing the real estate, but rather about telling your school's story in a compelling way.

Tips for Challenging Tours

- Figure out what your distinctive strengths are, and show them off! Jim Collins, in his book *Good to Great*, presents the idea of The Hedgehog Principle. He says, "A Hedgehog concept is not a goal to be the best, a strategy to be the best, an intention to be the best, or a plan to be the best. It is an *understanding* of what you *can* be the best at. The distinction is absolutely crucial." For more on this principle, see <http://www.jimcollins.com/lab/hedgehog/index.html>
- Use ambassadors (parents, students, even alumni) to support your recruitment efforts. Let your stakeholders speak for themselves about the features and benefits of your school and their experiences there.
 - Allowing stakeholders to tell their own stories is one example of word of mouth marketing. The power of this lies in the credibility of the source, and most people would rather get a recommendation from a trusted friend or even an acquaintance than a "salesperson" – i.e.: the admission director. For a great article on this topic, read "Let Your Students Do the Talking" at http://www.acu.ac.uk/prnetwork/pdfs/word_of_mouth.pdf
- Build a story or testimonial database – gather as many examples as you can, from as many different sources as possible. If you don't know these stories, go around and ask people specific questions that will result in them telling you their story. Put them down on paper in an accessible format. The admission director should know them all and use them regularly when touring families, and ambassadors should know a variety of other people's stories to supplement their own examples.
 - Stop telling people about your school with facts and figures. Provide the same information through specific examples of real people at your school. The amount of time and attention that administrators currently spend quoting statistics needs to be turned around to be spent telling stories about their school.
 - It is important to tell stories that address what your prospective families WANT in your school, not what you think they NEED. Decisions are based on emotion, primarily. WANTS are irrational and subjective and have more power over the mind than NEEDS, which are practical and objective.
 - If there's a problem at your school, or your facilities are terrible, make the focus of the story not the conflict/problem, but the positive solution that comes of it. People will remember the positive and the problem will fade.

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- Learn how to turn all your negatives into positives. For each challenge that you face, brainstorm with your colleagues how to describe it in a positive way, assign some value to it, or otherwise make it look better.
 - PEJE Coach Rheua Stakely shares a story that during a tour of one day school, her tour guide refused to show her the music room, explaining that it was ugly and dark and otherwise a terrible space. Rheua later asked the faculty of the school if they could describe the music room in a more positive way. One response was, "It's amazing what beautiful music comes out of that room given its rather limited offerings." Anything negative can be made more positive!
- Show your school in action – don't just tell about it. If your school is nurturing, caring, focuses on the arts or on social justice – make sure touring families see this happening first hand. This is your chance to show your values in action, not just your classrooms in action. Remember that you're not just selling your school or Jewish day school education in general, you're selling Judaism and all its associated benefits and values. Parents want their kids to gain not just knowledge in academic subjects, but skills like autonomy, independence, critical thinking, personal identity, and confidence. Jewish day schools teach these skills well, so find stories and examples to share.
- Obey the marketing mantra of "Features tell but benefits sell." Facts and figures only go so far to convincing a prospective family – they need to know what's in it for them and how their child will benefit from attending your school, both in the short term (educational excellence) and in the long term (graduate outcomes).
- Make sure there are lots of visual presentations as families pass through the school hallways. Examples of student work, student artwork, and bright, creative bulletin boards are a must. These must be changed frequently so that content is always current – it's not good to see drawings of snowmen on a tour in May!
- Follow up each visit with a thank you note from the admission director and a personal contact from a parent ambassador. If a student ambassador tours a prospective student, have them send a follow up email. Make sure all their questions have been answered and that the family can see how much you appreciate the time they spent with you touring the school.
- If your tour will include stopping in classrooms, spend some time preparing the students for how they should treat guests to their class. Discuss the Jewish concept of "*hakhnasat orchim*" and help them feel confident in their ability to be great representatives of their school.
- Make your school as welcoming and "outsider friendly" as possible. Consider having multiple members of your school's administrative team, as well as some current and prospective parents, take the "Welcoming Jewish Community" survey to grade your school's welcoming qualities. Gather all the survey participants together to discuss the results and generate plans to improve those areas in which your scores were low. The survey can be found at <http://welcomingjewishcommunity.org/>

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- Make sure all families learn about the outcomes of graduates of your school. What schools do they continue on to when they leave your school (high schools, colleges)? How do they do in those environments? What are some of their achievements? If your school is old enough to have graduates that are already out of college, comment on their continued connection to Judaism as adults. Hint: In order to do any of these things, your school must stay in touch with its graduates on an annual basis, getting updates on their accomplishments and whereabouts. Partner with your development office to get this information.
- If your local competitors (public or other independent schools) have weaknesses, play up your strengths in these areas. But be honest! Help prospective families appreciate what they can get at your school which they can't get at other schools.
- Sell the school that you are, not that you aspire to become. Jim Collins, in his book *Good to Great*, talks about confronting your brutal facts. "All good to great organizations began the process of finding a path to greatness by confronting the brutal facts of their current reality. They also retained faith that they would prevail in the end, regardless of the difficulties. There is a sense of exhilaration that comes in facing head-on the hard truths and saying, 'We will never give up. We will never capitulate. It might take a long time, but we *will* find a way to prevail.'"
- If your school has future plans for renovations or a new building, promote those positive changes. Create a section on your website with construction photos, give hard hat tours of the building before it is completed, and promote the opportunities that the renovated/new space will afford your students. Sell the benefits of what is to come.
 - As an example, Sinai Akiba Academy in Los Angeles was unable to tour families through a large part of their facility while it was being renovated, so they created a construction brochure, a beautiful publication that complemented their other recruitment publications, that showed architectural renderings of the new spaces being built, shared what those spaces would be used for, and gave a timeline for the construction. Families may not have been able to see these spaces first-hand during their tour, but they got all the information they needed about what was to come in the future.
 - Document the transition from old to new facilities with photographs, oral history projects, and celebration. Don't let members of the school community forget how far you've come and help them appreciate their new facilities even more.

Admission professionals are in the only job that has the potential to change people's lives forever. The ways that your school will impact these students are only just beginning to be understood. Jewish day schools change the lives of Jewish children and their families in innumerable ways – don't let challenges with your facility get in the way of this powerful message. Don't focus on the real estate – focus on sharing your school's stories.