Why parents are so bossy

School as a service

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Introduction

This article looks at the nature of schools from a services marketing perspective and uses this perspective to understand what happens in schools.

First, a couple of short stories

After leaving the school where he had attended from kindy to year ten, Jason decided to return for a visit a couple of months into the new year. He arrived in the playground at recess time and was greeted by past friends and younger students who knew him well and sought to talk with him.

The new school principal, noticing a stranger at the centre of a lively group of students, approached Jason and asked if he had checked in at the school office to receive a visitor's ID pass. To which Jason responded, "I'm not a visitor, I belong here".

A strong sense of belonging can develop over many years and can be a very powerful influence in the minds of both students and parents. On the other hand, the reverse is also true. Feelings of alienation can grow out of poor decisions by administrators, as the following account demonstrates.

A fairly small, private high school in a large Australian city needed to accommodate an intake into year 11 from several other schools. The smaller feeder schools only went to year 10 so their students needed to migrate to a school that offered year 11 and 12. To make allowances for the extra students, the school opted to accommodate only the best academic students of the composite group. The school decided to cull the less academic of its students by 'dropping' its poorer performers. Many of these 'culled students' had been at the school from year 7 through to 10 and were, no doubt, with their families and friends, loyal supporters of the small school. Many of these students had parents and friends who had also been to the school or had associations with the school in some way. The students were devastated to be asked to leave. In addition, resentment for the new comers built as they represented the forces of social disruption.

That was nearly 20 years ago. Neither the parents and their friends nor the students and their friends have forgotten. They still tell the story of betrayed loyalty. The school never again had the problem of too many students.

> ***"Is it any wonder that schools have become 'lovemarks'?"***

Why they think they own the school

Schools are more than a 'community of scholars' or learners, teachers and interested others who embark on an interactive journey of discovery. The school is the equivalent of the neo-lithic village, a microcosm of the 'global village' where everyone knows something about almost everyone else.

School employees are often confronted by a parent (or student) who acts as if they own the school. They act and talk as if they know more about the school and how it should be run than the school administration and teachers, and in short, think they own the place.

Kevin Roberts, CEO Worldwide, Saachi & Saachi in his book, *Lovemarks*, gives an insight into this issue. He discusses brands, products and services that have developed a loyal and supportive clientele where the relationship has gone beyond the normal relationship a loyal and supportive customer has with a valued brand or trademark. He says, "Lovemarks are owned by the people who love them" (Roberts, 2004, p.133). Considering the length of the relationship that parents have with schools and their school communities, is it any wonder that schools have become 'lovemarks' to their constituents. Schools are more than mere brands, services or products. They are 'owned' and experienced, if not 'loved', by their constituents.

What are the factors that contribute to these powerful feelings of ownership? The answer probably lies in some of the following observations:

- The relationship between parents, students, the school and wider connected social groups is shared, observed and seen as 'semi-public'. These relationships are often the object of much discussion and critical assessment by individuals within these groups. Judgements over perceived fairness and propriety of school actions and events are closely scrutinised and widely discussed.
- The relationship between the parent and the school is multi-faceted in that it involves joint care for social and academic adjustment, and

emotional, creative and physical development of the student in the school and home context.

- The relationship with the school is multi-layered in that parents deal with staff operating a various levels within a hierarchical organisation; from school principal, deputy, department heads, and teachers to other school personnel, canteen volunteers, transport workers and classroom volunteers. These relationships are scrutinised and assessed by the school community.
- Long term relationships often span up to thirteen years, the life span of school attendance for a child. Parents often form life long friendships centred on common activities and experiences with the school and child as the focal point.
- Parents have strong emotional bonds with their children and are emotionally involved in the school experience of their child. Because of their parental role (especially when the child is young), they use their position of experience to make numerous value judgements on behalf of the child.
- Parents place huge investments of time, effort, emotion and money into the child and his or her experience at school. Consequently, most parents are very engaged in their child's response to the experience of school.
- Since parents and students know and interact with the administration, teachers, other parents and their children, they form networks of various types. As a result, they develop different levels of loyalty, affinity, and friendship.
- During the school experience, parents (and students) play multiple roles and have multiple points of contact with the school and the community it serves. Parents can be found on the school's board of management; sitting outside the principal's office with a recalcitrant offspring; helping to run the canteen, library or transport system; listening to junior students read; helping with class homework and projects and much, much more.

The school's relationship with its stakeholders is multi-layered, intertwined and incredibly complex.

Ownership and loyalty

Strong relationships lead to feelings of loyalty and feelings of ownership. Loyalty is an assertion, a response to a positive relationship, while ownership is a state of mind that empowers one to hold, manage and control. Ownership turns relationship management around so that the consumer wants to become more involved, has feelings of custodianship and protectiveness and is empowered to develop a stronger relationship.

More about services ownership

Schools provide education, not counted in terms of 'goods or chattels' but as a service. Service has been defined as "a deed, a performance, an effort" (Rathmell, 1966). Now think of the nature of services and how it leads from a growing sense of belonging in school participants to a strong sense of ownership by this same group.

"Strong relationships lead to feelings of loyalty and feelings of ownership"

Services and schools

In making sense of what happens in schools, some understanding of services marketing will be helpful at this juncture.

Services have four generic characteristics that pose difficulties for the customer (the student) and the service provider (the school). According to Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry (1985), these characteristics generally have been:

- Intangibility: Education is an experience, a service, it cannot be packaged.
- Hetrogeniety (variability): Each student will have different needs and expectations of their educational experience. The school will respond with varying degrees of flexibility to accommodate choice of curricula, extra-curricula offerings, and teaching and learning styles.
- Perishability: Services, like education, cannot be saved and inventoried, making supply and demand difficult to synchronise. Education takes place within a context of 'real' time; it cannot be stored, rolled up or stowed away for a more convenient time. Education cannot be taken down from the shelf and given to the next customer who wants to be educated.
- Simultaneity of production and consumption: The student participates in and consumes the educational experience as it is produced in the school.

There is a fifth characteristic that is often overlooked but which can be added to this list of service challenges.

- Ambivalence of ownership: The customer gets an experience but not the ownership or the means to produce the experience. Often the only tangible evidence of ownership of an education is a framed diploma or an improved performance in a number of skills.

Because customers are in the 'service factory' and participate in the 'manufacture of the service', they often have an intimate knowledge of the process, and develop powerful feelings of loyalty and ownership.

Ownership in schools

Schools are very dynamic social and cultural systems that exist to foster 'education': intellectual,

academic, social, cultural, emotional, physical and spiritual development. Because of the intangible nature of services, the protocols that are derived from them are often learned and negotiated from a position of power by school administrators and from a position of uncertainty and unfamiliarity by parents and students.

The uncertainty in the nature of ownership on the part of customers can lead to conflict that often centres on the diverse agendas that the stakeholders have for their participation in the education experience. The outcomes desired by principles, administrators, teachers, students and parents are not always well aligned.

Although they participate on many levels, neither the parent nor the child owns any part of the school. However, they feel they have ownership rights because they have contributed to the activities of the school on many levels.

> *Be prepared for frequent discussions over 'turf'*

Difficulties with a strong sense of ownership

There are some difficulties that come with a strong sense of the feeling of ownership by stakeholders: parents, relatives, friends, students and their friends. The stakeholders want to set agendas, control aspects of the school, have their say, be listened to and be taken seriously. These are generally appropriate and legitimate demands but they need to be carefully managed.

The need for management of feelings of ownership

Schools where the sense of ownership by stakeholders is strongest are probably more successful at 'educating' than those where the feelings of ownership are low. However, successful schools have clearly defined roles, strong organisational structures and strong leadership that defines the different stakeholder roles. Stakeholders need to know what parts they can own, parts where they have shared ownership and areas where they have no ownership.

This being the case, the relationships between stakeholders needs to be carefully managed. Feelings of ownership strengthen when stakeholders feel that they can set the agenda in their area of concern and that they have some control of what happens to them and the people and things that they are interested in. On the other hand, lack of feelings of inclusiveness, loyalty, ownership, or being able to set the agenda, produce feelings of frustration and indifference.

What to do?

What should a school administration do about this issue of school communities wanting to own and then 'boss' the school.

- The first thing is to recognise that this is a natural and legitimate feeling from your stakeholders.
- Keep the lines of communication open and current so as to avoid pressure building, problems going unresolved or battle lines being formed.
- Be prepared for frequent discussions over 'turf'—who should be doing what and when? Set up robust arbitration systems to resolve any disputes.
- Clearly define areas of responsibility so stakeholders can hold onto their turf and feel comfortable and empowered in the contribution that they make in their specific area or role.
- Give stakeholders roles that match their capabilities and feelings of ownership so they can feel that they are contributing.
- Recognise the value in both cooperative ownership and private space.
- Schools are a group enterprise: parents and relatives, students and their peers, school teachers, assistants, committees and the principal. All these people have a part to play in the operation of a school. A school administrator's role is to facilitate the synergies for success.
- Roles should be set democratically or in a representative way with appropriate boundaries like job descriptions, organisational diagrams and flow charts. When the boundaries for stakeholders are delineated, they can feel free to manage their arena and can be constrained to the role.
- Principals need to acknowledge that they cannot run every aspect of the school by themselves and that they need to generously share the responsibility, where appropriate.

The school will run best if principals and school administration share their vision and empower others to contribute through well-defined structures.

You have heard the old cliché, 'Rome wasn't built in a day', neither was your school. It takes a lot of cooperative effort by a lot of cooperative people to build and keep a school functioning effectively. Like Jason (in the initial illustration), your stakeholders will consider your school a 'lovemark' and say that they 'belong here'. Use this phenomenon to build your school. TEACH

References

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