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Rebranding a Special Needs School Through Marketing and Entrepreneurship: An MBA Capstone Consulting Case Study

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ABSTRACT

The MBA program at Molloy College emphasizes a curriculum that creates ethically-minded leaders with a mindful disposition toward serving the local community. This pedagogical philosophy is consistent with the school's mission that is deeply rooted in the Dominican tradition emphasizing the four pillars of study, spirituality, service, and community. This program culminates with the students applying what was learned in the classroom to a real-world consulting problem, often outside of their industry background comfort zone. The solutions need to be fully implementable and have a direct impact on the welfare of the local community.

This paper presents the consulting recommendations and overall learning achieved when an MBA capstone consulting team applied their classroom skills and knowledge to develop a rebranding and overall awareness program to assist The Woodward Children's Center (WCC). This student consulting team designed strategies aimed at modernizing the image of a school for special needs students through digital and print media, and the creation of an innovative entrepreneurship program utilizing the many talents of WCC's students.

Keywords

Education, consulting, not-for-profit, marketing, rebranding, entrepreneurship, special needs education

1 PEDAGOGICAL PHILOSOPHY

The MBA program at Molloy College emphasizes the philosophy of educating future leaders that can apply their learned business skills in ways that benefit organizations as well as the welfare of the community. This pedagogical philosophy is consistent with the Molloy College mission that is "rooted in the Dominican tradition of study, spirituality, service and community" (Molloy College Mission Statement, n.d.). As part of a "Civic Engagement" theme in the 2012-2013 academic year, the MBA capstone course was redesigned to create a transformational learning experience that also gives back to the community. The result was a project-based paradigm that allows the students to provide solution-driven consulting services for a local not-for-profit organization serving society.

The 2018 MBA capstone class was divided into three consulting teams serving two clients. This paper summarizes the work of one of these consulting teams: "*Molloy Visionaries*". This team used the Bloomberg Philanthropies "Mayor's Challenge" application as a general guideline for the consulting process. These guidelines include the following phases: (1) establishing a solution-driven vision, (2) developing a turnkey implementation plan, (3) evaluating the impact of the proposed solution, and (4) determining if the solution can be replicated to other cities or organizations (Bloomberg Philanthropies Competition Overview, 2017).

2 THE CLIENT AND CONSULTING PROBLEM

The client for this project was The Woodward Children's Center (WCC), a 501 (c)(3) Not-For-Profit Corporation and a P.L 853 Non-Public School approved by the New York State Education Department. Students are referred to WCC through school districts, physicians, therapists, private agencies, family court, and parents. Its vision is to educate and develop young adults with emotional and mental disabilities to become successful citizens in the future. The WCC offers a rich and varied level of educational programs to students ranging from ages 9-21 years of age that are presented by skilled, sensitive, and supportive staff, and prides itself on the safety and well-being for all students.

The capstone students met with officials from WCC and were presented problems pertaining to its overall image and marketing efforts across Long Island. Although the school has been operating successfully for over 60 years, enrolled students are predominantly from the New York City's "five boroughs" of Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, Queens, and Staten Island, with less

presence in the local communities of Long Island. This discrepancy is largely due to the local areas' outdated perception of the programs offered and student base that WCC serves. Over the past 10-15 years, WCC has noticed a significant increase in highly functioning students on the autism spectrum and those that are labeled "emotionally disturbed" with "silent traumas". Although the school may be considered a "best kept secret" in the area of special needs education, it is time for the public to become more aware of the services it provides.

The project began with a full site visit and tour of the WCC facilities. During this tour, the students were able to meet administrators, faculty, and therapists, and view first-hand the modern facilities and state-of-the-art technological educational tools. The team was then requested to use these observations and provide their outside skills and prior experiences to develop a full reimaging plan for the WCC.

3 THE CONSULTING SOLUTION

The team's vision for this problem consists of a multi-faceted plan to both improve the way that the communities of Long Island and New York City view the WCC and leverage its unique resources to create innovative opportunities for the current and future students. This comprehensive plan includes: (1) changing the school's mission statement, name, and logo; (2) increasing print media advertising; (3) enhancing its social media presence; (4) expanding open house events; and (5) developing the *Silk Scarf for Success (SSS)* program. The full implementation timeline for this multi-phased proposal is up to five years, while recognizing that solutions need to adhere to a very limited budget. The details for each of these recommendations are presented below.

Mission Statement, Name, and Logo

This initial phase was designed to reflect upon the evolution of the school over the past 60 years and signal to the community the modernized educational opportunities and learning atmosphere that the school provides. The offerings and environment have changed significantly over the years due to the emergence of students exhibiting silent- and emotional-based traumas. It is important to provide diverse educational and therapeutic opportunities for these students, all within a comfortable and serene atmosphere. Although the site visit revealed these characteristics, including a "serenity garden", these servicescape traits need to be promoted to the community and potential families of prospective students.

The mission statement should concisely reflect the offerings and values of the school, and Molloy Visionaries recommended the following mission statement: *"To create an educational and serene environment where special students can thrive and step into a brighter future."* This new statement presents WCC as a tranquil place where students can succeed and get the education they deserve. In keeping with the themes of providing a serene environment where students are prepared for a successful future, the team recommended that the name be changed to the *Woodward Long Island School for Success & Serenity (LISSS)*. This new name retains "Woodward" due to the impact of Luther E. Woodward as a pioneer in children's mental health and prior recognition of the school in the region. Adding "Long Island" to the name is an attempt to gain market share in addition to the five boroughs of New York City. The word "Success" shows how far the school has come in the past 60 years and that the students will be successful in getting a quality education. Complementing the name with "Serenity" defines the tone of the school, thus creating the image and impression that characterizes the facility. Lastly, the words "Children" and "Center" were removed to avoid any misrepresentation of a preschool or daycare center, and be more reflective of its 9-21 years of age student population.

The final aspect of this initial phase was to design an updated logo that reflects the new name, image, and modernized environment. The team designed three logos, conducted a market survey to gain feedback, and selected one containing an image of a wreath made of golden yellow laurel leaves with "LISSS" in the center in blue writing, and the full name of the school under the image in blue writing. The golden yellow color conveys optimism, hope, and happiness; the blue color has historically been associated with trust and serenity; and the laurel leaves are signs of fame, success, and prosperity.

Print Media

To reach families within the Long Island community, the Molloy Visionaries recommended advertising directly to the parents of autistic students through the Herald Community Newspaper and the Long Island Special Child magazine. The Herald Community Newspaper provides considerable coverage on Long Island for significantly less cost compared to a metro New York daily newspaper. Targeted advertising in the local editions of Freeport, Merrick, and Bellmore would yield a combined circulation of 19,405 households. Furthermore, the Nassau issue would cover a circulation of 6,017 households across the communities of Atlantic Beach, Cedarhurst, Hewlett, Hewlett Bay Park, Hewlett Harbor, Hewlett Neck, Inwood, Lawrence, North Woodmere, Woodburgh, and Woodmere.

The Long Island Special Child magazine was awarded the 2018 Gold Award Winner by Parenting Media Association and is a more concentrated and direct way of specifically reaching parents of children on the autism spectrum. This magazine is published twice a year and has an issue that concentrates on the Long Island communities. Although the advertising costs are higher with this magazine, the circulation is also much higher (120,000 households). This informative magazine can be strategically placed throughout libraries on Long Island, with more than 10 libraries within a 5-mile radius of WCC.

Social Media

The next phase of this plan was to design improvements to the school's website and enhance its overall social media presence. The website and social media platforms provide vehicles for the school to promote to its target market and communicate with parents of special needs students. The website improvements included the new school name, updated mission statement, and easy-to-access icons to its current and proposed social media accounts.

Although WCC does have a Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube account, the updates are infrequent and there are very few followers. WCC's Facebook account has only 12 followers and resides in Nassau County with a population of over 1.3 million people, so there is a significant market to reach and opportunity for improvements. To increase the frequency of online postings, Molloy Visionaries recommended using Hootsuite to manage its social media pages. Hootsuite is an online tool that manages all social media platforms and tracks how much attention and visits a page receives. Through this resource, WCC can create a schedule for postings on all social media sites and identify where changes in content may be appropriate.

Facebook contains valuable advertising tools that can be used by WCC. Through Facebook, WCC can influence families by targeting the following pages: Long Island Special Education Parent Network (5,900+ members), Simply Special Ed (46,000+ members), Parents Caring for Special Needs Kids (78,000+ members), and Special Education Resources for Kids (36,000+ members). In addition to these targeted Facebook groups, Molloy Visionaries recommended increased postings on WCC's Instagram and YouTube accounts. Instagram is a great way for the school to show off what the students are doing on a day-to-day basis, and YouTube allows WCC to tell a quick and notable story about the accomplishments it has with students in the Long Island community. Hootsuite will enable the WCC to increase the frequency of these postings.

It was also recommended that WCC further expand its social media presence through the use of Twitter, which allows for the sharing of quick messages, photos, and videos. To significantly increase social media exposure, it was recommended that WCC utilize hashtags for posting on all social media platforms. Google Reviews are also an important tool to create a positive influence for WCC. The updated website gives users an opportunity to share positive reviews and experiences necessary to promote the WCC. Crafted postcards and reminders can be given to recipients of special WCC events to encourage increased Google reviews.

Open House

Molloy Visionaries recommended expanding the WCC's open house schedule so that parents and prospective students have increased opportunities to experience first-hand all it has to offer. Updated brochures that reflect WCC's new and modernized facility will be distributed at these events. Awareness of the open houses will be provided through advertisements in the newspapers, magazines, and brochures displayed at nearby libraries, as well as from its increased social media presence.

Silk Scarf for Success Program

The *Silk Scarf for Success (SSS)* program allows the school to utilize the creativity of its students, professional educators and therapists, and state-of-the-art technologies to promote awareness and generate revenues by designing, producing, and selling unique silk scarves that truly represent the mission of the school. During the initial site visit, the team was shown a beautiful mural placed across one of the hallway walls. This "Inner-City Mural" depicted the creative vision that each student had of their home and is a favorite artistic piece showcased during site visits. The team also noticed a new screen-printing machine, and the concept of using this machine to create silk scarves with the image of this "Inner-City Mural" printed on them was born.

This silk scarf marketing approach has multiple benefits. First, the scarf itself will be a way to promote and create awareness of the unique school. The packaging of the scarf will include tags that display the new mission statement and logo, and can also serve as a business card. Second, the students who create the scarves will learn how to manage and run an online business. The SSS program will give them a chance to earn money, gain entrepreneurial skills, and move closer to becoming young, independent adults in society. Finally, a percentage of sales from the scarves will generate funds for the school. To ensure the success of the SSS program, it was suggested that new students paint a different theme each year. This will help all students feel part of this program and connected to WCC. Changing themes will also encourage repeat customers and collectors of the scarves.

This innovative SSS program was developed to create overall awareness for the school, help the students feel pride and gain independence, and provide a means of continuous revenues. This program could be incorporated as an introductory after-school activity, summer program, or even a special interest class during school hours. The marketing and sales of the SSS program will be introduced through videos debuted on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. As a result, the SSS program will teach future generations the importance of working together, allow them to explore their creativity, and introduce them to the steps of operating a business in an ecommerce world.

4 PROJECTED COSTS AND BENEFITS

Molloy Visionaries developed its multi-faceted turnkey solution plan with recommendations reflective of the limited budget allowed for implementation. The overall costs depend on which of the recommendations WCC decides to implement. Each

recommendation is independent of the other, so portions of the plan may be enacted or removed over time as the budget evolves.

The first phase of this plan was the mission, name, and logo change. Full cost breakdowns were provided and included expenses for a new school sign, updated letterhead and envelopes, flyers, brochures, and souvenir cellphone card holders to be distributed at events such as the open houses. The total costs for this phase are approximately \$2,400.

The print media advertising expenses are the largest costs associated with the school's rebranding efforts. The team recommended that WCC put two advertisements in both the Herald Community Newspaper's Freeport and Nassau editions, and one advertisement in both the Bellmore and Merrick editions. The cost for one junior page advertisement in Freeport, Bellmore, and Merrick is \$581 and one junior page advertisement in the Nassau newspaper is \$725. The total cost for advertising in the Herald Community Newspapers will be \$3,774. It was also recommended that one quarter-page advertisement be placed in the Special Child Magazine at a cost of \$1,100. The total costs for print media advertising is \$4,874.

Social Media expenses are expected to be low compared to print media, but also very effective. The Hootsuite social media manager costs \$228 for a one-year subscription and will allow WCC to increase its social media presence through increased posting frequency. Monthly advertisements on Facebook and Instagram will incur an annual cost of \$60, resulting in a total social media expense of approximately \$288. Both print and social media combined will significantly increase awareness throughout Long Island at a total cost of \$5,162.

The last, but most exciting, part of this plan was the SSS program and requires significant startup production costs. Market research led to a recommended initial production of 200 scarves. Sources for materials and supplies were provided and included costs of the fabric, boxes, tags, ribbon, and tissue paper. Production of 200 scarves requires 400 meters of silk fabric totaling \$2,000. The other costs associated include the boxes (\$81), tags (\$15), ribbons (\$3), and tissue paper (\$16). At a recommended selling price of \$30 per scarf, the SSS operation will break-even by selling only 71 scarves. If 200 scarves are sold, then the SSS program will recognize a profit of almost \$3,900.

The WCC has a marketing budget of \$5,000-\$9,000, which will cover the finances of these rebranding recommendations. The name changes of the school will only be a one-time expense. However, the advertisements through the Herald Community Newspaper, Special Child Magazine, brochures, and the SSS program will all be recurring expenses. The profits from the SSS program will be able to pay for WCC's recurring marketing expenses and allow WCC to advertise more frequently in the future.

5 CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

This paper had two primary objectives: (1) introduce the reader to the WCC organization and its important role in providing educational opportunities for students with emotional and mental disabilities, and (2) demonstrate how the Molloy College MBA program provides its graduate students with a comprehensive capstone experience while improving the community.

This MBA capstone experience exemplifies the community-focused mission of Molloy College. This project provided the students with a truly transformative learning experience that applied the knowledge and skills learned in the classroom to help an organization dedicated to positively changing the lives of special needs students and their families. The recommendations that were presented in this paper were part of the consulting team's effort to help rebrand the school through innovative marketing strategies and the development of an entrepreneurial program. These initiatives will work in synergy to generate marketing and operating funds while ensuring increased exposure of the school's professional staff, programs, and facilities to prospective students and their families. By implementing these recommendations, the WCC should be able to reach its target market and become a household name amongst families with special needs students across Long Island and the New York City metro area.

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7 REFERENCES

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Additional references will be supplied upon request.