

# CREATING THE HOME FIELD ADVANTAGE

AN OHIO CAREER CENTER RETHINKS  
ITS MARKETING GAME PLAN AND  
COMES OUT WITH A WINNING  
SEASON.



By Mark C. Perna

Far too many career and technical education schools overlook the opportunity to establish and cultivate real long-term emotional attachment and loyalty with prospective students and their parents. This occurs because of a basic misconception at the school that they are not in control of their own marketing and recruitment process. Community opinion, reasonable access to affordable media outlets, home school participation, and limited financial resources in general are just a few of the things that seem to limit options and add to that mistaken belief. In essence, the entire recruitment season seems as if you are playing each game, or action step in your marketing plan, on an away field because of the lack of control you seem to have in the process. It is time to change the game, take control and create the home field advantage.

Given that it is virtually impossible to win when you play all the games in a season on the away field, one of our clients, Ohio Hi-Point Career Center in Bellefontaine, Ohio, decided it would no longer continue to do what it had always done. The school made a critical and fundamental shift in recruitment strategy to do more to bring students to Hi-Point instead of always taking the Hi-Point message out to the feeder schools. This means that they control the necessary flow of information, which is the when, where, how and who in the recruitment process. The result was astounding. Ohio Hi-Point achieved a 39 percent increase in enrollment in just one year compared to the previous four years, which were flat.

I travel the country and talk with many CTE administrators and teachers. I have found that most schools fall into the trap of allowing feeder schools to control much of

Mark C. Perna

is the founder of Tools for Schools in Cleveland, Ohio. He is a member of ACTE and the ACTE Future Horizons Committee. He can be contacted at [mark@MT4S.com](mailto:mark@MT4S.com), or through the Tools for Schools Web site at [www.MT4S.com](http://www.MT4S.com).

the critical recruitment process. This is like allowing the away team to set all the rules. A clear change in CTE strategy is warranted and necessary for long-term success.

### Delivering the Pitch

I have worked with many CTE schools, and I am continually amazed and impressed by the incredible value delivered to students. They are engaged, productive and making the most out of their high school experience. Outstanding! So why does the message not get through? Simply, it is not delivered to the right audience with consistent persistence.

The solution is fairly easy. We need to schedule “home games” and deliver the message directly to students and parents in a coordinated and systematic approach—yet I do not advocate cutting our ties to the feeder school or the community. On the contrary, it is critical to build stronger relationships with counselors, teachers, principals and superintendents. We can do some recruiting at their schools, but we also need to start doing more recruitment at our schools. That is what we did at Ohio Hi-Point. We created the home field advantage.

At Ohio Hi-Point it was important to first develop a strong team to lead this change in recruitment strategy. The team was led by Superintendent Kim Wilson and Director Nila Marquard. The team also included Bruce Johnson, instructional supervisor, David Wagner, public relations coordinator, and Deb Wortman, instructional supervisor.

The team agreed at the onset that we would use the systematic approach of the “Enrollment Funnel,” which I have described in previous *Techniques* articles. We would use that strategic planning process to clearly identify action steps and share

## WE NEED TO DELIVER THE MESSAGE DIRECTLY TO STUDENTS AND PARENTS IN A COORDINATED AND SYSTEMATIC APPROACH.

our information with students and parents over a long period of time in what I call the “rain effect.” The “rain effect” means that every time you communicate your message, it is like a drop of falling rain. The more your message “drips,” the sooner you move a viable prospect to take action. Through this type of controlled, deliberate dissemination of information you are able to control where, when and how your message is received.

We look at every student and parent interaction as an opportunity to develop a long-term relationship that is no longer contingent on the feeder school. Ohio Hi-Point now controls a significant part of the process. We appreciate whatever the feeder schools facilitate, but we have added many additional “raindrops” directed at students and parents so that accurate information and true value is delivered over and over again.

Here are some of the approaches used to create the home field advantage.

### Building the Relationship

Many schools deliver a powerful eighth-grade event where they connect with prospective students, but nothing further happens until 10th grade. In essence, they start the courting relationship with a great first date but fail to make further contact or continue the relationship until two years later. It is then they try to reconnect and deliver all the information necessary for students and parents to make an educated decision in a short period of time. Prospective students are asked to make a commitment, yet the relationship has not been built on a solid long-term foundation.

Relationships are built with frequent, meaningful contact. At Ohio Hi-Point, those relationships are built over several years by presenting the value of Ohio Hi-Point to both prospective students and their parents with a high degree of frequency—the “rain effect.” Every communication, such as tours, counselor visits,



Mark Perna works with Hi-Point Superintendent Kim Wilson on marketing the school and its programs.

## What They Learned

Ohio Hi-Point Career Center in west-central Ohio provides career and technical training for high school students, adults, and business and industry in Ohio. The two-year high school serves 14 school districts and offers 24 career training programs.

*Techniques* asked Superintendent Kim Wilson and Director Nila Marquard what they had learned about their marketing strategies that led to an entry-level-year increase of 39 percent for 2006–2007.

"The biggest advantage is that we now have a cohesive recruiting system," says Wilson.

Instead of doing what she describes as a lot of separate, isolated events, she notes that they now have a plan for marketing from the seventh grade through the 10th grade. "It is well coordinated, and one year builds upon the next," Wilson explains.

Marquard agrees, noting, "The main thing is not to use a shotgun approach but to plan a steady influx."

She says that a lot of what they did was to improve upon the events they had been holding. For example, when sophomores come to visit, the school now does what it calls a "Bus Boomer." Student ambassadors get on the bus, welcome the sophomores and provide them with directions for the day's visit.

Hi-Point also worked on its marketing materials. Wilson describes the language they were using in their marketing materials as "appealing to us as adults and employees." They have turned that around to what would be appealing to students.

So at Ohio Hi-Point Career Center, the marketing is now more organized, more coordinated and more on target. As Wilson puts it, "We are doing a better job of what we do."

direct mail and newsletters, connects with a bold, personal and fun impact.

### Event Management

Tours, open houses and feeder school visitation events are structured to deliver a powerful impression intended to break through and define the real value students obtain from Ohio Hi-Point. A key objective in these events is to create a positive feeling about the opportunities and value available to all students.

Keep in mind that people remember 33 percent of what they read, 50 percent of what they are told, and 100 percent of what they feel, so it is the objective of each event to connect on an emotional level. Each event provides information, but the positive feeling creates an open mind and willingness to accept future "raindrops" of information regarding the Ohio Hi-Point story.

### Sophisticated Direct Mail Campaigns

Like the mortar that holds together each brick, a sophisticated direct mail campaign will tie together each event in the mar-

keting plan. Each mailing continues the relationship, on your own home field, and drops the appropriate information at the proper time leading to that next event or action step in the plan.

You control the message, the frequency, and the impact for both students and parents. This is your home field advantage, and you can utilize it to accomplish your objectives.

Ohio Hi-Point's enrollment funnel has created a series of mailings that help support each event. Mailings prior to each event prepare students and parents for what is coming up and the value they should look for, while mailings after each event thank students and parents for their participation.

The team is now taking mailings to the next level by using the database of prospective students to create targeted direct mail letters that deliver personal and relevant information to each student based on his or her interests. These letters contain an opening paragraph that matches program-interest level, signed by that particular program instructor, and

additional information that increases the personal value of each mailing.

### Enrollment and Application Process

Ohio Hi-Point is in the first stages of revamping the application and enrollment process so that it works to their advantage. This represents true home field advantage. Ohio Hi-Point controls the flow of information, and can “drip” messages directly to prospective students and parents as needed.

For example, from January through March each year, a series of direct mail letters are scheduled; these deliver the value of Ohio Hi-Point and include a laser-generated application already completed with the student’s name and address. The student selects the program, obtains a parent’s signature, and returns the application to Ohio Hi-Point. The barriers to enrollment have been significantly reduced.

### Positioning the Partnership

In order to successfully schedule events at your own school and gain the advantage, it is essential to position everything you

## WE NEED TO MAKE THE FUNDAMENTAL CHANGE IN PERCEPTION FROM PASSIVE TO POWERFUL IN THE MARKETING AND RECRUITMENT PROCESS.

do as a benefit to the feeder school. Ohio Hi-Point genuinely wants to streamline the process, make things easier for feeder school counselors, and remove as many barriers to enrollment as possible. Counselors have been generally accepting of the changes implemented thus far, because Ohio Hi-Point is sensitive to the needs of their partner feeder schools.

Prior to making any change, the pros and cons of any decision are discussed and the impact on that feeder school relationship is always considered. It is vital to continually build strong relationships with feeder school counselors, teachers, principals and superintendents.

### A Winning Season

These approaches are just the tip of the iceberg. Creating the home field advantage means making the fundamental change in perception from passive to powerful in the

marketing and recruitment process. Take control of your own destiny and deliver a powerful message of value to your prospective students anytime, anywhere.

The team at Ohio Hi-Point has championed the view that success comes from creating a long-lasting relationship with students and their parents. That relationship starts early and continues through enrollment, retention, alumni and community relations. It is not one or two communications, events or conversations, but hundreds that create the relationship that cultivates emotional attachment and loyalty.

Creating the home field advantage has delivered a 39 percent increase in enrollment for Ohio Hi-Point. It is this ongoing relationship-building in the years to come that will determine their ultimate success, as well as yours, on the journey to be enrollment rich. ■

# TechCredit

## Receive Professional Development Hours for Reading *Techniques* Magazine!

### Here’s how to do it:

1. Read this article.
2. Log on to [www.educatorcredits.com](http://www.educatorcredits.com).
3. Select “Course Catalog” by clicking on the text on the home page (be ready to provide the following information: your name, complete address, day and work phone numbers, and e-mail address).
4. Choose the month/article for which you wish to receive hours.
5. Follow the instructions through registration and payment. Each article costs \$7.95. Once registered, you will be taken to your home room, where you can review the article and begin your exam.
6. Complete the examination by choosing the correct answers, then clicking the submit button. Once you pass the exam, you will be taken to your completion page, and the Professional Development hours are issued through the certificate of completion.

This article provides one Professional Development hour for career and technical educators. It can only be completed via the [educatorcredits.com](http://educatorcredits.com) Web site. If you need assistance, please call [educatorcredits.com](tel:1-866-369-8010) at 1-866-369-8010 during business hours—Monday through Friday, 7:00 a.m.–3:00 p.m. PST. You may also e-mail questions to: [service@ingrain.com](mailto:service@ingrain.com). Please do not contact ACTE or *Techniques* magazine for assistance.