

Using Communication to Build a Movement, a Business Strategy

Situation

With a mission to increase the number of effective charter schools throughout the state, the California Charter Schools Association (CCSA) www.myschool.org has realized significant gains in many regions including Los Angeles, Oakland and San Diego. Charter Schools are public schools that offer an alternative to the traditional public school run by the Unified School Districts. Many charter schools have a theme such as Arts and Science or Tech Ed and they strive to create relevant, engaging curriculum to serve all children. Charter Schools often locate in areas where children are underserved by the traditional public education system. Research has proven charter school successes with children who were once under performing in a traditional public school environment.

The San Joaquin Valley is a region that is plagued with high unemployment, chronic poverty and low performing schools. Together with the support from the Department of Education and the James Irvine Foundation, the California Charter Schools Association (CCSA) made a commitment to increasing the number of quality charter schools in the valley.

Faced with the reality of overwhelming negative public perception for charter schools locally and only a few high performing schools to date, Fresno General Manager John Madrid knew he needed more than a typical communication strategy. The goal was to change the public's perception of charter schools and create an understanding of the benefits of including charter schools in the educational offerings. With a strategic plan for Fresno, CCSA could then take this approach to their other Valley markets and systematically grow the number of high quality charter schools for the entire region.

Approach

CCSA, Fresno chose Gleason Group to outline the goal and objectives of this initiative and design and execute a strategy that would build on existing relationships and the interdependency of systems and organizations. The objective was to convey a vision for a healthy charter school movement while building a willing coalition of local influencers committed to its success. Gleason Group recognized critical local circumstances and structured an approach to capitalize on this timing. Much of the success of this initiative would be measured by growing local support for the CCSA, the inclusion of charter schools as a solution in community-wide discussions on education and inventive ways to address improving the high school graduation statistics.

The process designed by Gleason Group included a framework for community change based upon relationships. Leveraging these existing relationships, influencers go from limited understanding to believing in the value of the vision and ultimately being willing to personally support the cause. By assessing the market through research and interviews, a strategic plan was drafted that outlined the objectives and tactics necessary to create a community-wide movement. Specific communication strategies were recommended to work in concert with marketing mediums currently employed by CCSA. Recommendations were made on how to build and track the CCSA, Fresno network so that internal and external relationships are nurtured, leveraged and expanded. The strategies designed by Gleason Group also work to build an active coalition of empowered school leaders.

Results

As we begin to move into Phase 2 of the process, CCSA Fresno is armed with a systematic approach to advocate for charter schools and grow their market that begins with the value of relationship and works together with the community they serve, providing educational choices to all Fresno area children. This framework can now be customized to other CCSA regions to achieve similar objectives both in their external target markets and within the culture of their member schools.