

Planning a Successful Open House

The following paper helps you plan effectively and establish a proper timeline for holding an open house. Following these guidelines will help ensure the success of your event. The success of any open house is proportional to the effort and support invested.

Why Hold An Open House?

An open house is the most important marketing event that you can do for your school. Families need to see the campus and view the school programs in progress. It is vital that families talk to the faculty, staff, and students (the people who know and experience the school firsthand).

What Type Of Open House Do I Hold?

A large-number, “drop-in” type of event is very effective and highly recommended. It provides an opportunity to display your school in action. Parents have the chance to observe your faculty teaching or describing different types of programs. It is a chance for families to watch students doing activities and it is a great opportunity to hear administrators giving talks.

Include Students in Your Program

One of the very best ways to promote your school is to use your kids as ambassadors. Tours from students are an excellent way to make sure that visitors see everything you want them to see on your campus. Tours should highlight campus features and special programs (a sports practice/game, science experiments, singing or music rehearsal, etc). Use student ambassadors to greet visitors and direct them around your campus. Use the ambassadors in areas of likely interest (chapel, library, labs, and sports facility). Make sure your ambassadors are dressed appropriately or if they participate in a sport or other group, have them wear the respective uniform.

6 Months Before Your Open House

Give yourself plenty of time for planning your open house. 6 months in advance of your open house is generally a good time to begin planning.

- Select a date and time for your open house by reviewing your calendar for all possible conflict of events other than holidays. Do not forget about long running events such as the World Series and the Rodeo. Be sure to pick a time when your campus looks its best. Spring and fall are two very nice times of the year in Houston. Make sure the date works for your Principal and admission director. You will definitely want these people on hand to speak with the families attending your event. Most importantly, make sure there are no construction or maintenance projects scheduled for your campus during your open house.
- Make a laundry list of all the potential people you would like to see at your open house.
- Spend time thinking about the “special people” on your list, and send these people personal invitations. Many grandparents help their families with finances. Do not forget about the people who are leaders with influence over peers.
- Invest a little time in deciding the age of the children you want attending your open house. If you invite children to your open house, keep attention spans in mind when setting up programs.
- Think about the areas of the school needed for your open house such as the cafeteria, auditorium, gymnasium, parking lots, etc. Reserve these areas far in advance of your event.
- Ask current parents to serve refreshments. Visiting parents want the perspective of those already part of the school. Be sure older applicants get a peer’s opinion from current students, too.
- Determine how to communicate your event:
 - An eye-catching postcard with an RSVP is very effective and is in most cases the best choice. Nevertheless, personal

invitations are used successfully and are often used in addition to the postcard when targeting the “special people” mentioned above.

- It is important to supplement your mailed piece with advertising. A simple, clean design that promotes your school is a nice touch. Keep in mind that it is not necessary to tell “everything” about your school in this ad. Your objective is to provide the audience with just a little taste of what is happening at your school.
- Using direct mail and posters are great ways to promote your open house. The more things you do to create awareness for your event – the better your chances are for a great turnout.

Advertising:

Advertising allows you to target a specific group through special invitations, ads in specific publications, and the assistance of mutual friends.

You can use paid advertising to issue broad invitations via print, radio, and television service announcements.

Using grassroots advertising to promote awareness about your open house is extremely effective and can cost as little as purchasing paper. Distribute cost effective paper fliers to your parish, local businesses, libraries, youth centers, etc.

Be consistent in your various promotional pieces so they have a familiarity when someone sees more than one. Remember that the objective of your promotional pieces / ads are to publicize your open house. It is good to use several sentences highlighting your school but do not over do the length or your “bigger promotional message” will be lost.

Ask for help from your public relations person or a knowledgeable parent when creating ads and posters. They will know how to fit an ad to the column width of a weekly newspaper and they will know

whether an ad should include a photo or logo. They will help you with proper placement of information such as RSVP, phone numbers, hours, school address, name of a contact person, and a non-discriminatory admission statement. At the end of the day, this is the best way to ensure all promotional pieces are right for your school's image.

14 Days Before Your Open House

Below are suggested things to do two weeks before your open house. Please consider the following:

- Send reminder memos to the key people involved and needed to make your open house successful. This is critical. There is nothing worse than finding out the day before your event that a person you are depending on forgot to mark your open house on their calendar.
- Issue press releases to newspapers about your open house. Be sure to take photos of students preparing for your event and include these with your press releases. This is a good way to draw attention to your event.
- Placing posters, bulletins, announcements, and notices about your event in strategic locations will help support a great turnout.
- Be sure to have a check-in at your open house. This is a great way for you to collect pertinent information and stay in touch with the attendees of your event. You will want to record mailing addresses, email addresses, and how families learned about your open house. Having this information on-hand makes it easy to follow up with these people in the future.

10 Days Before Your Open House

As your open house gets nearer, you should consider doing the following things:

- Send follow up post cards via first class mail to remind people about your upcoming open house.
- Distribute announcements to radio bulletin boards and initiate any paid radio ads you have budgeted. Be sure to emphasize the availability of scholarship and/or financial aid information at the open house.
- Take a tour of your campus and issue any emergency work-repair orders (if necessary).

One or Two Days Before Your Open House

It is almost time for your open house. Here are a few important things you can do the day before your event:

- Estimate the attendance of your event. Surprisingly enough, one-third of those who RSVP do not come, and one-third of those who come do not RSVP.
- Confirm the attendee numbers with you food-service providers and all of the volunteers for your event.
- Prepare all of the materials you will need at the open house such as: name tags for the school staff and volunteers; name tags for visitors, programs, fliers, and packets of school materials for distribution.
- Reconfirm your needs for air-conditioning and/or heating.
- Be sure to test the PA system – an improperly functioning PA system will devalue a well-planned event.
- You will want to record a message on your school's answering machine stating that all people are welcome to attend the open house. Be sure to include in your message that you do not need an RSVP to attend the open house. Do not forget to mention the time of your open house and driving directions.
- Hang your welcome signs in visible as well as strategic areas.

Review & Follow Up After Your Open House

It is very important to review and follow up accordingly after your open house. You must measure the success of your open house in order to learn what worked and what did not work. This way you can accurately determine your success and make improvements for the future. Consider doing the following:

- First, check your guest book to determine the effectiveness of your ad campaign. Knowing how families heard about your event will help you determine placements of future advertisements.
- Provide the attendees of your open house with a survey and request they complete it. Review the results closely. Comments about areas for improvements are especially important.
- Keep copies of your plans, ads, invitations, etc. This helps for preparing for next year and makes it easier to train new personnel on how to plan for an open house.
- Lastly, never forget to thank your generous volunteers and community contacts.