


by Christopher M. Marra 

# Reframing Recruitment as Marketing: Building Connections with Prospective High School Music Students, Families, and Administrators

**Abstract:** The transition from middle school to high school can be a particularly challenging time for music program retention. However, when music teachers view this process through the lens of marketing, it may be possible to develop a more holistic and comprehensive approach toward student enrollment. Marketing strategies related to perception, targeting, salience, and the “rule of seven” are all adaptable to music program membership efforts. These tools can help music teachers more effectively tailor messages and attract prospective students.

**Keywords:** advocacy, enrollment, marketing, music program, recruitment, transition



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The journey from middle school to high school can often feel like an overwhelming transition. With increased

elective opportunities and growing pressure to attend to academic rigor, many students and families can feel anxious about balancing interests and time commitments during the high school experience. On top of these concerns, students working through the added challenges associated with COVID-19 may feel somewhat detached from the traditional music experiences they once loved in school. For eighth-grade music students, this period can be a critical point for retention in the activity. As a result, music programs often see higher attrition when students transition to high school.<sup>1</sup>

As a high school band and orchestra director for ten years, I noticed similar

*As students move into secondary school, music sometimes gets pushed to the back burner. Here are some ideas to keep it in the forefront of students' (and their families') minds.*

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annual trends. Students and parent/guardians were citing reoccurring concerns such as perceived schedule conflicts, financial and time commitments, and worries about maintaining high GPAs each year. After a few years of feeling confused about why I kept losing students to these anticipated apprehensions, I realized the old process of “recruitment” (i.e., sweeping in to talk to eighth-grade students just before course enrollment) might not be the most effective approach to delivering accurate and effective messaging. As a result, I decided to refocus my approach on membership growth through the lens of marketing rather than recruitment.

This new plan of action involved a more proactive path infused with a variety of strategies from both inside and outside the music teaching profession, including information gathered from business marketing classes. Promotion of our music program became a collaboration with my colleagues and booster parents. We developed a coordinated yearlong strategy that, after three years of implementation, doubled the size of the high school music program. The purpose of this article is to (1) explore the common trends and research related to music-student enrollment during the eighth- to ninth-grade transition; (2) outline key marketing concepts and how they could support music-program enrollment goals; and (3) suggest ways to apply these strategies to the key target markets of students, parents, and administrators. I will also include resources and suggested timelines that can be adapted to your teaching setting.

## Research on Enrollment

For music educators teaching at the secondary level, attrition during the high school transition seems to be a continuous dilemma. However, there is little scholarship about this particular moment in music programs. Much of the extant literature examined attrition after the first year of music study.<sup>2</sup> Other investigators studied this topic more broadly over the course of students’ entire time in public school.<sup>3</sup> The Tanglewood

Symposium of 1967 produced one of the first formal acknowledgments of this transition point and indicated that a decline in music participation at the high school level was a consistent problem in the music education profession.<sup>4</sup> More recently, researchers revealed that music programs at the secondary level are only able to retain between 10 and 20 percent of the student population. This number seems to be closely related to the socioeconomic status (SES), gender, and ethnicity of students.<sup>5</sup>

Several authors published in the *Music Educators Journal* posited various theories about why music programs at the secondary level experience this problem with retention. Professor emeritus of music education John Kratus and music education scholar David Williams suggested that the subject matter itself has lost relevance with current high school students.<sup>6</sup> Other authors cited a variety of contributing factors, such as competing activities, insufficient parental support, peer influence, and a general loss of interest.<sup>7</sup> Music education researcher Jennifer Hawkinson surveyed and interviewed students who decided not to participate in their high school’s music program. She found that factors such as self-efficacy, perception of the music program, and the number of outside constraints were influential in students’ decisions. She suggested that acknowledging and confronting known barriers as well as adopting a more student-centered approach might have a positive effect on student retention.<sup>8</sup>

Social factors are also known to be a primary influence on students’ desire to participate in high school music. Investigators Cecil Adderley and colleagues reported that students became members of their music ensembles due in part to the established positive reputation of the music program within the school and other peers’ positive view of the music program. The authors further noted that participants frequently cited friendship benefits as well as growth in their personal self-esteem, confidence, and self-knowledge as reasons for participating in their music program.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Elizabeth Parker, an associate professor

of music education at Temple University in Philadelphia, revealed that participating in a music program that is perceived as excellent may outweigh other factors that could negatively influence perception of the ensemble.<sup>10</sup>

The problem of music student attrition at the high school level is not new in our profession. While some authors believe a complete overhaul of music class offerings is the best course of action towards retaining students, I suggest that more can be done to keep the students who choose to be involved in traditional ensembles. When considering the implications of past research alongside the antiquated recruitment practices often used by music teachers, it seems as though there may be unexplored opportunities to address these barriers, communicate more effectively to students and parents, and enhance the perception of the music program.

## Marketing for Music Teaching

It is often the case that busy music teachers only think about promoting their program when it is time for students to sign up for classes.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, this approach does not allow music programs to develop a coherent strategy to best reach and inform families of the great work they do for students. Additionally, these presentations can feel a bit like a “used-car salesman” pitch where students and guardians only see a presence from the high school music program when it seems to best serve the music teacher’s interests.

Rather than framing this time as recruitment, I recommend music teachers consider rethinking this process as “marketing.” This shift in mindset would focus a music teacher’s efforts by using time-tested marketing strategies throughout an ongoing, yearlong process in contrast to consolidated communications only during the recruitment season. Many approaches identified in marketing texts apply well to music program promotion.<sup>12</sup> Principles surrounding the concepts of perception, targeting, salience, and the “rule of seven” are particularly useful. These areas of focus can

help music programs formulate plans to better understand their audiences and how to most effectively engage with them.

The phrase “perception is reality” often refers to the way individuals behave based on their own personal construction of reality rather than an objective reality. People’s perceptions of a brand, its values, and its benefits have a significant impact on their decisions. In the world of marketing, this concept helps stress the importance of understanding what aspects influence a consumer’s perception such that they are driven to make decisions. Marketers can influence perception by clearly defining a product’s unique value and the consumers’ unmet need. When a company is able to highlight attention toward the most positive aspects of their product and connect those attributes to the consumers’ perceived needs, they are more likely to generate a dependable and flourishing patron base.<sup>13</sup> When translating this to music programs, it would be appropriate to consider the specific benefits associated with music program participation with particular emphasis on the aspects you believe the music program can fulfill better other electives. Next, consider the unmet needs of the students and parents. How does participation in the music program help fulfill those needs more effectively than any other elective option? The answers to these questions need to be tailored to the specific audience of students in a school system. This is often referred to as targeting.

In business marketing, there is an understanding that a “one size fits all” approach to messaging is not effective. Instead, marketing professionals try to segment their customers into smaller target markets. From here, they work to more thoroughly understand the needs and perceptions related to each market segment and then create a marketing strategy that specifically targets each group based on their characteristics. Music programs typically have three unique target audiences: students, parents, and administrators. Each of these groups will share with the other groups

some similar characteristics, such as the desire for academic achievement or the value of contributing to school culture. However, each group also possesses a unique set of perceptions and unmet needs. For instance, students are often more concerned about the social aspects of music participation, while parents like to know their children feel connected to something meaningful. Therefore, it would be best to have a marketing strategy for each of these distinctive target audiences. More specific examples of targeting are shared later in this article.

The concept of salience is also important when considering any marketing strategy. Salience refers to the prominence and/or closeness of the person delivering the message. An individual is more likely to trust information from someone they perceive to be similar to themselves.<sup>14</sup> As a result, it would be wise to consider messengers who can closely relate to each target audience. While the music teacher should absolutely be involved as a messenger, it would be wise to also include students and parents in these materials and presentations. Prospective students and parents will be more receptive to hearing messages from individuals they see as similar to themselves. This can be even more effective if those messengers are able to share personal stories related to common questions or concerns about high school music participation.

Finally, marketing professionals often refer to a communication principle called the “rule of seven.” This rule suggests that prospective customers must interact with a marketing message at least seven times before they will take action.<sup>15</sup> This can (and should) involve a variety of marketing mediums including in-person advocacy, digital interactions, and even paper advertisements. While this may seem difficult to achieve with a music program, consider how many opportunities music educators have to communicate with their various audiences. Between attending concerts, hosting joint concerts, participating in information nights, visiting middle school rehearsals, sending home letters (digital and paper), working with

guidance counselors, social media, and a new fluency with videoconferencing platforms, it seems reasonable that our prospective students and families could encounter our messages seven times (or more) throughout the course of the year.

## Applying Marketing Strategies

As mentioned earlier, the process of segmentation and targeting is commonly used in marketing to better understand characteristics of each audience group. By doing so, marketers can better position their product messaging to satisfy the customers’ unmet need. Music teachers likely use this concept without realizing it. For instance, if a music teacher wanted to propose a music trip for the upcoming school year to their students, parents, and administrators, they would perhaps create three different presentations. While the content of the presentation would be mostly similar, they would probably highlight the aspects of the trip that most appealed to the particular audience they were talking to. The same process could be applied to marketing the music program as a whole. To do this, I segmented our audiences into three distinct groups: (1) students, (2) parents/guardians, and (3) administrators. Next, I will apply the other marketing strategies to each group by considering the unique characteristics, perceptions, and needs of those we typically interact with when working to grow enrollment.

## Students

### *Perception*

When trying to understand student perceptions, consider what it is like to be a thirteen- or fourteen-year-old who was just asked to select their classes for high school. What questions or concerns might likely dominate their thoughts during this process? Many students wonder which classes are mandatory and which are elective. And with all of these elective options, how will they have time for them on top of their other interests? In the case of music, I

was often asked questions such as “Can I still play soccer *and* do music?” and “Am I good enough to play in the high-school orchestra?” Additionally, many students can feel parental and peer pressure to take the “right” classes to best position themselves for admission and earning scholarships to college. Music teachers should prepare a list of these common questions that best represent their teaching contexts. A good starting point may be asking current freshmen what their greatest perceived obstacles were before making the decision to participate in music. Next, music teachers should prepare solutions to these common concerns and have them on hand. This communicates that you not only understand their position but that you have also spent the time to work out resolutions to many anticipated barriers.

Finally, eighth graders are in the process of developing their social identity and are often influenced by what their friends are choosing to participate in during high school.<sup>16</sup> They want to know if doing music high school is considered “cool” or not. The social aspects of high school music participation are likely to be even more important to students who have been away from “normal” school experiences during this difficult era. Students want to be a part of something that is special. They want to know what membership in this music program means. Therefore, music programs should highlight how our classes and ensembles often provide a much-needed “home away from home” and a connection to students from all grade levels.<sup>17</sup>

### *Salience*

While it is important for the music teacher to be involved in these communications, students will be even more receptive to hearing messages from audiences that they consider to be similar to themselves.<sup>18</sup> After all, they can speak firsthand about how they once had similar concerns, how they worked through those issues, and what they value most about their participation in music. I would recommend gathering

a group of student “ambassadors” each year that range somewhat broadly in age, gender, race, and have a variety of other social-group connections within the school. In my own marketing campaigns, I included a freshman whose own entrance into the group began as “on the fence” but now loves their experience. I also featured the story of a sophomore or junior who was successfully involved in other activities that were perceived as barriers to participation (in my case, track and field). Last, the senior representative spoke to seeing their involvement in the music program as vital to reaching their broader goals in high school and beyond. This group of high school members helped future students understand that many of their concerns were easily solvable with solid planning and good communication.

When assembling this group of students, I suggest meeting in advance of the presentation to discuss some of the common concerns mentioned above and ask them to reflect on their personal experiences with these topics. You might ask them to provide some real-life examples and stories that can help perspective students understand how membership in this group is not only worthwhile but unique and different from other activities and classes they may be considering at the high school.

### *The Rule of Seven*

For my program, our efforts began in the fall when we hosted a side-by-side pep-band experience. Next, the high school ensembles performed for the whole middle school, and I began visiting the middle school classes. During these visits, I would conduct or provide clinics when possible. By the winter, I typically attended at least one middle school concert, hosted parent and student informational events (at the middle school), and began presenting about the various aspects of the high school music program while addressing typical concerns right up front. By the time enrollment came in the spring semester,

I brought current students to the middle school and also hosted the middle school ensembles for joint concerts (at these events, I also spoke to parents and students). Next, I sent home physical welcome letters along with commination from our booster parents. Finally, our boosters continuously updated our social media pages throughout the year. All of these efforts were designed with the goal to maintain a positive, constructive, and welcoming presence of our program rather than swooping in like a sleazy salesperson only during the course enrollment period. (See Figure 1 for a marketing strategy calendar and Figure 2 for a sample welcome letter to students; feel free to make use of these figures as you see fit.)

## **Parents/Guardians**

### *Perception*

Parents and guardians often share concerns similar to those of students about balancing classes and activities. They may also be worried about the financial commitments associated with high school music (e.g., instruments, uniforms/attire, fundraising, travel) and whether their child will have a place where they feel welcome in this new school environment. In my experience, parents of eighth-grade students may be even more anxious than their children are about this transition. The long list of questions and concerns can result in parents and students perceiving the music program as too time-consuming, too expensive, and too overwhelming to continue in high school. When these perceptions are not addressed up-front and early in the marketing process, parents and guardians who do not feel comfortable speaking up about these concerns will often disengage.

### *Salience*

Similar to what is true with students, marketing to parents is most effective coming from parents. Parent-to-parent communication can be particularly

useful when highlighting the unique benefits of participating in the music program. This is especially useful when addressing common concerns about schedule and the ways students are welcomed into the group. For my program, I would assemble a group of parents that included a senior parent, a freshmen parent, and a parent whose child may have overcome an obstacle to participate in music (e.g., athletic conflicts or worries about homework time). This helped ensure that prospective parents were likely to resonate with at least one of these parent presenters. Before meetings, we would prepare a list of common parental concerns and solutions. Presenters would also share some specific worries they had during this transition period.

### *The Rule of Seven*

Along with student activities, parent outreach began in the fall. Parents were invited to attend all side-by-side events and would also be present when I attended middle school concerts. As we approached the winter months, parents were invited to our social media accounts and included in all printed materials. Finally, my booster organization initiated a “parent buddy” system where new parents were paired with existing parents as a way of building community and enhancing participation. Veteran parents helped their buddies with volunteer signups, reminders about drop-off and pickup procedures, and other logistics related to the unique contexts of our program.

## **Administrators**

### *Perception*

It takes a village to manage a music program, and that village involves administrators. It is important to get administrators (of all types) on your side. This includes guidance counselors, assistant principals, and administrative assistants. They all likely have a role in the enrollment process because they set the schedule, and course requirements,

## **FIGURE 1**

### **Marketing Strategy Calendar**

(Target Population: **S = Students, P = Parents, A = Administrators**)

#### **Summer**

- Contact middle school teachers to set/confirm tentative dates for events. (S, P)

#### **September**

- Side-by-Side Marching/Pep Band experience (S)
- Meeting with administration about marketing plan and their role (A)

#### **October**

- Large-ensemble performance for entire middle school (outdoors at lunch or flex period) (S)
- Active social media of program events (S, P, A)

#### **November**

- High school director visit with “clinic” teaching experiences (S)

#### **December**

- Attend middle school concerts and speak briefly at these events if possible; pass out printed flyers. (S, P)
- Meet with high school Guidance Department to prepare them with common questions and solutions. (A)

#### **January**

- Visit eighth-grade classes with current “student ambassadors.” (S)
- Send home individual welcome letter or invitations. (S, P)
- Host “Perspective Parent Night.” (P)
- Active on social media (S, P, A)
- Attend all elective-night events. (S, P, A)

#### **February**

- Follow up with guidance department to ensure all barriers were resolved. (A)
- Follow up with middle school music teachers. (S, P)

#### **March**

- Host “joint concerts” with eighth-grade ensembles at the high school. Speak to parents about exciting plans for next year; remind them it is not too late to enroll. (S, P)

#### **April/May**

- Assess effectiveness of current efforts and adjust as needed for next year. (S, P, A)

and it is expected that they will be asked about participation in music, too.<sup>19</sup>

To understand an administrator’s perception, we have to consider what their overarching school goals are. What do they believe, and to whom do they need to answer? What metrics do they use to determine success, and how can the music program contribute to the administrator’s definition of that success? In my experience, good administrators

place a high priority on student connectedness, positive school culture, and social emotional learning (SEL).<sup>20</sup> Typically, this is something music programs normally contribute to by design due to the amount of contact time music teachers have and the facilitative role they often take when interacting with students. However, these attributes may not be as obvious to administrators as they are to music teachers, which makes

## FIGURE 2

### Sample Welcome Letter to Students

[Music Program Logo Here]

Date

Dear Future [H.S. Name] Music Family,

It is my pleasure to welcome you to the next step in your educational journey. Entering high school is probably one of the most exciting and overwhelming experiences that students and parents will have. Coming to a new school provides a vast opportunity to develop new skills and to further build on the many achievements that you have already accomplished. One opportunity that I hope you will decide to take advantage of is being a part of our award-winning [Name] High School Music Department next year.

You have been fortunate to be a part of a thriving middle-school music experience. Electing to be a part of the [Name] Music Department will give you the opportunity to build on all of your talents and to take your musical experiences to the next level.

We are proud to offer a variety of music classes at [Name]. As you are about to register for classes, I would like to remind you of the many fabulous music options that you have.

If you are *currently in a band*, your next step will be to enroll in **[course code for band]**. We are fortunate to be able to offer multiple credits for enrollment in this singular class. This one class can fulfill a variety of requirements for most college admissions. This class does require some rehearsal time outside of school from August–November. Although it can appear to be a big time commitment, I can assure you that most students actually maintain better GPAs during the marching season. Students often say this time of year is their favorite aspect of the program.

If you are *currently in orchestra*, your next step will be to enroll in **[course code for orchestra]**. This ensemble has many performance opportunities throughout the year. Students who enroll in this class for all four years of high school will receive three years of Visual/Performing Arts credit and one year of Applied Arts credit. In their fourth year, students can elect to be placed in honors-level orchestra.

If you are *currently in choir*, your next step will be to enroll in **[course code for choir]**. This ensemble also has many performance opportunities throughout the year. Students who enroll in this class for all four years of high school will receive three years of Visual/Performing Arts credit and one year of Applied Arts credit.

Finally, if you have an *interest in jazz*, you should consider being a part of our Jazz Ensemble. To be a part of this group you will need to add **[course code for jazz]** in your “second elective” spot. Students in this class must also be enrolled in the Symphonic Band or Orchestra. Members of the Jazz Ensemble perform frequently at community events in addition to our typical annual concerts. This class requires an audition, however all interested student should list on your schedule. We will contact you in May for details on the audition process.

I wish you the best of luck throughout this process. I sincerely hope that you will decide to join us during this exciting time for the [H.S. Name] Music Department. I can assure you that being a part of our music family will be one of the best decisions you have ever made. The friendships and memories that you create with us will be the ones that you will keep for a lifetime.

Sincerely,

[Name]

[Name]

Instrumental Music  
[Name] High School  
(###) ###-####  
Email

Choral Music  
[Name] High School  
(###) ###-####  
Email

Visit us at the [Name] Music Website

[URL here]

it necessary to highlight these benefits as a part of your marketing strategy.

## Salience

One of the keys to building a positive working relationship with administrators is developing salience. To do this, music teachers need to develop relationships with their administrators such that you can find common interests beyond the school. Music teachers can also build salience by actively reaching out to share good news and by showing that you, as the music teacher, are vested in the overarching, schoolwide goals, not just the goals that support music.

## The Rule of Seven

It is a good idea to meet with administrators early in the school year and share your goals for student connectedness and the marketing plans to get students involved in high school music. Share a list of common concerns from students and parents and how you would recommend they address them. I suggest inviting members of the administration to your other events (i.e., joint concerts; student and parent meetings) to briefly speak and show their support. If possible, you should ask for pictures of the music program to be featured on the school website and social media accounts. Finally, I recommend getting into the habit of sharing good news about the music program on the morning announcements. Hearing ongoing positive news about the music program helps build an affirmative perception throughout the whole school.

## Mindful Marketing

Concerns over music student enrollment when moving to the high school level are long-standing in our profession. While a number of factors contribute to a student's decision to continue with music during this transition, I believe music teachers can positively impact enrollment with a more mindful marketing approach. Using marketing strategies such as perception, targeting, salience,

and the rule of seven can help educators better understand the unique outlooks and needs of each audience group, tailor messaging to highlight membership benefits, and explore a variety of ways to deliver those messages. By viewing this time period through the lens of marketing, music teachers are more likely to diversify and expand their efforts to attract and maintain students. Finally, while this article was primarily focused on the high school transition in instrumental ensembles, music teachers should feel empowered to know that these concepts can easily be adapted to other teaching settings. With some targeted planning, the strategies discussed here can be applied to marketing vocal ensembles or establishing a solid enrollment base in beginning music classes as well.

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