

What is on your gym walls?

Using public spaces to communicate what sets your school apart

“What does the [building] itself tell you about this company? ...What does your setting tell customers?”

Disney Institute, with Theodore Kinni
Be Our Guest

Yes, I am well aware that we are not Disneyland and do not have the budgets they do. Nevertheless, even with (almost) no money, your public spaces need to reinforce what is most important to your school.

Why focus on your gym?

I'm assuming your gym, if you have one, is the space where your graduations, music programs, fall festivals, fund-raisers, spring flings, social nights, etc. occur. This means that more people walk into your gym, than come into your office or classrooms... grandparents, church members, extended family members, friends of current parents, etc.

Additionally, if your school participates in varsity sports you will have the parents from visiting teams in your gym regularly as well.

Finally, your gym is the area of your school you are most likely to either rent out or make available to groups in your community: a community basketball night, an official polling place (wow, that is hundreds of people), the facility for a Sunday-keeping church. (While this isn't the focus of today's message, you might consider seeking to rent out that space as a way to increase your school's visibility as well.)

If you do not have gym, apply this message to whatever space is the most public in your school.

What story is your gym telling your guests?

If display cases in your gym's entryway are filled with dust-covered Pathfinder trophies from years (or decades) ago--your school is telling guests, "Nothing much is happening around here currently so we are stuck celebrating successes from the distant past."

If your gym is an unsightly storage area for infrequently (or never) used items--your school is telling guests, "We are so stretched keeping up the bare minimum that we don't have the time and energy to make our environment appealing."

If the majority of your gym's wall space is dedicated to sponsorships and banners advertising your sports teams' winning seasons--your school is telling guests, "Sports and winning are important to us."

None of these are inherently evil things. But they are not the focus of why your school exists. Your gym is your best avenue for visibly reinforcing your school's mission, and in the process differentiating yourselves from your competition.

What story should it tell?

You will need to decide what is most important to your school and what makes you different and special. But I'll give you a couple hints. Academics and character development are the two most successful differentiators for Christian schools across the country.

Are there any examples?

Why, yes there are. Years ago, I walked into a high school gym here in Northern. The walls were nearly covered with vertical banners displaying the motto of each graduating class. While not every motto was stellar, the overall story was still, "We have left here with a higher purpose in life."

In a competing school, I've seen a banner congratulating the current graduating class with a list of all the colleges to which those students had been accepted. (I don't believe those students were attending all the colleges listed, but they had been accepted.) The story: "Our students are prepared for college and can attend very good colleges."

Another school in Northern has its mission statement hanging on a banner. While it competes for emphasis with the more numerous sports banners, the story is still, "Our mission is important to us."

And for a non-gym example: One school has added a Bible verse and related image to fill the space at the front of their meeting room which is used for both school and community gatherings. The story: "We are a Bible-based school."

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A small note on the examples relating to sports. I can easily imagine the vehement argument from proud parents that celebrating your school's sport successes is a

wonderful draw and/or that because this is the school's gym it is appropriate to focus on sports in that space. Here are my thoughts:

- Successful organizations differentiate themselves from their competition. (This is true for schools or banks or car manufacturers.) What makes you different and special?
- Your gym is your most public space and therefore your best avenue for communicating to your community what makes you different and special.
- No Adventist school that I know can effectively compete with their **local** public school on sports. This is true both on the level of our sports teams competing and, because we don't win on the field (against our local public schools), as a point of differentiation.
- Looking like a public school, with banners and sponsorship advertising, means you are sending the message, "Us too. We do sports too. We look just like our local competition." But you need to look different and better than the competition on a metric of your choosing.

Delegating:

Setting the mission and differentiation of your school is a team effort, and should be led by yourself, your board chair and/or pastor through the school board. Everything else here can be delegated: brainstorming a way to communicate your differentiation, making it happen, organizing a work bee, soliciting and coordinating use of the gym for outside entities.

Binder tab: June

School size: All

Marketing process step:

- 1) Who are we?
- 2) What do families want?
- 3) What needs to change?
- 4) How do we tell our community?
- 5) How do we track results?