

# Parental Preferences for Private Faith-Based Pre-School Websites

**Date:**

May 22<sup>nd</sup> 2010

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Ed 690 Spring 201

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## Overview

Like their “traditional” private and public counterparts, private faith based preschools often seek to increase enrollment through multifunctional websites. As parents turn to the Internet in considering schools for their children, there is a need for schools to design websites to meet the informational and organizational expectations of these parents. Additionally, the aesthetics, navigability, relevance, timeliness, and “quality” of information on the school site all affect the parents’ impression of the school. The aforementioned has a direct effect on whether or not parents choose to investigate the school as a prospective childcare provider.

Researchers [Laura Cecil, Brian Levels & Lyford Rome] selected three different private, faith based, school websites as a basis to build a descriptive comparison study. We then surveyed parents of preschoolers currently enrolled in the San Diego State University's (SDSU) Children's Center. Parents were asked to view the websites one at a time and then anonymously complete a survey about site elements that might affect their decision to consider each one for enrollment. Survey items focused on the school-specific information that parents might deem critical to know, as well as site aesthetics and site usability/navigability.

The survey yielded interesting trends and patterns although a number of factors (e.g. time constraints, lack of personal contact with the sample group, survey instrument problems) affected the amount of data we gathered. Keeping the above barriers in mind, we were able to extract those patterns from nine completed surveys. The data we gathered assisted us in drawing conclusions in the following areas:

- Which of the three sites the parents preferred the most
- Parents initial impressions when first visiting the websites
- Ease of location information on the websites
- Ease of navigability
- Quality of content
- Website appearance
- Content over design

# Review of Relevant Literature

We sought to find the elements of private faith based preschool website most likely to influence the enrollment choice of parents seeking a school for their child(ren). Accordingly, the team organized its review of the literature around the following themes or constructs:

1. General website clarity
2. Parental preferences for school websites
3. School website marketing

## *General Website Clarity*

A poorly designed website can have a detrimental effect on a business in this age of internet savvy users (Williams & Tollet, 2006). We deemed that it is useful to review general principles of information architecture and how elements of aesthetics, navigability and clarity of presentation affect the usefulness of a website. Additionally fundamental errors are common if the site is not designed with the perspective of the end user in mind (Nielsen, 2000).

Utility is a term which refers to how relevant and functional is the content of the site to the needs of the user. Usability refers to how well users can access this functionality (Hassan & Li, 2005). The level of utility and usability together, is a good gauge for determining general website clarity.

Several approaches for usability testing have been developed; some include the evaluation of quality of the content as well as the interface (Hassan & Li). These approaches vary in their focus as well as their methodology. While these approaches span the generations of web development, many share common elements that have been found essential to a user's satisfaction with a particular site. We used a combination of the findings in six studies (**See Appendix B Table 1**) and determined that the common thread between the studies is that navigation, consistency, clean design and guidance all contribute to usability.

## *Parental Preferences for School Websites*

The use of the Internet is on the rise today. Recent studies show that the majority of Americans use the Internet regularly to get information (Swann, 2006). As more and more people turn to the internet as a main source of information, new possibilities for

schools to market themselves through a website arise. With these new possibilities the following questions are raised: What are parents looking for? How should this information be organized? In order to answer these questions, it is important to understand those using these websites, their preferences, and what information they are seeking.

Parents are turning to the Internet more frequently and are looking for easy to find information. Studies by the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that parents with children under 18 were more likely to use the Internet than those with no children. These same parents were more excited about technology than non-parents (as cited in Swann, 2006). According to Vicars (2009) they are also a group of “visually oriented people who have little time or patience for a web site that is not inviting or cannot quickly link them to the desired information within three clicks (p. 14).

As the above evidence suggests, parents today are turning to the internet more frequently when it comes to finding a school for their children instead of more traditional methods, such as phone calls, visits or reading brochures. This often means their first impression of a school comes from that school’s website. Beyond first impressions, some parents even shop for schools by visiting web sites and comparing features, looking for everything from the school’s mission to the lunch menu (McKenzie, 1997). Due to the increased number of parents with young children using the Internet and the features they look for, it is imperative for preschools’ web sites be well organized and supply appropriate information.

Well designed websites may be the best way to encourage prospective parents to show further interest in a preschool (Vicars, 2009, p. 15). Once parents decide to visit the website, it is vital to know what information they are seeking in order to keep them interested and to get them to take the next steps. The experience that parents seeking a preschool have initially with a website is vital (Goldsborough, 2001, p. 12). According to research by Vicars (2009), parents are looking for sites that know what’s important to them and communicate these ideas in an attention holding manner (p. 15).

Content should be brief with easy to find links and clear headlines. Easy navigability through site maps and clearly labeled links help find the information they are seeking. Parents want to feel in control on the website, with navigational buttons to major sections

on all or most pages. These parents do not want to wait for content, so pages should load quickly. Goldsborough (2001) found that parents are also looking for easily accessible information, not “dumbed down”, but “clear, quick and easy”(p.12). Keeping websites simple, to the point, and well organized all work to the benefit of the school.

Once parents decide they can navigate a website and are comfortable with the aesthetics, they look for specific content. They want to be able to easily access the school's mission, get a feel for its character, its look, its offerings to children, and its overall spirit (McKenzie, 1997). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the largest organization working with accrediting preschools, uses 10 standards in it's certification process. NAEYC (n.d.) states these standards and how parents can use them to choose a preschool. Curriculum, staff, physical environment, leadership and management are listed among these. Many parents will seek this information on the school's website, where it can be shown through photos of staff, facilities and in biographical information of teachers and administrators. All of this information should be easily accessible and prominent on a preschool's website. Once parents have this information, they can decide if the school is of interest to their family and take the next steps in deciding if it is right for them.

### ***School Website Marketing***

Internet marketing plays a major role in any form of business in the 21st century. A Wikipedia article states "The interactive nature of Internet marketing in terms of providing instant response and eliciting responses is a unique quality of the medium." (*Wikipedia 2010*) Good internet marketing strategies are essential for all types of business. Stoney DeGeyter, the President of Pole Position Marketing, states:

"Marketing a website isn't particularly difficult. It's usually just a matter of knowing what to do, how to do it and having the skills and time to get it done. With that said, marketing a website isn't particularly easy either. There are so many factors and variables in play that at any given time that the job can be quite overwhelming." (DeGeyter, 2008)

DeGeyter also formed a Web marketing checklist that can be used as a tool to determine what elements make a website marketable ([Marketing Checklist](#)). As stated

earlier there are many variables that are Essential in good website development. We used this as a reference to determine what questions we should ask our audience pertaining to website marketing.

Search engine optimization is also major factor in all types of web marketing. It is essential that a web page, or other web based content, is highly ranked in the major search engine databases, of the major search providers. The Graphic Design School website states:

“it is critical that the information is visible and easily accessible when they need or want the information. The problem with this is that the Internet is so big, in fact it’s so huge that if each web page on the net were an actual piece of 8.5” by 11” sheet of paper the amount of paper generated, would over fill a football stadium with the capacity of seating 100,000 people. (*Graphic Design School 2009*) ”

If a Pre School publishes a web page or any relevant content, the consumer must be able to find that information with little or no effort. One of our evaluation items for this study dealt with search engine optimization.

# Contextual Factors, Issues and Concerns

Several constraints affected this study, like most. These contextual factors are detailed in the following subsections:

- Time
- Low response rate

## *Time*

The research was completed within a given time limit (College Semester). This limit did not allow for the survey to be tested prior to being sent to the sample population. With more time, the instruments could have been tested and altered for better results.

Our research supervisor (Dr. Marcie Bober-Michel) worked diligently to connect us with the parents at San Diego State University's Children's Center, which we used as our survey pool. At the end of the semester we were able to connect with Robin Judd (SDSU Children's Center Supervisor). We ran into time problems because of other research studies that were going on at the center. Robin had to choose a time that was best for the center and us. With care and concern, Robin was able to give us a decent time slot to administer the surveys. We ran into some unavoidable time problems with this, but got enough response from the parents to gather much needed data.

## *Low Response Rate*

Few respondents completed the entire survey. It was sent out to all parents at the San Diego State Children's Center with 33 parents viewing the survey and only 9 (27.3%) completing it. This low response rate may be attributed to several factors:

1. Survey length- The survey was too long. Most respondents did not look at all three of the websites in detail and finished questions for only one or two sites.
2. Survey clarity- Some respondents showed confusion about the reason for the survey. Some thought the survey was about the Children's Center website and did not understand why they were looking at other schools' websites.

3. Distribution method- The survey was sent to parents by the director of the Children's Center. We did not have direct contact with the parents, so were unable to answer questions, encourage participation, or explain the study.

## Methodology

This was a descriptive study exploring the types and quality of information prospective parents want to see on a private faith-based preschool's website. We also looked at how the information offered affects a parents decision to consider the school as a candidate for their child. The methodology is broken into 4 sections:

- Sample
- Website Selection
- Survey
- Procedures

Each section details the steps taken to complete the study.

### *Sample*

The SDSU Children's Center population was chosen because these parents have most likely used the Internet to look for a preschool (see <http://as.sdsu.edu/child/index.html>). We inferred that they were somewhat familiar with items that should be considered when looking for a preschool. The Center primarily serves families associated with the University, although all students are welcome. Children from infants through age 4 can enroll.

### *Website Selection*

We chose three websites of local San Diego faith-based private preschools to use as websites the parents would visit to answer the survey questions. The school sites selected were: St. Paul's Lutheran of Pacific Beach, Christ Lutheran School La Mesa and Grace Lutheran of San Diego. We choose schools with similar religious backgrounds in order to minimize any bias from the sample based on religious preference. These sites also offered a range in usability, graphic appeal, and information provided. One of our researchers, Laura Cecil, also had some familiarity with these three schools, allowing for the possibility of aiding the schools in designing websites.

## Survey

Data was largely gathered from the survey that the team developed in SurveyMonkey- an online survey generator. The survey consisted of 4 main parts:

1. **Greeting** - The greeting introduced the researchers and the study to the sample. It also insured anonymity and confidentiality.
2. **Demographic information**- Parents were asked about how many preschool age children they have, ages of children, gender, and marital status.
3. **Individual website reviews**- Each website was given it's own survey page with 11 questions. A link for the school site was placed at the top asking parents to view the site and answer the questions. Parents first rated their initial impression of the site. They were then asked to locate 15 informational items about the school, such as tuition, schedules, philosophy, and contact information. Parents rated how easy it was to find this information on a scale from *easy* to *could not locate*. Using a similar scale of *very informative* to *not informative at all*, parents were asked to rate how helpful the information was in making an enrollment decision. After ranking, parents were asked if the information was enough to take the next steps towards enrollment in the school. The next two questions were short answer, asking for three words to describe the school and three items that would influence their enrollment decision. The last question asked which most impressed them, the design of the site, the information on the site, both or neither.
4. **Website ranking**- On the final survey page, parents ranked the websites in order from *most likely to recommend* to *least likely to recommend*. They were also asked for three terms they would use when performing an Internet search for a private religious preschool.

## Procedures

We began with formulating the research question. Once this was established, a sample group was selected. Our Professor made initial contact with the SDSU Children's Center director to establish willingness to help with data gathering. Once permission was received, we designed the survey. The survey was sent to the director for approval before being distributed to parents, noting that participation was voluntary and anonymity assured. We created an introduction card with a web address for

survey access and an introduction to the study and the researchers. We set a time with the director to be at the Center and pass out cards, talk with parents, and begin data gathering. The time passed with no contact from the Center director, so the researchers began forming an alternative group to survey. The director was heard from right before data gathering began, so the original sample from the Children's Center was used. The director sent out an email to the parents with a link to the survey and a brief introduction of the study, inviting them to participate. We gathered survey data for a week, then analyzed the results. Results were analyzed by coding short answer responses and looking for patterns. Final site rankings were also compared with ratings on type of information found and difficulty in finding information to determine what most influenced parents.

## Findings

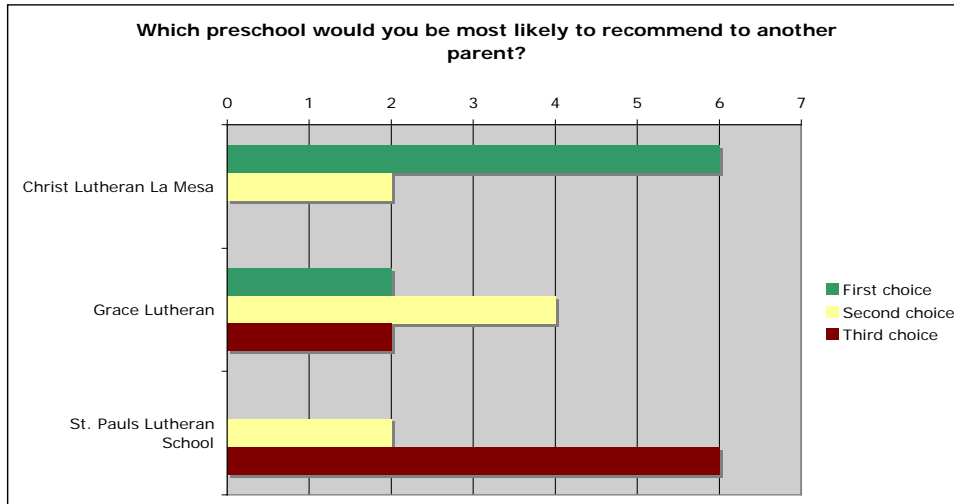
### *Analysis*

Parents in the study examined three websites, answered our online questionnaire and then ranked them according to their preference. We took the results of these overall ratings and then compared them to the survey results to see what factors most influenced their preferences. This section will present the summary of these findings. We will start with the respondents' choice of the school which they would recommend to other parents

### *Parent Preferences*

After reviewing the websites, participants indicated which of the three preschools they would be most likely to recommend to another parent. Parents overwhelmingly selected one school, Christ Lutheran La Mesa, as their first choice. 75% chose it as their favorite, with the remaining 25% ranking it second. Grace Lutheran scored in the middle of the three with 25% of parents ranking it first, 50% second and 25% making it their third choice. No respondents chose St. Paul's as the first school they would recommend, 25% placed it second but 75% ranked it last. The results are displayed in the following **Table 2, on next page:**

**Table 2 – Site most likely to be recommended:**



What factors led to this result? Through the online survey, participants were asked to rate the site on:

- Their initial impression,
- How easy or difficult it was to find information
- Whether the site provided adequate information to lead to a follow up
- Whether the design of the site or the content had impressed them the most.

Though our survey group was small, the responses they provided do seem to offer some insight as to why the sites were ranked in that order.

### ***Initial Impressions***

Participants explored each website individually and then indicated whether they had a positive, negative or neutral initial impression of the site. The initial impression responses were mostly neutral, with St. Paul's returning the sole negative response. Both Grace and Christ also had only positive or neutral impressions, but St. Paul's had no positive responses at all. 66.7% of those who had a positive initial impression of Grace Lutheran still chose Christ Lutheran as their first recommendation. 33.7% of those ranking Christ Lutheran the highest, had no strong impression of the website initially. While the initial impression seems to set the stage for the final result, it appears that a positive initial impression was not sufficient by itself to move a site into first place in the final assessment.

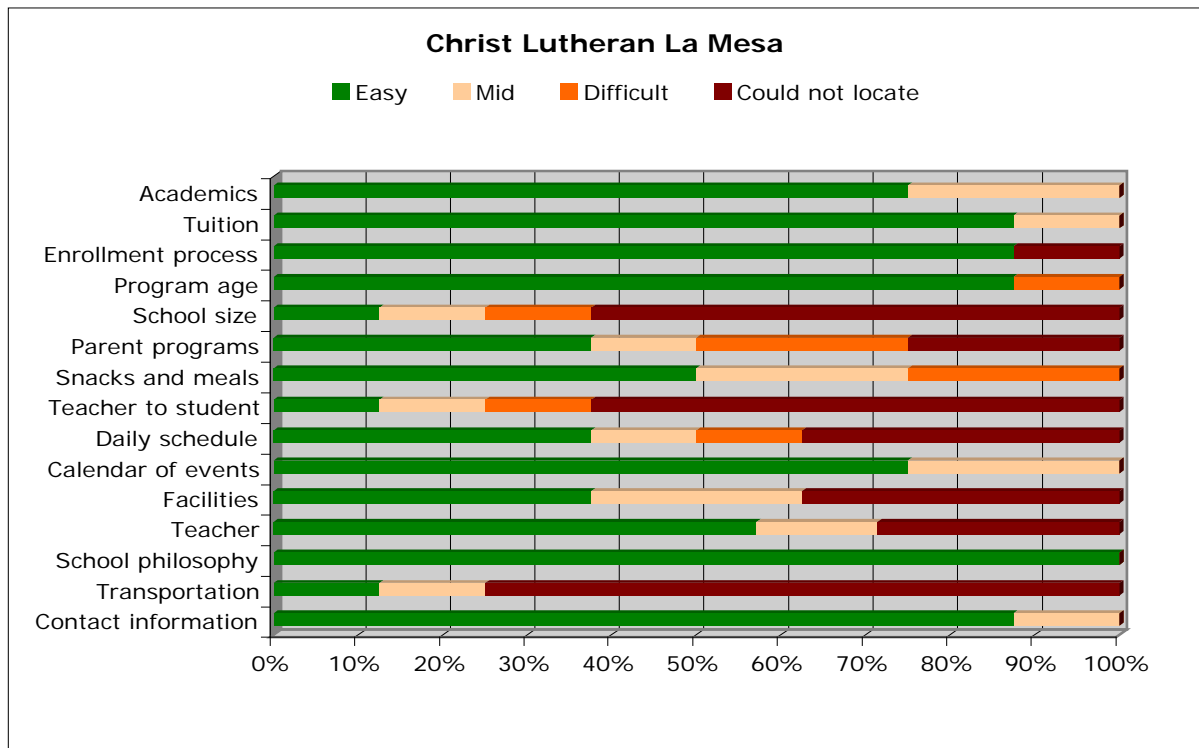
## Locating Information

We identified fifteen categories of information that could influence prospective parents to consider a preschool for their children. These covered such topics as academics, teacher to student ratios, transportation options and school philosophy. Participants rated how easy or difficult it was to find information from each category on each school website. The results were weighted with 5 points for "Easy" down to 1 point for "Difficult" and 0 for "Could not locate." Christ Lutheran La Mesa ranked the highest with a mean of 3.09 points, with St. Paul's Lutheran School and Grace Lutheran finishing with 2.27 and 2.05 points respectively. It would appear that ease of finding information contributed to Christ Lutheran's ranking at the conclusion.

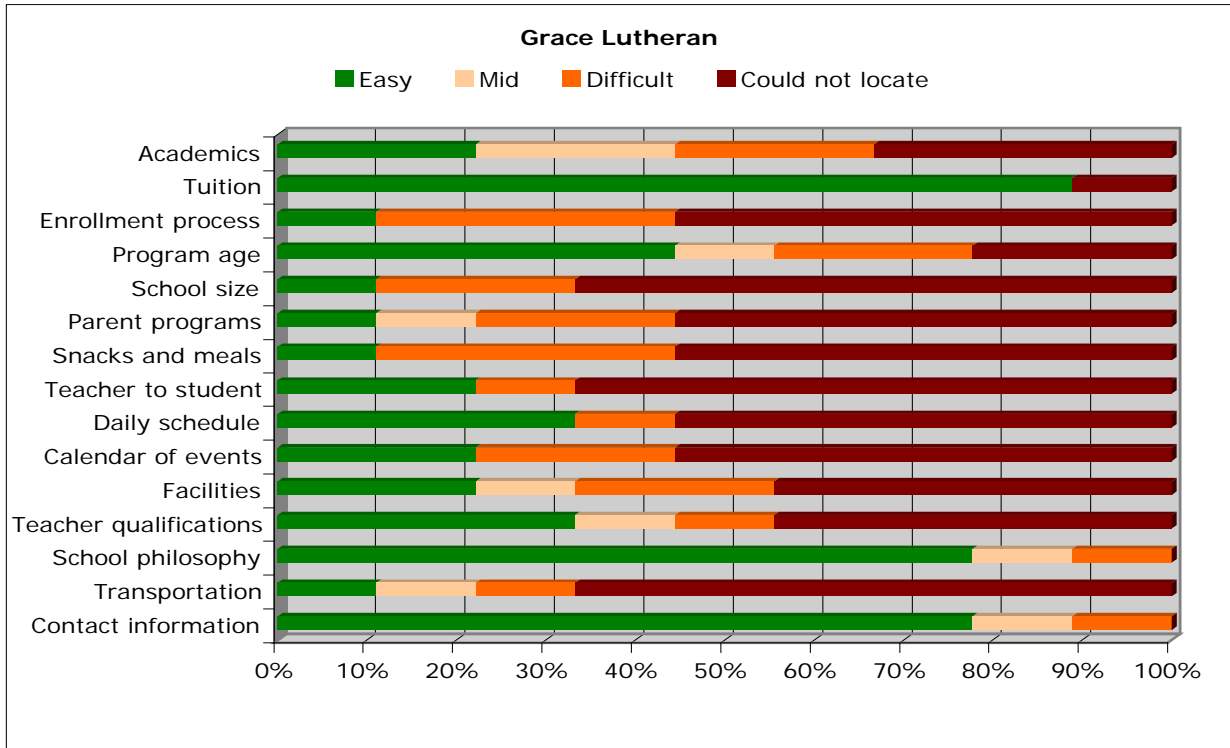
In the following charts, the lengths of the bars reflect the proportion of participants who chose each response. Green represents responses of "Easy to locate" while red shows responses for elements that could not be located. (See Table 3.1 – 3.3 below)

**Table 3 - How easy or difficult was it to find information for each of the following elements:**

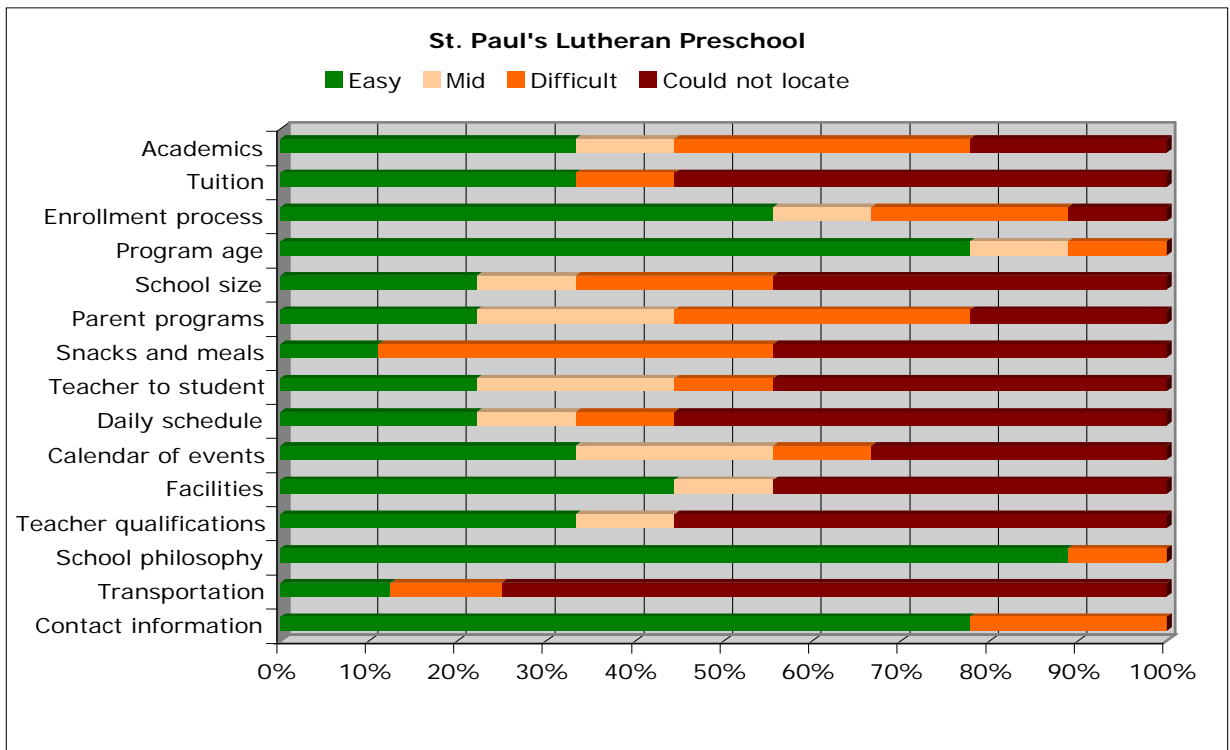
**Table 3.1**



**Table 3.2**



**Table 3.3**



## *Navigability*

Short answer follow up questions on the survey also gave insight into the importance of good content organization. On St. Paul's website, the lowest ranked, 2 of 6 comments referenced the difficulty in navigability. Parents thought information was hard to find and the site was described as "difficult to use". Christ Lutheran's site was described using the word "organized" in 5 responses. The Grace Lutheran website was described by one parent as "easy to navigate". The fact that navigability was mentioned in answers for all three sites leads to the assertion that ease of access to information is important in a preschool's website.

## *Quality of Content*

Besides the ease of locating information, participants were also asked to assess the quality of the information, with regards making an enrollment decision. The same fifteen categories were used as the content to be judged on a scale from highly informative (5 points) to not informative at all (1 point). The responses were tabulated and Christ Lutheran La Mesa's site ranked the highest again with a score of 3.54. Also, again, St. Paul's and Grace ranked very close to each other with scores of 2.72 and 2.67 respectively.

## *Information Adequacy*

Respondents were then asked to consider if each website provided adequate information to lead to the next steps in the enrollment process, such as a follow up call or visit. Again, Christ Lutheran ranked highest in the results with 75% saying that it provided sufficient information to prompt further inquiry. 33.3% rated Grace Lutheran as having adequate information available, slightly higher than St. Paul's score 22.2%.

Follow up questions prompted participants to elaborate. The answers pointed to specific content that would be sought on a school site. Parents asked for more information on tuition, ratios, programs offered, facilities and schedules specifically. St. Paul's website, on which parents had the most difficulty finding this information, was rated the lowest with 44.4% indicating that it did not have adequate information. Christ Lutheran, the first ranked school, had no specific mentions of more information needed. Parents described this site as "complete" and having "plenty of information".

Parents stated that the most influential factors on Grace and Christ's website were the philosophy, tuition, school hours, teacher credentials, and schedule. Since both these sites ranked higher than St. Paul's where this information was not readily found, it would seem that these would be the areas of information vital to include.

Information from the short answer questions on the survey also asserts that parents want to use websites to answer as many of their questions as possible. Five responses made reference to wanting enrollment forms available through the website, before even visiting the school. Two answers also showed the parents' desire to contact a school through email, mentioning that an email should be accessible directly from the site. Phone numbers listed were helpful, but these answers show that parents would like to have their questions answered through email.

### *Appearance*

We asked parents to choose three words or phrases to describe each school. Participants mentioned website appearance as a factor in how they view a prospective school, although fewer comments were made in this area than the navigability and information availability. One parent commented on how Grace's site was "nice looking" but "lacking information." When describing what most influenced them about the site, three parents mentioned photos and visual appeal for both Grace's and Christ's website. St. Paul's site was described as "unappealing". Parents wanted to see a good looking site that gives them a feel for the school and staff. These responses suggest that website appearance does play a part in overall interest in a school but will not disguise a lack of content.

### *Content over Design*

Finally, participants were asked what impressed them the most about each site: the content or the design. Respondents indicated that for Christ Lutheran, the content was the most impressive element while Grace Lutheran's site scored higher on design. Participants were not impressed with either element of St. Paul's site. Given the rankings in the final assessment, these results certainly support the adage that "content is king" and echo the sentiments expressed by the parents when describing the schools in three words or phrases. **(See Appendix B Table 4)**

## Conclusions

Since the sample size was so small, any conclusions will be preliminary at best. However, the results do seem to reinforce the importance of accessible and relevant content to parents researching pre-schools on the internet. Content made more of a difference in parents' choices than the look of a site. Christ Lutheran La Mesa was ranked as the school most would recommend to other parents and participants were most impressed with the content on this site. They also responded that they were able to easily find most information listed.

Appearance can also affect the decision to recommend a school, as Grace was selected as second choice and parents marked this site as being most impressed by the design. St Paul's, which was neither impressive in appearance nor content, was ranked third. While St. Paul's and Grace Lutheran were ranked similarly in ease of locating and the quality of information, the more appealing design appears to have given Grace Lutheran an advantage.

It is interesting to note that of the three websites, Christ Lutheran La Mesa was the only one to have been built by a professional designer. It would seem that the investment of time and resources in thoughtful organization of a school website has measurable positive consequences.

## Summary

From the small sample size, only preliminary conclusions can be made. It does appear that both website content and design elements can affect a parent's decision to consider a school for a follow up or to recommend it to another parent. Access to information looks to be the more important of the two to prospective parents, but a larger sample size would have to be created to determine whether this is true. It also seems that engaging a website designer with experience can pay dividends. In a competitive market, even the slight advantage that such an investment offers could make the difference between a prospective parent choosing to visit the school or to keep searching online. Again, the confidences in such findings are constrained by the extremely small sample size. More participants would be needed in order to strengthen the results of our study.

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# Appendix B

*Table 1 – Website Usability Study Summary*

<b>De Marisco &amp; Levialdi (2003) note the following areas chosen for website evaluation:</b>
Information representation and appearance
Access, navigation, orientation
Information architecture
Human-centered design
<b>Hassan &amp; Li (2005) identified 57 key criteria of web usability, organized into seven main groups:</b>
Screen appearance
Content
Accessibility
Navigation
Media use
Interactivity
Consistency
<b>Nielsen (2005) details ten usability heuristics upon which to judge software and website interfaces:</b>
Visibility of system status
Match between system and the real world
User control and standards
Consistency and standards
Error prevention
Recognition rather than recall
Flexibility and efficiency of use
Aesthetic and minimalist design

**The Purdue Usability Testing Questionnaire (Lin, Choong & Salvendy, 1997) groups usability testing questions into eight categories**

**Compatibility**

**Consistency**

**Flexibility**

**Learnability**

**Minimal action**

**Minimal memory load**

**Perceptual limitation**

**User guidance**

**Nathan & Yeow (2009) discuss seven website usability factors (WUFs) in their research:**

**Ease of web navigation**

**Friendliness of website**

**Interactivity of website**

**Download speed**

**Trustworthiness**

**Use of graphics and images**

**Use of color and font**

**Liu (2008) describes the process of website evaluation and recommends these techniques:**

**Usability testing of real target users in a controlled setting**

**Heuristic evaluation based on assessment of experts**

**Cognitive walkthroughs to discover workflow issues**

**Focus Groups**

**Thinking aloud**

**Table 4 - Content over Design**

