

Marketing Principles in Higher Education

By Leonard J. Moisan, Ph.D.

Higher education institutions have intensified marketing activities of all kinds, according to a study by the American College Testing Program ("Demographics, Standards, and Equity: Challenges in College Admissions," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 8 October 1986.) Recruitment budgets in four-year institutions have increased 63 percent since 1980, more than twice the inflation rate, and common campus marketing strategies include direct mail, videos, pressure for more and better media coverage, and other techniques. Everyone from the chairperson of the English Department to the athletic director is counting on more and better marketing to answer financial woes.

Although specific marketing techniques have brought new life to many campuses, governing board members and administrators should understand that effective marketing is a complex planning tool with essential components. It should be proactive not reactive, and collaborative rather than independent.

Consider the following ten marketing concepts when developing or enhancing a marketing plan. They are based on an extensive review of pertinent literature and the author's experience as an administrative vice president, a consultant, and a board member of several organizations.

1. Protagonist

Unless a protagonist takes the risk, garners support, and champions the idea of marketing within an organization, it probably will not be implemented effectively. The protagonist must fully understand marketing and be willing to educate others to make it a regular part of the institutional planning process. Generally, the higher the level of support for marketing, the easier it is to implement. At some universities, the protagonist is the chancellor or president; at other institutions, board members, senior executives, or department heads are marketing protagonists. If marketing is to work for higher education institutions, governing boards and chief executives must enthusiastically support the concept and encourage or even supply a protagonist.

2. Purpose

Once a protagonist has emerged, enthused the masses, and inspired appropriate institutional and/or departmental support, the next task focuses on institutional purpose or mission.

At many institutions, purpose is clear. Too often, however, institutional mission is obscured by activities rather than driving those activities. Again, governing boards and chief executives can facilitate the necessary focus; their ongoing evaluation of activities and policies in relation to purpose sets the tone of a college or university and can alter an institution's direction.

Effective marketing requires a clear understanding of exactly what the institution is trying to achieve. From this understanding, a vision for the institution emerges providing direction for activities and decisions. Clear understanding and vision also ease decisions about what activities and resource allocations are appropriate or inappropriate.

3. Perceptions

The next step is to test purpose against internal and external constituencies. Internal feedback should be obtained to achieve at least a modicum of agreement about what the purpose should be. Often, existing operational committees deal with issues related to institutional purpose or mission. Also, self-study accreditation committees can serve as excellent vehicles to facilitate this process.

Once the institution establishes or re-affirms its goals, it should solicit responses from external constituencies (students, parents, donors, community, alumni, etc.) to determine their perceptions of:

- current institutional purpose,
- what institutional purpose should be,
- institutional strengths and weaknesses.

External opinions usually are obtained by conducting a market study interviewing constituents in person, over the telephone, or by mail. Many organizations also organize focus groups to monitor constituent concerns; still others conduct formal feasibility studies before undertakings such as capital fundraising drives.

The institution needs regular feedback from both internal and external environments. To do otherwise could prove fatal. Board members, as well as administrators, cannot afford to assume they are part of a closed system. Higher education is an open and competitive system, dependent upon the external environment for financial support and students.

4. Planning

As a result of ongoing market research, the institution should have a good idea of perceived strengths and weaknesses as well as areas of need and potential growth. Such information is the basis for effective planning and decision making, a compass that tells us where we are and where we need to go. The kind of information provided by good market research helps dictate thoughtful strategic planning.

In a 1985 study of marketing planning ["Can Your Marketing Planning Procedures Be Improved?," in *Marketing Management Readings* (Homewood: Richard Irwin, 1986) 456-474.], Stanley Stasch and Patricia Lanktree found that organizations with the most thorough market planning were those utilizing managerial experience from a number of levels, employing external and internal sources of ideas, allotting enough time for development of marketing strategies, and using organizational and motivational factors to encourage good planning.

Not all planning can or should be this extensive. Time constraints and resource availability have to be figured into the equation. Nevertheless, planning in higher education potentially affects many lives because higher education is people intensive.

5. Positioning

Positioning means establishing how an institution is intended to be perceived by the market relative to its competition. A natural outgrowth of planning, positioning involves developing a strategy combining product, distribution, price, and promotion. In many ways, perceptions, planning, and positioning are interdependent; competitive positioning requires on-going and effective market research and planning.

Positioning answers the following questions: 1. What are we going to provide? 2. How and to whom will we deliver it? 3. What will we charge? 4. How will we promote

it?

One key to developing an effective positioning strategy is not to try to be all things to all people. In addition to its strengths, a college or university or even a department must recognize its weaknesses and limitations. Knowing exactly what and to whom you intend to deliver are crucial to marketing success.

6. Politics

Before implementing planning decisions and positioning strategies, consider their political implications. Who will be affected and in what ways? What are the short and long-term effects? What are the potential gains or risks? What is the potential for external and internal support? Will we win the battle and lose the war by implementing this decision at this time under these circumstances? All these political questions should be addressed and resolved before implementing a planning decision.

Asking and answering such hard political questions is (ideally) an open and collaborative process leading to some level of consensus. Some hard, potentially volatile, decisions might have to be made, but if decisions are discussed and based on knowledge rather than impulse, the likelihood of success is enhanced greatly.

7. Prioritizing and Pruning

An effective planning process and positioning strategy provide a sound basis to prioritize activities and allocate resources toward those activities. In *Marketing Strategy and Plans* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1985), David Luck and O.C. Ferrell state that resource allocation is the final stage of strategic planning. Luck and Ferrell list the main determinants of allocations: (1) the size of the investment, (2) the rate of return to be earned, and (3) the risks faced.

Of course, resource allocation decisions are based on the amount of available funds. For example, a floundering liberal arts college that has dipped deeply into its endowment and experienced severe enrollment declines might benefit from the services of a leading Madison Avenue firm, but the college hardly would be in a position to justify the investment or the risks.

Another point to consider: Prioritizing resource allocations has the potential of being extremely volatile and often necessitates hard decisions. In this day of declining enrollments and constricting resources, all programs must be evaluated to see if they are producing enough fruit, and dead branches must be pruned so the institution can flourish.

8. Promotion

One of the most important marketing components is promotion; promotion stimulates a prospective donor or student to respond in the desired way. Because people respond differently to different stimuli, institutions should rely on more than one promotional vehicle. Effective marketing plans in higher education increasingly incorporate a "promotion mix" including advertising, personal selling, general publicity, and special promotions. Virtually all colleges and universities distribute general publicity such as fact sheets and four-color glossy brochures. Likewise, institutions often engage the services of articulate and attractive spokespersons who travel the country trying to convince high school students that a particular institution is the best one for them.

Many colleges and universities have comprehensive programs that, in addition to

brochures and recruiters, utilize promotional devices such as advertisements, videos, slide shows, personal letters, postcards, elaborate follow-up systems, and telemarketing. Computer technology enables institutions to employ a vast network of student, alumni, parent, and donor volunteers to help recruit undergraduates and raise money.

In this apparent rush toward Madison Avenue glitz, promotions must be well planned, coordinated, and grounded in integrity. Because an institution engages a successful advertising firm to help develop student recruitment materials, the institution should not abdicate responsibility for what those materials say. Promotional packages should portray an accurate picture of the college or university. Nothing damages an institution more than an unhappy customer who believes he or she was cheated or misled.

9. Passion

If institutions want successful marketing programs, they need representatives with a sense of passion, commitment, and enthusiasm. People respond to passion; they respect passion and are intrigued by it, because passion connotes a high level of commitment.

The premier seller of a product is a satisfied customer, because a satisfied customer can passionately convey the benefits of the product he or she has personally experienced. Nothing is more boring than listening to a polished professional give a canned speech about a school or institutional need to which he or she might be indifferent.

10. Performance

The final, and probably most important, principle is performance. Performance-delivery of promised services is the foundation of an effective marketing program. Performance is *the* measure of institutional integrity, which helps the consumer determine whether or not he or she will continue to repeat as a customer.

Promotion and passion without performance might lead to a short-term windfall, but eventually will spell long-term disaster for an institution. Disgruntled students vote with their feet. Students who stay on campus, grow as individuals, and are committed to the institution are the most salient measures of whether or not a college or university's promotional materials are fact or fiction. As Alexander Astin wrote:

"With enrollments going down and costs going up in the 1980s, I would invest in absolutely first-rate learning. I would concentrate on excellent student services, superb teaching, and rigorous studies, so that my college had a great number of highly satisfied customers, and a steady stream of superbly trained young people. Parents would love a place where young students received lots of attention and learned more than they thought they could. Such a campus would have great word of mouth advertising, and that is the best marketing and competitive strategy." ("Proposals for Change in College Admissions," in *Maximizing Leadership Effectiveness*, eds. Alexander Astin and Peter Scherrer [San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1981], 162.)

To say that the institutional marketing process is a long and involved one understates the matter. Effective marketing means commitments of time, money, and other resources, and necessitates an understanding of professional marketing techniques. Effective marketing must be set in the context of a college's or university's tradition, yet it requires a new focus and identity promising in some ways to disrupt that tradition. Nevertheless, whatever the demands of the marketing process, whatever energy it exacts,

an effective marketing program based on these 10 principles can bring new life and energy to both fledgling and successful institutions.

"Grace is given of God, but knowledge is bought in the market."

– Arthur Hugh Clough

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