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Know Thyself: 5 Strategies for Marketing a College

By RICHARD A. HESEL

While reading one of the new higher-education-business magazines that seem to have sprung up like weeds in the past few years, I came across two articles that made me want to reach for a figurative can of weedkiller.

One argued that a marketing-savvy college would be well advised to “brand” its president. Perhaps, inspired by the examples of Donald Trump and Martha Stewart, the author had in mind the notion of the “branded person,” who takes on an identity that represents something larger than mere personality and captures some set of commercially valuable human aspirations.

Aside from the fact that most college presidents -- aware of the dangers inherent in pinning an institutional identity on a single individual -- would find such an idea ludicrous, the author was apparently oblivious to the fact that the average presidential tenure lasts just five years. By the time one could “brand” a president, even if there were any good reason to do so, she’d be gone.

The second article suggested that college faculties are the only major impediments to the booming enrollments and bounteous net gains in tuition revenue made possible by higher-education marketing. Faculties, the author implied, have the impudence to insist that higher education might be about education after all, and not the fun and games pictured in so many look-alike college “viewbooks.”

Cantankerous and difficult though faculty members can be, I’ll take their version of truth and wisdom over a vision of education championed by advocates of conspicuous consumption. As a marketing consultant to higher education for nearly three decades, I have seen fads come and go. Investments in marketing have paid off for many colleges, but for others they have added up to a colossal waste of money.

Several clear patterns have defined the most successful marketing investments, and they boil down to five strategies:

1. Focus on the product. While I am loath to reduce a college education to the same level as an expensive kitchen appliance or a luxury automobile, there is no doubt that the most effective marketing in higher education concerns first and foremost the nature of the education being provided -- in other words, the product. What marketers call a brand or market position is nothing more than a compelling identity that expresses the special qualities of that product in ways that motivate the interest and inspire the dreams of important constituencies.

When Woodrow Wilson developed the idea for the preceptorial system at Princeton a century ago, he set into motion a series of changes that propelled the institution into the ranks of the finest universities in the land, one where teaching was paramount. At the same time he strengthened the graduate school and created Princeton's legendary and oft-imitated National Schools Committee, which organized alumni across the nation to help with student recruitment.

While Wilson had an eye fixed firmly on boosting Princeton's public regard, those initiatives were driven foremost by a concern for the quality of the university. Nearly a century later, Dean of the Faculty Aaron Lemonick was fond of describing Princeton as "the only world-class research university with teaching at its heart," a "brand" that Wilson probably would have been happy to embrace.

The list of other colleges that have built both enduring reputations and differentiated market positions almost always reveals an attention to educational initiatives: Colorado College (one course at a time), Worcester Polytechnic Institute (the WPI Plan, which revolutionized engineering education in the early 1970s), the College of Wooster (independent learning), Harvard (always innovating), Columbia (the core), and Brown (the free-choice curriculum), as well as the University of Chicago, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and many of the University of California campuses.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that educational innovations undertaken for their own sake, in the hope of boosting visibility and market demand, can soon become liabilities. For example, adding a criminal-forensics program to a liberal-arts college in order to capitalize on the popularity of the television program *CSI* may or may not produce a temporary spike in applications. In the long run, the fad will fade, the new program will siphon resources from the core mission, and the college's identity as a liberal-arts institution may grow murky. Few successfully branded institutions set an innovative educational course driven primarily by marketing goals. Rather, promising marketing opportunities follow from the development of substantive educational distinctions.

2. Focus on strategic goals that are well defined and long-term in scope. During a recent presentation on branding at a conference sponsored by the Council for Advancement and Support of Education, I asked the public-affairs and marketing professionals in the audience to raise their hands if their institutions had strategic plans -- or at least clear sets of strategic objectives -- that might serve as guides for their marketing activities. Much to my surprise, only about 40 percent raised their hands. The

subsequent discussion revealed that many were operating without any carefully developed institutional goals, beyond the usual suspects: “better students,” “more net tuition revenue,” or “more coverage in *The New York Times*.”

The types of goals on which successful marketing plans are based go far beyond operational objectives like admit rates, yield, and net tuition revenue. Instead of asking, “How can we be better known?” (which is, ultimately, an operational rather than a strategic question), well-defined goals address the more critical question: “What do we want to be known for?” Until that question is answered, an institution’s marketing efforts will lack a clear focus.

3. Make critical decisions on a sound empirical basis. Last year *The Chronicle* published [an article](#) about an institution in New York City (Polytechnic University) that had tapped a major portion of the proceeds from a huge gift to build new facilities. This multimillion-dollar investment was made on the assumption that prospective students would find the improvements appealing, thus prompting an enrollment increase so large that it would generate enough additional tuition revenue to help ease the university’s recurring deficits. That assumption, which apparently had not been subjected to any reliable tests with the institution’s external markets, proved wrong. As a result Polytechnic was left with empty beds, daunting debt, and, potentially, a disheartening future.

In ways large and small, similar scenarios are played out every day on many campuses. Decisions are made about an array of crucial initiatives -- tuition increases, new student-life centers or athletics facilities, costly curricular changes, expensive branding campaigns -- on the basis of internal assumptions about their appeal to key constituencies and the resulting impact on enrollment, net tuition revenue, alumni support, and other important criteria. Unfortunately, there is scant evidence to test the validity of those assumptions. The fact that so many public (and private) universities are stumbling from one major tuition increase to the next with no reliable measure of the possible enrollment consequences is as powerful an argument as can be made for the importance of having an empirical foundation for making critical decisions.

The generally sorry state of market research in higher education helps explain this situation, but a more compelling case can be made for the disconnect between the magnitude of the investments that institutions are willing to make in strategic initiatives and the rigor with which they analyze the possible outcomes the initiatives will produce. Proven research tools exist to measure the effects on enrollment and net tuition revenue of many kinds of initiatives (branding strategies, curricular changes, and price increases, for example). However, few institutions use such tools, either because they are unaware of these advanced research methods or because they are reluctant to invest the time and resources necessary to determine whether their pet strategic investments are worth making. Joseph Heller might have found a good model here for *Catch-22*.

4. Integrate everything you do. I am moderately exasperated when colleges talk about branding. While the concept is not new, the current theology of higher-education marketing has invested it with the quality of revelation: a salvation for all marketing ills and the path to a glorious institutional future.

One fact brings me back down from the heavens with a thud when I think about the promises and expectations attached to branding in higher education: the several millions of dollars that Microsoft spends on branding and marketing every day. In comparison, marketing budgets in higher education are considered profligate if they spend a fraction of that in a year.

The reality is that marketing and branding efforts in higher education have to compete not only with those of other colleges for the attention of prospective students and other constituencies, but also with the hundreds of other enterprises attempting to pound their brands and messages into the sensory-overloaded hearts and minds of the same audiences. So Texas A&M's competition for attention is not only UT Austin and Texas Tech but also Honda, Pepsi, the Gap, and, yes, Microsoft -- all of which are spending much more money, with much greater sophistication, on their marketing-and-branding efforts.

This means that higher education, with comparatively paltry means at its disposal, must spend every marketing penny as if it were the last. Intelligent, highly coordinated, tightfisted management of marketing activities is essential. Every activity must be part of an integrated scheme, each serving the same overarching strategic goals and communicating related themes and messages. Anything short of that enervates the entire effort.

5. Commit for the long haul. Remember Eastern Air Lines? In the last decade of its existence that venerable survivor of the early days of aviation adopted a strategy that I call "brand du jour." One year it was "the Wings of Man," the next some equally empty slogan. It was difficult to remember from one year to the next what Eastern Air Lines actually represented, other than imminent danger of bankruptcy.

Marketing in higher education often suffers from the same problem. Every few years expensive marketing materials are discarded and others created, with administrators and marketing consultants churning out new brands, themes, and images at an alarming rate. Not only is this wasteful, it is counterproductive. With comparatively meager resources to invest in marketing and branding, and a transient audience that turns over every few years, consistency and longevity are essential ingredients of a successful college marketing effort.

New York University offers the perfect example. In the mid-1970s, President James Hester set what had been a regional commuter school, largely serving students from the New York metropolitan area, on a path toward becoming an Ivy League alternative on Washington Square. The idea seemed implausible to many, but Hester and a succession of presidents, trustees, and donors stuck to it. Investments were made in the substance of

the idea. The campus was beautified, new facilities created, academic programs and teaching strengthened, faculty appointments held to high standards. And a solid marketing-and-communications effort was created to support it all. Three decades later, NYU is a changed place, competing with top-caliber institutions at the undergraduate, graduate, and professional levels. Once a stepchild of uptown Columbia University, it is now a serious competitive threat.

None of this was accomplished in a year, or even several. Nor did it happen during the tenure of those who started the wheels in motion. Rather, a long-term commitment to well-defined goals resulted in the steady accretion of quality and regard that has made NYU the university that James Hester envisioned 30 years ago.

There are no magic bullets, no overnight results, and very little instant gratification in the marketing of colleges and universities. But a focus on quality and distinction, the setting of substantive objectives, the use of sound empirical evidence to guide important decisions, the integration of efforts, and consistency over the long haul can produce remarkable change.

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