

Top Ten Marketing Mistakes Colleges Make (Violate Them at Your Own Risk)

As a higher education marketing consultant since the early 1990s, I have seen many things that have caused me to shake my head in disbelief: plans created without forethought, or hastily thrown together to satisfy a board; budgets decreased and expectations increased; and the feeling that it is good to be "the best kept secret." But as I started to think about the marketing mistakes that were very consistent from campus to campus, it was clear I could identify ten main items. Having worked on many marketing plans for colleges and universities across the country, I have also placed them in rank order, with #1 being the worst of the mistakes to make. Many of you will realize your institution has committed some of these mistakes, but hopefully very few will recognize *all* of them on the list. Either way, the time is right to get help. At the end of each listing, key strategies are detailed to help you avoid that particular mistake. Use them wisely!

From the home office in Cedar Rapids, Iowa:

10 Promotion tactics will not save a strategically flawed institution

Too many institutions believe that to get more students, they just need to promote more. For some this may indeed be the case. However, they are ignoring one simple fact (which will actually be addressed in full in another key mistake): that a car that is a lemon, no matter how much you polish it up, is still a lemon on the inside. When you market a poor institution, all that happens is that more people find out you're a poor institution.

Let's think about the four Ps of marketing. If you do not offer the right courses (Product), for the right price (Price), in the right time and place (Place), it does not matter how much you tell them (Promote)...they will not attend. All that will happen is that prospective students will find out you don't have the right courses, at the right price, in the right place and time...and they will look elsewhere.

KEY STRATEGY

Get your house in order internally before you market externally. Promotion will not save a poor institution. Constantly review

your marketing mix (Product, Price, and Place) to ensure this is not a problem for your institution.

9 Trying to make marketing too complicated

Given all the advances in marketing in the last ten years (such as One-to-One Marketing, Guerrilla Marketing, Branding and Image Building, etc.), the solution is simple: have something your market desires and tell the market through a mix of promotional vehicles.

There are a couple of important items to keep in mind as you think about marketing. Your audiences will not be able to grasp complex messages, so remember the *KISS* principle: *Keep It Simple Stupid*. Next, remember your audience's favorite radio station is *WII-FM*, or *What's In It For Me?* Make sure that as you develop marketing strategies, you make them personally relevant to the audience with which you are communicating. How will your institution benefit the target audience? Talk to them about what is important to them, not what is important to you.

KEY STRATEGY

Do not wait for the perfect plan. Start with a few strategies, build consensus and momentum, and adjust accordingly. If you wait for the perfect plan, it will be outdated by the time you finish it. Develop a scaled-back plan focusing on key areas first, and then move into completing a full marketing plan.

8 Ignoring the 5th and 6th Ps

The 5th and 6th Ps of marketing are Policy and Politics. Address territoriality very early, or your best marketing efforts will fail. Many times this is accomplished by enabling policy changes. Remove the barriers related to policy and politics and you will become a more marketing-oriented institution.

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Addressing territoriality may be as simple as determining what is important to the internal (political) audiences. Keep in mind that product, price, and place issues are strategic and require the input and direction of stakeholders, while promotion tends to be more tactical and of less interest to stakeholders.

KEY STRATEGY

Don't forget about the importance of internal marketing. Good plans will fail without the support of your internal stakeholders. Your internal audiences (faculty, staff, administration, and current students) play a critical role in image development and are the best salespeople. To many external constituencies, they represent the image of the institution. Create talking points and make sure everyone is "singing off the same song sheet."

7 Poorly crafted messages and poorly defined target markets

Remember, who are the customers, and how do we need to reach them? The messages and the audience need to be properly defined; great messages do not matter if they do not reach the right people. Conversely, poor messages *do* matter if they reach the proper audience, unfortunately in a negative way.

Don't change something just because you are tired of it, and don't create a message or publication that you like. Think about it like this: 25- to 45-year-old designers create publications for 45- to 75-year-old administrators to use with 15- to 18-year-olds (this is a very big disconnect).

KEY STRATEGY

Understand what the target audience thinks of you (current attitude) and move to create messages that resonate with them. You must seek to differentiate your institution from your competition in ways that *target audiences* find meaningful, and you must communicate this differentiation aggressively. Different markets need different messages. Segment and communicate.

6 Failure to realize the importance of the Web as a marketing tool

In the last few years we have seen a paradigm shift from publications-based promotional strategies to Web-based marketing strategies. The way we go to market has changed. Table 1 shows the old funnel vs. the new funnel. The new funnel focuses on a more dynamic approach to reaching prospects with speed, efficiency, and effectiveness.

We have made a shift from a publications-based approach to a Web-first approach. Most prospective students' first interaction with a school will now be the Web site. So does your site fit in with the rest of the communications? If not, look to make alterations so you have a seamless flow between your print and Web-based communications.

KEY STRATEGY

Remember the three keys to a good Web site as you reassess your existing Web presence. The first key is graphical. Remember, looks can kill. It may not be the sole reason that a prospect

looks at your site and decides to look elsewhere; however, you will be compared to other sites and your own publications from a graphic perspective. At the very least, integrate the look with your existing promotion.

Next is the level of information on your site. Do you have what they need? The key elements tend to be programs and majors, admissions requirements, "what's new," and the application. Make these four areas easy to find.

This leads to the most important key, which is navigation. It must be intuitive. Most schools structure the site architecturally as they are structured internally. Unfortunately, this makes no sense to the outside world. Use terms and navigational elements that your audience will understand, not what you know and understand.

5 Not giving it time to work and making no one accountable

The writing of a plan or moving into a marketing environment does not immediately ensure success. The goal of any venture such as this is long-term sustained growth. Remember the following:

- Good marketing plans take time
- Group accountability is no accountability
- Marketing can't perform miracles—more money is wasted due to marketers expecting miracles than due to any other misconception of marketing
- Marketing must be sustained over a period of time to be effective, as you must assume that your market has a short-term memory

KEY STRATEGY

Educate the uninitiated to marketing and why it is important. Help them to understand that it takes time to build a brand (or rebuild a brand), and that brand building is a key to long-term success. Have a brand champion—someone that lives the brand and works to integrate the messages that you send out.

4 Failure to spell commitment to marketing with \$

Many schools understand what it takes to build a brand. Few schools show that commitment with the money necessary to do this brand building correctly. At a time when institutional budgets across the country are being cut, many schools are choosing to cut in the area of marketing. This will lead to major issues down the road as brands become less identifiable and messages are lost in the clutter of other messages. Try to consider marketing as an investment, not a cost.

The commitment made must be on an annual basis, so don't begin something you can't sustain. Your new efforts will heat up

Table 1

Component	Old Funnel	New Funnel
First impression	Search brochure or letter	Web, billboard, radio, etc....
Viewbook or catalog	Complete information	Photos, spirit, a guide to the Web
WWW	Brochureware	Dynamic, primary media
E-mail	Labor extensive, non-existent	Automated, primary communication mechanism
Database	One big list (all treated the same)	Segmentation done to 1-to-1 marketing level

the marketplace, so make sure that you have the ability (resources, such as money and people) to sustain this effort of time.

KEY STRATEGY

As a rough guideline, about 1.5 to 2.5 percent of an institutional operating budget should be spent on disposable marketing activities (programs, not people). However, institutions with severe marketing and image problems will spend more.

3 Lack of vision and mission

Like a road map, mission and vision provide guidance and direction. Schools that don't fully understand or articulate this are like a ship adrift at sea, with no set clear course. They will only find "brand" if they are lucky.

The lack of clearly articulated mission (who we are) and vision (where are we going) is very prevalent in higher education. Much of this stems from the structure that currently exists in this marketplace. Mission and vision come from the president, yet faculty and staff pressure from below and boards push from above. Very rarely do they feel comfortable to set this direction without input from all stakeholders. Unfortunately this can be like herding cats, which is an impossible task. Also, because presidents' tenures tend to be short-lived (four years or less), the vision is constantly changing with new people in this position.

KEY STRATEGY

Leadership by consensus isn't always the answer. Pick a direction, let everyone understand that direction, and go forth and prosper.

2 Not conducting research to guide your planning

Using old or no research will lead to flawed marketing efforts. Most schools do not have a specific budget set aside for market research. If you are trying to influence an audience, to change or enhance a perception (reality), then you must first understand what they currently think of you. In order to get from Point A (current attitude) to Point B (desired attitude), you have to do research to understand Point A. Then you can accurately create a plan to get to the desired attitude.

Research should be used to help you define your target audiences, discover how they perceive quality, and determine what messages should be used to reach them. It can also answer which mediums should be used for which audiences, and should also be used to determine if your current product mix is appropriate. Remember, you have to have the right courses, offered at the right time, for the right price, in the right place, before you can effectively promote. Research can help you answer these critical questions.

KEY STRATEGY

Good research will allow you to understand a direction, create a message, and choose the "weapon" to use to get your message to the target audiences. Without research it is all a guess based on gut instinct. Most people will be right on gut instinct 80 percent of the time. It is that last 20 percent that can make the difference between a good and great enrollment year. Remember, without data, it is only opinion.

1 Defining marketing as promotion

Marketing is much more than promotion, yet because it is the visual side of marketing, it is seen by many as marketing. Few decisionmakers understand the difference between marketing and promotion. It is very important to assess what you have to offer (product, price, place) before you offer it (promotion). Decisionmakers, in particular faculty, almost automatically assume that the problem cannot be related to product. We have the perfect mix of programs for our target audience, "we just need to get the word out!"

It is critical to determine if the product mix is viable for your target audiences. Use research to guide the planning, but be willing to make adjustments to the product if it is not in line.

KEY STRATEGY

Review your first three Ps and then take it to market. Promotion is just the vehicle that brings the other three Ps to market. When people decide to sell their house, the first thing they do before listing it is fix it up and make sure they have something of value to sell. Work to get your house in order before you aggressively promote.

Conclusion

Here is a recap of the top ten marketing mistakes:

- 1 Promotion will not save a strategically flawed institution
- 2 Trying to make marketing too complicated
- 3 Ignoring the 5th and 6th Ps
- 4 Poorly crafted messages and poorly defined target markets
- 5 Failure to realize the importance of the Web as a marketing tool
- 6 Not giving it time to work and making no one accountable
- 7 Failure to spell commitment to marketing with \$
- 8 Lack of vision and mission
- 9 Not conducting research to guide your planning
- 10 Defining marketing as promotion

Work to change some of these institutional flaws and you will become a more marketing-oriented institution. Work smart by conducting research to guide your efforts, and realizing that in order to promote, you have to fix the first three Ps of marketing (product, price, and place) while not forgetting about the fifth and sixth Ps (policy and politics). Don't forget about your Web site. It is the first opportunity many key target audiences have to interact with you; make it a positive experience and begin building relationships with them early. Finally, integrate your communications and begin to build a brand through effective and realistic communication efforts. Working to build a stronger brand makes the direct marketing efforts more effective. This effort starts with a firm commitment to assessing the four Ps at your institution. Take the first step.