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An Occasional Paper

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Re-Tooling Marketing For A New Generation

If there's a single, foundational principle of marketing that higher education routinely violates, that principle is segmentation. Woefully underfunded marketing budgets, combined with largely unfounded allegiances to "doing it like we've always done it," have led too many college marketers to embrace a one-size-fits-all, spray-and-pray-and-move-on-to-the-next-project mentality. But the most embarrassing realization is that most of us are fully aware we're doing it.

While there is no single silver bullet communication solution, new and emerging technologies are offering mind-boggling opportunities to broaden the set of channels we use to connect with target audiences. As they should be, Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and a seemingly endless array of companion social media channels are finding their way into the strategic marketing plans of colleges and universities across the nation. After all, we need to be where our current and prospective stakeholders are if we hope to engage—and stay engaged—with them.

Also, veteran campus leaders who have historically had difficulties discerning the difference between marketing and recruitment are phasing out of influence. In their place is a new generation of senior leadership team members, many of whom are "crossing over" from the corporate sector where marketing enjoys a more respected (and better resourced) seat at the table, and where measuring a marketing program's return-on-investment is not an option, but a mandate designed to facilitate smarter strategic planning.

How does this all connect with the principle of market segmentation? Quite simply, the current sea change of channel expansion and administrative accountability has the potential to catapult higher education marketing into more contemporary behavior. And none too soon. Because there is a new generation of consumers among us who are defined less by age and more by their sensibilities, sensitivities, interests, and passions. They are the cultural consumers of the Renaissance Generation (RenGen), they comprise a significant share of your school's current and prospective stakeholders, and they are a new market segment that has little tolerance for irrelevant messaging and hollow promotional barrages.

In other words, this new audience subset is demanding segmented marketing like no other.

The research of cultural analyst Patricia Martin, author of *RenGen: The Rise of the Cultural Consumer*, packs a significant punch for the future of higher education marketing. According to Martin, "American life is defined by unbridled change. Seismic shifts in the way we create meaning are reorganizing our work, leisure, and belief systems—in essence, our culture. In this environment, the smartest way forward is to practice the art and science of research about and within the culture to discover ways to support the human need to create meaning in our lives."

The RenGen is a cultural movement rather than an age- or demographic-specific subset of today's world marketplace, created by the confluence of art, education, entertainment,

and business. Martin asserts that at its core, the RenGen embraces collaboration, the blending of disciplines and professions, culture in its broadest sense, and a growing acceptance of complexity. “The RenGen is also paving the way to a new look for leadership, moving away from traditional hierarchies towards leadership by artists, writers, scientists, and others we have not typically seen in leadership roles. Our future will not be defined or driven by what happens on Wall Street, but rather by the emerging leaders who are shaping our culture.”

You may well be thinking that a good bit of this language sounds like the now-familiar Millennial Generation descriptors that received so much attention in recent years. This is true, but because this Renaissance Generation is defined by sensibilities and sensitivities rather than age, serving their communication and affinity needs essentially transcends every audience boundary across your college or university. So in recognizing the RenGen, we’ve added another dimension of complexity to the fundamental necessity for audience segmentation.

During the past several months, Martin and her son became entangled with a college search process. “That experience changed my perception of the mission of higher education,” Martin reports. In an era when a lack of transparency and authenticity spells sure death for any brand, she was startled by the discovery that some of the colleges and universities with which she became familiar are clearly trying to sell something they’re not. “That’s a very bad idea for the higher education mega-brand,” Martin says. “Smart, discerning parents are already onto what’s happening.” And, she suggests, this has put many schools at greater risk than they realize.

“One of the trends we’ve begun to track is that cultural consumers are highly sensitive people, and they’re feeling a great deal of overwhelm in this environment where there’s always more information to get and always something more to learn or master. They’ve started to stick with the things they know, things they understand, and things they do well. And they tend to feel resentful when they’re made to feel stupid,” Martin says.

This has clear ramifications for recruitment, fundraising, alumni, and even retention programs that are less than user-friendly, if not user-compassionate. Likewise, the concepts of relevance and resonance are mission-critical for the cultural consumers of the RenGen. If the messages you send to a cultural consumer don’t demonstrate the breadth

of awareness and appreciation she shares for the broader cultural good, those messages will go unnoticed. Worse yet, they may leave a lasting negative impression and actually push her away from your institutional brand altogether.

Good marketing will never get easier, simpler, or less expensive. But the fundamental principles will always hold true. Relationships—not new communication channels and dazzling technology—recruit and retain students, raise money, and keep a campus community running efficiently. Re-tooling marketing strategies to address the needs of our most influential market segments is an essential first step. Patricia Martin’s fascinating research into the Renaissance Generation may well be a smart place for you to start that re-tooling.

Patricia Martin will deliver a keynote presentation at Stamats’ 12th Annual Strategic Integrated Marketing Conference, July 27–30. Details: www.stamats.com/events/eventdetail.asp?eventid=53

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