

White Paper No. 2

STAMATS COMMUNICATIONS, INC.

Those Important Things

What Every College President Needs to Know About Marketing and Recruiting

AUTHOR:

Dr. Robert A. Sevier

Vice President for Research and Marketing

Stamats Communications, Inc.

e-mail: bob-sevier@stamats.com

SUBJECT HIGHLIGHTS:

Chances are, you don't know everything about marketing and recruiting that you would like to. Yet each day, you and your staff make hundreds of decisions that have profound marketing and recruiting implications for your institution. This paper examines nine important principles, principles that will help you and your institution more effectively meet the complex challenges that are ahead.

Things You Need to Know A Marketing Primer

It began with a telephone call. A new president of a client college was calling with a problem. "All I seem to get is data," he said, "but I have no way to know what's important and what's not." He concluded with a question: "What are the most important things that I should know about marketing a college?"

I was immediately captivated by his question. We quickly learned that it wasn't data he needed, but perspective, new ways to look at old problems. Over the next few weeks and months we traded a number of telephone calls and as our conversations progressed, so did the list of what we came to call "those important things."

Nine key understandings

While we discussed a great number of issues, I settled on the following nine for this article:

- It begins with vision
- Marketing is more than promotion
- Image is everything
- How students make a decision
- Mind share must come before market share
- Position your institution
- Segment whenever possible
- Choose a champion
- You need to have a plan

Number 1: It begins with vision

Today's colleges and universities suffer from too much vision rather than too little. In an age of coalitions and consensus management, many senior administrators lack the will and resolve to declare a concise vision and then stick with it. Unwilling to make tough decisions,

they offer too many programs to too many people in too many different geographies. Trying to do too much, they do too little well.

More than ever before, colleges and universities need vision, a clear sense of purpose and process. And if vision is a declaration of direction, then the president is the chief navigator. It is her or his responsibility to assess the internal coalitions and the external opportunities and obstacles that are before the institution and then declare that direction to the campus community and beyond.

Borrowing from Bryson, let me outline three reasons why vision is so important:

- An articulated vision lessens internal debate and helps the institution focus its resources and energy. Less time will be expended on debating what to do, how to do it, and why; and more time can be devoted simply to getting on with the institution's business. An agreed-upon vision may contribute to a significant reduction in the level of organizational conflict.
- A clear vision of success provides an effective substitute for leadership. When the vision is clear, there is less need for someone to continually point the way; people are more able and inclined to lead and manage themselves.
- A vision can be inspirational and motivating. If a vision of success becomes a calling, an enormous amount of individual energy and dedication can be released in pursuit of a forceful vision.

Vision is critical. Without it, your recruiting and marketing strategies, and ultimately your mission, will fail.

Number 2: Marketing is more than promotion

If you define marketing as only promotion, it is highly likely that your marketing efforts will fail. Savvy institutions use a proper definition of marketing that embraces product, price, place, and promotion. An understanding of these four P's is critical.

Product

The first "P" is product. Contrary to popular belief, an institution's product is not limited just to its academic program. Rather, the product is the sum of the student's academic, social, physical, and even spiritual value experiences. It is very important to note that different target audiences will value different aspects of your product. Students, for example, might be very interested in the academic and social dimensions of the product while parents might want to know more about the academic and values dimension.

Surprisingly, institutions often have the most trouble differentiating and marketing the academic dimension of their product. Typically, institutions tend to focus on faculty and to stress such factors as faculty credentials, availability, student-to-faculty ratio, class size, and other variables. However, a successful portrayal of an institution's academic quality should consider all four of the foundation stones of academic quality: curriculum, faculty, facilities, and the quality of the students. Each of these four dimensions of the academic experience can also be positioned and promoted.

One other tangential aspect of academic quality should be addressed: outcomes. Most students and parents are very interested in and motivated by outcomes. In other words, they want to know about the job and career and graduate school successes of an institution's alumni.

Questions to be asked related to product:

- What is your product?
- How does your product compare with those at other institutions?
- How can you more effectively market your curriculum, faculty, facilities, and the quality of your students?
- How can you market your social, physical, and spiritual products?
- Is/are your product/programs in demand?
- Will students overcome real and imagined barriers to take advantage of your product?
- What are the demonstrated outcomes of your product?

Price

Not surprisingly, most recruiting and marketing efforts focus on the dollar cost to attend. However, price can also be evaluated in terms of non-dollar costs. For example, while tuition may be reasonable, students may not be attracted to the institution's location, may not like the size of the college or university, or may feel that the institution does not have a strong image. Non-dollar costs such as these often increase, from the student's perspective, the total cost of attending the institution.

A successful marketing strategy involves assessing and addressing the dollar and non-dollar costs of attending the institution. At the same time, an effort must be made to evaluate, from the perspective of prospective students, the dollar and non-dollar costs of attending competing institutions. As part of this analysis, the institution must also evaluate the amount, type, and delivery of financial aid dollars and information.

Questions to ask related to price:

- How much do you charge for your product?
- How does this price compare with your competition?
- From the perspective of the student, what are the non-dollar costs of attending?
- How effective is your financial aid program?
- How do you package financial aid?

Place

Realtors have long said it best: location, location, location. Research has consistently shown that a college or university's location is a significant factor in a student's decision to attend. This is particularly true when an institution may not have a strong image or when it positions its location as a resource, something of benefit to the student.

It is worth noting that "place" is becoming more marketable than ever before. Historically, as long as "place" was bound to a specific geography, there was

little that most institutions could do to modify their place. However, with the advent of satellite, computer network, video, and distance learning, "place" has never been more flexible, even "movable."

Dr. Robert Smith, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Tennessee at Martin, noted at a recent CASE conference that, "Over the next few years as more and more colleges and universities develop viable links to the emerging information highway, place may become more of a moot point. The handful of institutions that currently offer courses and degrees via electronic mediums will explode rapidly, and the day will quickly arise that any student anywhere may tap into the information highway and obtain a degree from virtually any college or university in the country."

Questions to ask related to place:

- Where are your programs offered?
- Are these places attractive, convenient, safe?
- What segments of your target market perceive your location as positive; what segments perceive it as negative?
- Are people willing to take classes in these places?
- What other places might serve you better?
- What alternative delivery modes are available?
- Are your programs offered at a time that prospective students find attractive?
- Does this time compete with other potential conflicts (job, family obligations, traffic patterns)?

Promotion

The final "P" is promotion. In many respects, promotion involves "marketing" the other three P's through such avenues as advertising, publications, direct mail, publicity, personal contact, and environmental (how you look). In other words, promotion involves bringing, in meaningful ways, different aspects of your product, price, and place to the attention of prospective students and other target audiences.

There is one aspect of promotion that I find to be extremely interesting. Often, institutions are overly concerned about the need to be distinctive, but when you pare away the layers of many successful institutions you find that they are not distinctive in terms of program, price, or place. What makes them distinctive, instead, is the amount, quality, and continuity of their promotional efforts. In other words, what helps make an institution distinctive, in part, is how effectively it promotes itself.

Questions to be asked related to promotion:

- To what mediums (TV, radio, advertising, direct mail, multimedia) are your audiences most likely to respond?
- What mediums are available in your target geographies?
- How do your promotional activities compare to those used by your competition?
- What mediums can give you an edge?

Number 3: Image is everything

When it came down to it, I just couldn't attend that other school. Even though they offered me more aid and even though it was in a more attractive location, the fact is that I really had not heard of it before they started sending me stuff in the mail. I decided to go to a college we knew — a college we had heard of.

*Quote from a focus group of high school seniors
Aurora, Illinois*

Each year, we survey thousands of college-bound high school students, and each year I have a basic truth affirmed: More students choose a college because of its image or reputation than almost any other factor. It's that simple. If students don't know you, they can't, or more correctly won't, act on the messages you send. They won't open your mail, they won't visit your campus, and they certainly won't enroll.

Strong images don't happen by accident; they occur because of design. They require the commitment of top administrators. They require a clear understanding of how you and your competition are perceived by your target markets. They require a concise set of achievable image goals. And they require long-term budgetary support. In other words, images must be managed.

David Martin calls image management "romancing the brand." In his book by the same title, he examines how businesses create brand loyalty in the hearts and minds of consumers. And while the book focuses almost exclusively on businesses and consumers, its application to student recruiting and institutional marketing is as obvious as it is crucial. He writes that "brand mystique accrues by projecting a consistent personality over time... Your creative selling message must build awareness of the brand and of its special advantages over a period of time. It must sustain this awareness so that the brand will be remembered when the need arises."

Martin goes on to use an illustration from David Ogilvy:

What would you think of a politician who changed his public personality every year?

Have you noticed that Winston Churchill has been careful to wear the same ties and the same hats for fifty years — so as not to confuse us? Think of all the forces that work to change the personality and image of the brand from season to season. The advertising managers come and go. The copywriters, the art directors, and the account executives come and go. Even the agencies come and go. What guts it takes, what obstinate determination, to stick to one coherent creative policy, year after year, in the face of the pressures to "come up with something new" every six months.

Many institutions would do well to adopt Churchill's strategy.

Let me illustrate romancing the brand another way. A few years ago, when my son was attending pre-school,

he came home with a poster of the University of Iowa Hawkeye football team. I asked him about the poster, and he said that everyone in his school, not just his class, received the same poster that morning. The University of Iowa was building brand name recognition and brand loyalty among a group of five-year-olds.

Number 4: How students make decisions

People, even students, make decisions in a predictable fashion. They balance, as if on a giant scale, the perceived costs of doing something against the perceived benefits.

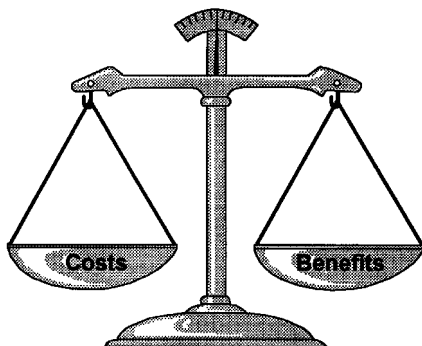
Prospective students apply this balance when evaluating colleges. From their perspective, they add up all the costs of attending an institution. Costs might include the dollar costs to attend, maybe the student doesn't like the location, perhaps the institution doesn't have the exact major the student wants, or perhaps the institution isn't all that well known.

While weighing costs, the student is also weighing benefits. Maybe the institution has a great program or a tremendous internship program. Perhaps the student is attracted to the institution's size or religious affiliation. And like the costs, these benefits are calculated.

If the costs outweigh the benefits, chances are the student will not attend. Or if the student does attend, she or he may not persist. However, if the benefits outweigh the costs, then the student will enroll.

The challenge is twofold. First, you must mercilessly calculate, from the perspective of the student, the cost/benefit analysis for your own institution and for your primary competitors. And second, you must communicate the benefits to prospective students. It does little good to have benefits if they are unknown.

There is an important lesson here. When students say you are too expensive, what they are often saying is that you are not worth the cost. They calculated the costs and benefits of attending your institution and decided that the costs were too great for the benefits they would receive.



Costs

Benefits

The relationship between costs and benefits is called *value*. And while most institutions can't do much to lower cost, they can increase benefits and, ultimately, value. Value is much more important than cost. Value is what students are willing to pay for. Most institutions spend far too much time worrying about cost, and they do a poor job showing value.

Number 5: Mind share must come before market share

If you aren't on their minds, they won't be in your classrooms. If students aren't already thinking about you *before* you search, chances are the recruiting strategies you muster either won't work or will only work at great cost.

When you think about it, this makes sense. By nature, humans are averse to risk. We shop in the same stores and buy the same products. We eat in the same restaurants. We buy books by the same authors. We seek the familiar.

Students are no different. They take comfort in the familiar. As a result, they are much more likely to attend a college or university they are familiar with before search than one introduced through search.

Psychologists tell us that gaining familiarity and causing someone to act on that familiarity requires five sequential steps, steps that take place over an extended period of time. The steps include:

1. Gaining the attention of the subject (the student)
2. Causing the student to contemplate your offer
3. Persuading the student that your offer is credible and in her or his best interest
4. Motivating the student to act
5. Keeping the student committed to her or his decision

First, you must gain her or his attention. This alone is no small feat. When you consider that the average person, including students, is bombarded by more than 1,000 messages each day, you begin to get an inkling of the challenge that is before you. Even the most cogent, attractive message will fail if it is never noticed.

Second, you must cause the student to contemplate your offer. She or he must begin to "weigh" (remember the cost vs. benefit scale) the advantages and disadvantages of your offer while also contemplating the offers from other institutions.

Third, they must be persuaded that your offer is credible and in their best interest. Not surprisingly, peer and parent verification of their conclusion and decision is critical.

Fourth, you must motivate the student to act. Not only must your messages be convincing, they must be compelling. There must be a sense of significance and urgency.

And finally, your message strategy must keep the student committed to her or his decision. This requires ongoing reinforcement and "keep sold" strategies.

Number 6: Competitive positioning

Generally, students don't say, "I'm going to go to Cleveland State or I'm not going to go to college." Rather, they say, "I'm going to go to Ohio State or Wright State or Columbus State or," well, you get the idea.

The fact is, students are very quick to compare one college with another, and institutions that fail to recognize this do so at their own peril.

Competitive positioning involves a clear understanding of two concepts: positioning and differentiation. Let's look at positioning in two ways. First, when someone mentions your college name, what is the first adjective they use to describe you? If they say "liberal arts" or "good school" or "friendly," those are the positions you hold. Or, suppose you say the word "quality" and then ask students to name two or three institutions that they feel hold this position. This is another way to identify your position.

Ideally, you want students to identify you with a position you value. As is often the case, however, students do not identify you with any position or, even worse, identify you with a position you do not want to hold.

Differentiation involves distinguishing yourself from your competition in ways that are achievable and that students find meaningful. An important reminder here: If you do not differentiate some aspect of your product, then students will differentiate you on price.

The merging of positioning and differentiation is competitive positioning. This involves developing and communicating powerful and meaningful differences between your offerings and those of your competition.

Competitive positioning is a multi-step, sequential process. First, you must identify your competition. It is best to focus on the institutions with which you really compete for the students you need most. Generally, these will be institutions that are more similar to you than dissimilar. Learn everything you can about these institutions. In particular, focus on their image, curriculum, price, and promotional strategies.

Second, you need to determine the position you and your competition have in the minds and hearts of prospective students. This involves research. Identify your target audience and target geography and begin asking questions.

Third, identify the position you wish to hold. This involves analyzing two discrete sets of data. First, the positions valued by the students in your marketplace. And second, the positions occupied by your competition. Of course, this entails systematic research.

As you seek to identify your position, remember:

- Effective positioning must come from the marketplace
- Directly confronting an entrenched competitor will almost always fail
- It is very difficult for an institution to hold more than one position at a time
- Your chosen position must be realistic
- The position you choose must be significant to the marketplace

And finally, develop a communication plan that will move you to the positions you wish to hold in the minds and hearts of prospective students.

Number 7: Segment whenever you can

One of the most profound yet underutilized aspects of marketing is the need to segment your audiences. As you know, not all students are alike. They have different abilities and different motivations. They are of different ethnic backgrounds and come from different regions. They have different life goals and different beliefs and values.

Even knowing this, though, most institutions recruit all students exactly the same way — they send the same search piece and cover letter to every student. They send the same viewbook. And offer the same campus tour. In other words, they fail to segment.

Segmentation involves dividing a heterogeneous pool of prospective students into discrete homogenous subsets. Segmentation recognizes that different students respond to different messages and they are attracted to different positioning strategies.

Segmentation is not marketing theory, it is basic marketing fact. The best segmenting strategies involve five steps:

- Statistically identify tentative segments within your student pools
- Determine whether the size of each segment is sufficient to justify targeting
- Conduct market research with each segment to identify individual's values, attitudes, lifestyles, motivations, expectations, etc.
- Test individual message strategies
- Implement and evaluate the segmentation strategies

A word of caution here: don't attempt to develop different strategies for more than a handful of your most meaningful segments. While segmentation works, it is easy to design a segmentation strategy that is overly cumbersome. Until you have developed a fair amount of expertise, limit the number of segments to three or four.

Number 8: Choose a champion

This "important thing" is not conceptual, but practical — your marketing efforts need a champion, a person that galvanizes and legitimizes your marketing efforts. A strong marketing champion gathers resources, mediates between the different power and organizational structures on campus, and leads.

A powerful champion is important for several reasons. First, because the variables that affect an institution's marketing efforts cross so many departmental and divisional lines, turf battles can only be avoided when a strong champion is actively involved. Second, because many marketing issues are related to policy and strategic planning, the marketing effort must be closely related to the institution's policy-making body. And finally, because marketing is dependent on appropriate funding, the champion, and by extension the president,

must actively support the reallocation of funds to support the marketing effort.

The characteristics of a strong marketing champion are relatively straightforward. First, she or he must have the respect of the campus community. Second, the potential champion must have both a theoretical and experiential understanding of marketing. Third, the person must have power and clout. And finally, the champion must be able to lead and motivate people.

A champion is a necessary first step, but care must also be taken to establish the marketing team and its efforts. Not surprisingly, faculty are often the biggest critics of marketing. As they look at the members of the team and its leadership, they will be asking themselves:

- Are team members academically and experientially qualified?
- Does the team understand the qualities and characteristics that make educational institutions unique and valued?
- Will the team members work within current channels of governance and communication, or are they “buckaroos” who ride roughshod over the campus?

To help establish credibility, team members should get out and meet people. Attend divisional meetings. Tour facilities. Ask questions ...listen ...and keep confidences. And finally, they must make their promises carefully. In some cases, your marketing effort will be measured more by what you failed to accomplish than what you did accomplish. Take great care not to promise more than you can deliver. And finally, share success with everyone who was involved and even a few people who weren't. Nothing blunts criticism faster than sharing success.

Campus support for marketing must be earned. A friend noted that you'll know you have the support of the faculty when they look at you as a resource rather than an obstacle. And while you may never hear praise from faculty, if they start coming to you with information and ideas instead of just criticism, then you have gone a long way toward earning their respect.

Number 9: You need to write a plan

The final “important thing” is perhaps the most basic — you need to write a plan. I know, this will take time. But both the process and the product are critical. And while there are many good reasons for writing a plan, I prefer one: A written marketing plan provides a detailed guide of what will be done, by whom, and when. In other words, the document becomes a guide to action.

Marketing is too complex, dollars too scarce, and time too fleeting to proceed without a written plan.

Marketing Plan Outline

Section I: Mission and Situational Analysis

- Mission statement
- Situational analysis
 - * Review of internal/institutional data
 - * Review of external/environmental data
 - * Compilation of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats

Section II: Marketing Goals and Audiences

- Prioritized marketing goals
- Prioritized target audiences

Section III: Strategies

- Marketing action plans
- Budgets
- Time lines
- Evaluation mechanisms

The plan outline presented above is straightforward, builds on an institution's mission, evaluates the marketplace, clarifies goals and target audiences, and assigns responsibility.

While there is no mystery to writing a good plan, a couple of insights may help smooth the process. First, begin with your institutional mission, strategic plan, and institutional goals. If your plan doesn't dovetail neatly with these documents, something is wrong.

Second, culminate your situational analysis with a short, insightful presentation of your institutional strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT).

Third, use the SWOT to finalize your prioritized list of marketing goals and target audiences. The key here is to prioritize. Everything and everyone will clamor for your attention, but you only have so much time and money. Focus on the truly important.

And finally, write strategies for each goal. Goals are the things you hope to accomplish, and individual strategies are the means by which you reach your goals.

Take the time to write a plan. You'll be glad you did.

References

- Bryson, John M.: *Strategic Planning for Public and NonProfit Organizations*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991.
- Martin, David N.: *Romancing the Brand*. New York: AMACOM, 1989.
- Sevier, Robert A.: “Creating a Marketing Plan,” *College and University*. Washington, D.C.: AACRAO, Summer 1989.

Stamats Communications, Inc., is a comprehensive higher education research, marketing, and publications company that has served colleges and universities since 1958.

Our products and services include:

- Recruiting and development publications including needs analysis, research, concept development, design, writing, photography, and printing production
- Market research including image studies, competition analyses, and student-satisfaction studies
- Geodemographic market analysis
- Marketing, recruiting, image-enhancement, and competitive positioning plans
- Multimedia products including Web pages, CDs, floppy disks, and comprehensive Internet strategies

For more information about any of our services or to be placed on our Applications mailing list, call toll-free, (800) 553-8878 or (319) 364-6167.