

Making Marketing Work

Do We Really Mean It When We Say 'It's Everybody's Business'?

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Can you trust a committee to identify and implement your major college marketing initiatives?

You not only can, but, indeed, you *must* honestly empower a broad cross-section of individuals if marketing is going to have the effect you need to make a difference in enrollment growth and student success.

It is precisely because marketing, when viewed in a broad definition of "define a need - then fill it," has to involve such college-wide areas as curriculum, services, retention and research - not just promotion and recruitment - that effective marketing becomes everybody's business and requires a team approach.

Having said that, and even believing that, however, is not enough unless you can truly institute a process and structure that enables the team to first understand what marketing encompasses and then to get involved, plan and -- most importantly -- implement the plans they create.

Having worked with dozens of colleges to help them create a marketing team and plan, I have yet to find any college where a group of faculty, staff and administrators, having been given an understanding of and framework for marketing, do not come up with creative, relevant, doable objectives to form the basis of a marketing plan that will bring concrete results in enrollment growth and student success.

The problem in most institutions is not a lack of ideas, but the lack of a structure to make those ideas really happen. We are all too busy doing our "real jobs" to take time out to implement these significant ideas. Further, most good marketing ideas require cutting across department lines. And even in the smallest institutions, people tend to stay in their own areas and don't have the time or opportunity to get together and communicate in person.

By using the group process, individuals from different departments are able to share their perspectives, which gives a stronger activity, and by doing so jointly they can agree to move forward. The marketing task force framework gives the authority for this cross-

divisional activity to happen. Further, this process creates the “buy-in” that gives you an enthusiastic group, ready to move forward and see their ideas become reality.

The structure to be successful must also be based on true empowerment and an action bias. Once general directions are agreed upon, those who have taken responsibility must be allowed the flexibility to implement it in a way that makes sense to them. By having a wide cross-division team to start with, the various areas that need consideration should be a part of the recommended plan from the start.

Finally, this approach has to include written identification of persons responsible for implementation of the various parts and a timeline for that implementation. Without this, it simply stays in the "good idea" stage.

A philosophy of "progress not perfection" is also essential. Too often we study good ideas to death. At some point it is better to take the risk and move forward, even if we fail initially, as long as we measure success and eliminate those ideas that don't work as well so we can concentrate on repeating those ideas that do.

What is it that we want these teams to do so they are truly paying attention to marketing in its most effective approach?

First, while marketing has become acceptable, and this is fortunate, it is still perceived by many to mean no more than that a slick ad or brochure. And while that is a part of the total marketing picture, it in no way constitutes the entire picture. In fact, marketing is not as foreign to higher education as some would believe. As indicated above, effective marketing, in its simplest definition, is “defining a need and filling it,” something community colleges have been doing in implementing their mission from their inception as they reach out to diverse populations, especially with increasing adult markets and changing demographics of our college students.

Because community colleges have been offering a product geared to meet community needs and result in student success, they have grown over the years, often with not much more effort than the "field of dreams" approach to marketing. Indeed, we built the colleges, and the public *did* come. However, the world of marketing has changed. We've begun to saturate the market of those who come simply because we exist and those who come without our making major changes in our product.

As our competition becomes more sophisticated in how they market to many of our same potential target markets, we need to look at what we do as well. The days of creating a product we just think is needed and then hoping or assuming the audience will appear no longer works, if it ever did. As colleges who do marketing well became more sophisticated and an adult market in particular gains more options, we need to learn to market well if we are to survive.

Good marketing encompasses a full range of institutional aspects, including market research, the product which includes both curriculum and services, promotion, inquiry follow-up, retention, and evaluation.

We need to make changes in each of these areas. For example, under curriculum we need to consider creative ways to offer our product that meet student needs such as convenient times and places, accelerated blocks, and distance learning, now including the computer. We need to ask if we've updated our programs and courses to reflect a changing job market and made the hard decision to eliminate what's no longer relevant.

Our services need to include effective ways to get students into the system by monitoring and following up on inquiries at each stage. And then, more importantly, effective ways to help students stay in the system and succeed, with retention strategies from early alert contacts and peer mentoring to such simple activities as having faculty announce in classes during registration periods the next courses in a sequence and other related classes.

Once we have overcome the possible barriers to truly making marketing "everybody's business," our institutions can be on one of the most effective paths to help them achieve college goals, from enrollment building to community relations and student success. And that's what we want to be about anyway.

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