

Beyond the Field of Dreams: Marketing for the 21st Century

By Sandra Golden

(Editor's note: The following article is based on the keynote address given by Sandra Golden at several NCMPR district conferences.)

As we head into a new millennium, the one situation we can be certain of is that change is a given. Indeed, it is a new world. Those of us marketing community colleges face new audiences and new competition. We face a world of rapidly changing technologies, a world now communicating comfortably through e-mail and the web, a world of students encompassing adult learners, Generation Xers and now the new Generation Ys, and a population growing in diversity.

If we are to help our colleges effectively serve and reach these new markets, we need to understand these changes and to help our institutions develop strategies that go far beyond a "field of dreams" approach. In the early years of community colleges, the "if you build it, they will come" philosophy often worked. But those markets are largely saturated – and represent only part of our target audiences today, and our competition is more sophisticated. We must change and adapt just to keep pace.

Let's take a look at who some of these changing markets include, what we need to do to reach them, and finally, what we as marketing professionals need to do ourselves to remain most effective.

The educational trends and markets

As we read headlines today, we know that the public is concerned about the job we are doing in education. While public opinion polls show that Americans still assign a high value and respect to a college degree, the public and legislators and leaders are also concerned with access, costs/value, accountability, productivity and outcome measures. I believe this scrutiny is actually based on good news; it is precisely because our work in higher education is more critical than ever that we are receiving so much attention.

Job market. Consider these facts: In today's world of changing technologies, 75% of all jobs now require post-secondary education; however 4 out of 5 new jobs will not require a bachelor's degree, and technological jobs are the fastest growing segment. We offer the hot careers for the 21st century. Further, 75% of the current workforce will need significant retraining in coming years.

Because of these facts, it is no surprise that 44% of all undergrads are in community colleges, with an average age of 29.

Adults. The adult student market, in fact, continues to grow. Half of all undergraduate learners today are 25 or older, and adult learners have increased 50% in the last 20 years. In fact, the “traditional” student (18-22, full time, lives on campus) makes up only 16% of all undergraduate students. So the need to attract and serve the adult market becomes increasingly important, and as we adapt our programs to meet those needs, we also face increasing competition from four-year and proprietary schools that now are looking to reach many of those same markets.

What do adults want and need? Perhaps the bywords should be services, services, and more services. Adults look to convenience in locations, schedules, and timely completion. For many adults, attending college has to be fit into demands of family, work and community activities. Why are they attending? Careers. 90% return for job/career reasons. Even in non-credit programs, 70% are studying for career reasons.

Generations X and Y. At the same time our adult markets are growing, our younger markets are changing as well. The Generation X (from age 21 to 30s) and the Generation Y (under 21) come to us with a whole new perspective on the world.

Both these groups are cyber-literate and expect innovations, choices and flexibility. The Generation Xers grew up on video games and computers, and the Y’s grew up on-line and with instantaneous information, watching news/history as it happened. Yet their living history doesn’t include the Vietnam War, the Cold War, a space shuttle blowing up, the Kennedy assassination or even President Reagan being shot. They don’t remember a time without videos, computers, e-mail, faxes, answering machines, walkmans or MTV. At the same time, personal relations are important to these groups.

Precisely because the Xers grew up in a mass media world, they are used to going through information and forming their own decisions. They don’t like hype or labels and have become savvy, cost conscious, skeptical in their buying habits and look for value and need. Many were latchkey kids, in an era of working moms and divorced parents; today, women expect to work but want balance with home and family. For many Xers, they entered a workforce during recession, so many stayed in school and now are willing to jump from job to job.

The Y generation brings more optimism. They think being technologically literate is the best part of Generation Y. Large percentages believe in helping others, in lifelong learning and do not believe money buys happiness.

Diversity. These generations are also more diverse and tolerant of diversity. And the world we live in will become more diverse yet. U.S. population projections show minority groups growing from 28% to 37.6% by 2025. The Hispanic population itself has increased 40% from 1990-1998. In some areas, the “minority” will become a majority.

Marketing for these changes

As we consider these changing markets, we need to keep several approaches in mind to reach them. Among these are:

- Use technology. A generation that grew up with computers and Internet expects to get and use information that way. Develop marketing on the web, with e-mail and chat rooms, with on-line registration and applications and CD-ROMs. But also remember to keep these tools visual and dynamic, taking advantage of the technology - not, for example, just reprinting the catalogue on the web. Also understand that people using these new technologies expect an immediate response and that the personal follow-up continues to be critical.
- Create convenient alternative delivery systems. Distance learning, inter-session classes, one-hour modules, weekend degree programs are already happening around the country. Good customer service is also expected; service barriers with complicated and inconvenience procedures will keep potential students from enrolling and returning.

We can write headlines, as some colleges have done, that say, “This fall we built our schedule around yours,” “Eight barriers keep people from attending college...we’ve eliminated all of them” and “What you want...when you want it...right now...right here,” but only if we’ve created the products and services to fill those needs.

- Show real student benefits and outcomes in your ads and promotion. Hype alone won’t do it. For example, use employer and student success testimonials; give your top 10 reasons to attend and repeat those real facts over and over so the perception starts to meet the reality of the advantages we offer. Show the diversity, from age to ethnic differences, in your promotion as well.

Making it happen in the college setting

Once we understand the changing markets and the need for new approaches and messages, our final issue becomes how do we make this happen in the complex, educational setting in each of our colleges? To do so requires 1) approaching marketing broadly, 2) creating a team approach and 3) viewing and proving ourselves as strategists.

Define marketing. For marketing to be effective, it must be viewed as far more than just promotion and recruitment. A good marketing plan must encompass the broad range of areas that impact marketing, including market research, curriculum/curriculum delivery, services, inquiry follow-up and retention, in addition to promotion and recruitment, and a way to continually evaluate and change in each of these areas. As we consider all the changing markets we need to serve to be fulfilling our mission, a definition of marketing

as “define the need; then fill it” becomes more relevant than ever. We can’t just start with the product, try to sell it, and consider that effective marketing.

Creating a team. In order to truly come up with a plan that addresses each of these areas, the college must have a broad-based team creating that plan. Having worked with dozens of colleges to help them develop such a 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 and doable objectives. What is necessary is creating the structure that includes a large group of individuals from across the college, ensures their participation and buy in and then puts the ideas into a written form with assigned responsibilities and timelines so that the plan takes on an action-bias and implementation is ensured.

Marketer as a strategist. Finally, the challenge for you as the marketing/PR leader is to act and to be viewed as a strategist and not just a technician. A study of college presidents done a few years ago indicated that 98% of presidents said PR was an important part of their job. At the same time, when they were asked to rate their own PR departments, the highest ratings were for task-oriented technical skills such as writing press releases, special events, media relations and publications, while the more strategic aspects such as counsel/advise on institutional policies, keeping the president informed on trends in the external environment, shaping the institutional image and even marketing the institution received lower rankings.

You need to take the responsibility for changing that perception by truly becoming a strategist. The issues you bring to the table should go beyond a new design or publication and should address, for example, changing trends and audiences and the kinds of programs and messages the institution needs to reach them.

Further, you need to position your department goals as extensions of the overall college strategies and directions. And finally you need to develop hard data to evaluate the work you do; surveys and on-going tracking, both generally and for specific efforts and pieces, can show concrete results on public perceptions and awareness of the institution, its products and promotion.

What hasn’t changed?

As we continue to market in a world of accelerating changes, we also need to keep in mind that some things haven’t changed and shouldn’t. As we talk with our students and alumni we hear story after story of how the community college gave them support and motivation and changed their lives. These stories are real. These are messages that need to continue to be communicated. This is what we do, and it is why what we do continues to be important and rewarding.