

Helping Your College Departments Reach Their Target Markets

How often has someone shown up in your office desperately asking for a brochure or ad to help promote a specific program? And how often have you found yourself trying to ask the right questions to determine their target audiences, distribution etc. and found they really don't have this information and, in fact, haven't thought these aspects through?

Having been in this situation hundreds of times in my own marketing/PR career, I eventually developed a worksheet of questions that I found helps faculty and staff focus on whom they are really trying to reach and how to get there. Sometimes a brochure or ad is the answer. Often it is not -- at least not until some basic changes in the curriculum or services are made to be more orientated to the students they are trying to reach. And very often, the more they can identify a specific target and determine unique ways to reach that group, the more effective their marketing has been.

It is because of this need in our colleges that we have to go beyond the many activities that will be identified through a Marketing Task Force to promote the overall college enrollment. We also need to create effective techniques to target specific programs (academic, career, service programs) and specific target markets (e.g. women returning to school, minority groups, business).

What is key as these activities take place is that the approaches are indeed unique to specific markets and not just an exercise in applying the same broad, shotgun to every program.

Some basic questions will help us identify the differences. The first step in determining how to reach a target market is creating a situational analysis. What do you already know? If this is a program that exists at your institution, how many students are in it, is enrollment increasing or decreasing, what are the demographics, what is the job market like etc.? Are there subgroups in your market e.g. business can include small business, manufacturing etc. The more specifically you can define your target, the easier it will be to tailor an effective program to reach them. When we asked our health career managers where their students came from, for example, we learned that many were already working in health care facilities such as hospitals, but in lower or unskilled jobs. With this knowledge, we suggested setting up information tables and recruiting at these locations as one effective approach.

Next, identify your goals. While the response "increased enrollment" sounds like the obvious one, there can be others as well. Perhaps you have high inquiry rates, but not enough potential students move from inquiry to enrollment. Perhaps many enroll, but then drop out. For each of these, the solutions and concentration of effort will differ.

Once these items are established, ask what the specific needs of your market are and what benefits in your product meet those needs. And, perhaps the hardest, but most important question is "What in your product --curriculum and services --can you change

to better reach your market. E.g. new time offerings, location, new courses, expanded services?”

Finally, once your best possible product is designed, you are ready to ask how to promote it. The easy answer always seems to be take out an ad or do a brochure. And while that may be valuable some of the time, the question to come back with for promotion is what outlets could you use that are unique to your target and why? Before you do a brochure, for example, the question is where do you send it or distribute it and is the content then directed to your specific target?

An example of using these criteria for specific targets can be seen by reviewing the approach when one college decided to enhance their business program. They determined there was a need for small businesses to consider international opportunities and addressed this need by creating new courses in the subject, taught by professionals in the field who could concentrate on the nuts and bolts information business owners needed, not just theory, and offered the class in time blocks on Saturdays or one evening a week. For promotion, they partnered with the area’s chamber of commerce, small business associations and other related organizations, and even offered a free workshop to small business owners to get them on campus and to serve as a springboard for additional publicity.

Similarly, in trying to reach a minority Hispanic population, a college’s total approach began by forming an advisory committee that not only included key college personnel, but also key Hispanic leaders in the community. Dialogue among them led to such changes in curriculum and services as a new English as a Second Language class with Spanish emphasis, on-campus career days for potential Hispanic students, scholarships offered in conjunction with an area Hispanic organization, a series of cultural performances, and developing counseling and mentoring programs. Once these were in place, special promotion materials, including PSAs, and brochures in Spanish had something special to communicate.

All of these approaches show how marketing is indeed aptly described as, “Define a need. Then fill it.” As one participant in an NCMPR workshop that used this worksheet to approach target markets said in explaining its effectiveness, “I can’t believe the difference it has made in helping faculty and staff focus on programs, what they need to do and change, and what they want the marketing to accomplish.” By asking these same questions, you can help your college achieve these results as well.