

## **NCMPR**

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## **Red-Hot PR/Marketing Techniques in an Ice-Cold Economy**

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As our country deals with hard economic times, the nation's two-year colleges find themselves in a dilemma: How do they find additional support to serve growing enrollments, even while state legislatures are cutting budgets?

Budget cuts are real, and this means we can't continue to do everything as we have in the past. Neither, however, can we afford to stop the momentum of getting our message out. When you totally drop or radically reduce your public relations and marketing activities, you don't later come back to where you were but often go back to square one. And it takes far too long to rebuild.

While the temptation is to say we don't need to "market" when we already have more students than budget resources, effective – and ongoing – strategic marketing and related public relations planning can help colleges build support to survive these times and set a base for future effectiveness.

## **Weed Out Ineffective Strategies**

One key component is to determine which marketing and PR strategies are working well and should be retained, and which ones aren't as effective and should be dropped. This requires measurement, both for recruitment purposes and for gauging awareness of our message among other important constituents, including legislators and business and community leaders. The problem in many institutions is that marketing and PR activities are not measured – and many erroneously think they can't be measured.

Tracking approaches can be as simple as asking all inquiries how they heard about the college and how they prefer to get information and then using this data to make changes accordingly. Some colleges in today's tight funding are adjusting to the times by limiting catalog printing and referring people to the Web instead. Or they've already eliminated a mass mailing of the full schedule book and have created instead a simpler marketing piece and targeted its mailings by age, ZIP codes or other demographic factors. The schedule should then be on the web, with printed copies available in limited numbers on request.

The use of the web also continues to grow dramatically. Once a good site is developed, many promotional materials can reside there. Further, using the web for e-marketing enables you to create targeted lists and keeping in touch literally with the click of a button at virtually no cost.

Other approaches, such as finding the good feature angles to pitch stories for free media coverage, also can yield impressive results.

The important thing to remember is that all of these require knowing what works well and what is less effective. Ongoing community awareness surveys are also an excellent means for providing feedback on how well our marketing and PR efforts are working among potential students as well as community leaders and the general public.

## **Tell Your Story and Tell It Again**

In fact, our marketing and overall PR messages must be *interrelated* and create a *shared* image. Thus, the same ad or human-interest story featuring successful alumni not only attracts potential students, but also helps legislators, business leaders and the public understand the important role we play in economic development. And with today's tight

budgets, the need to reach legislators and community leaders with the critical importance of our work is greater than ever.

Actually, we could not ask for a better time to tell this part of our story – that in hard economic times, community colleges are, indeed, a big part of the *solution* because we provide hope for those needing training and retraining in today's uncertain work world. We need to personalize this truth with hard statistics from our service area and with PR stories about the people we retrain and businesses we help. We can show how the community college is providing area employers with a skilled workforce. Or we can talk about the number of our grads who stay in the community, find jobs and, ultimately, contribute to the local economy. It's a strong message. And it needs to be told again and again.

## **Give 'Em the Facts**

Lay out important facts about your college in briefing papers with impact statistics. Visit editorial boards. Use your Web site to post key facts and figures. Create a continuing news message service via e-mail. Sponsor on-campus events for legislators and community leaders. Develop an active speakers' bureau.

By arming community and business supporters, alumni, students, advisory committee members, boards of trustees and other key supporters with facts about your college, they can help do the talking. They can join you in contacting legislators about your funding needs and writing op ed pieces or letters-to-the-editor. Hard-core facts can also be important when seeking donations from area businesses and other private sources or launching mill levy or bond campaigns. Turning for funding to businesses who need our trained graduates is often a win-win situation that we need to position as such with ongoing communication on our value.

## **Prioritize and Target**

Knowing that budget cuts are coming, we must identify our priorities, make a clear case for them, and hope this makes it easier for legislators to fund those priorities.

While overall enrollment may be up, individual programs and specific underserved markets still need marketing attention, for example. A number of states have created initiatives to reach underserved minorities. Two-year colleges in some states have been successful in gaining additional funding to retrain newly unemployed workers.

## **In the End, Evaluate and Revise**

A strategic PR/marketing plan that is continually evaluated and revised in concrete measurement needs to become the way we operate. It must become an ongoing way of doing business at our colleges – especially when dollars are scarce.

Reaching our audiences requires marketing plans that go beyond promotion and consider such areas as curriculum delivery, customer service, recruitment, inquiry follow-up and retention. The good news is that many activities don't require additional dollars. What they require is a planning process that is structured so you have individuals working across department lines to reorganize and prioritize efforts so that key suggestions actually get implemented.

We know the job we do is important. Our challenge is to get that message out while continually evaluating how to do it effectively with limited resources.

*Sandra Golden is president of Sandra Golden & Associates, a marketing/PR consulting firm that specializes in providing two-year colleges with marketing audits, research/perception surveys and workshops. Golden served previously as associate vice president of public affairs at Cuyahoga Community College. She is a past NCMPR president and winner of the 1993 Communicator of the Year Award. You can reach her through her Web site at [www.SandraGolden.com](http://www.SandraGolden.com).*