
Regional

Higher ed needs new forms of marketing

In this day and age of crises – financial, enrollment, even scandal – among institutions of higher education, image “management” has become a tool to help some institutions stay afloat. Countless colleges and universities have resorted to spending money on glossy brochures, billboards and even on expensive TV airtime.

The images they portray are usually one of happy and attractive students having fun on campus, enjoying athletic events and amenities that used to be more likely to be found at country clubs than colleges. The quality of education is almost an afterthought. The name of the institution is being sold as a commodity, just like toothpaste.

In this race for name recognition many institutions have even resorted to hiring advertisement agencies. These agencies, more accustomed to selling everyday consumer products and who have little understanding of how academia works, further emphasize the notion that higher education is a commodity to be sold using traditional marketing approaches.

The results? Not good. Although some board members may be impressed by the institutions they oversee for developing marketing campaigns similar to those of their own businesses, financial support of higher education continues to decline, politicians’ criticism on spending tax payers’ money in advertising campaigns flourish and the image and understanding of what higher education is all about is nowhere to be seen.

What the leaders of these institutions are missing is two-fold. First, that the emphasis of their campaigns should be academics, not climbing walls, athletics, or

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the endless repetition of worn-out buzzwords such as “excellence” that every school uses. Second, they fail to realize that the venues used to reach potential students and supporters have changed dramatically in the last decade or so, and that in order to reach them you do not need to spend enormous amounts of money.

The emphasis on academics must be the fundamental principle of these campaigns. Most families that make the financial commitment to send their sons and daughters to college do so with the expectation of a return in terms of well-paying jobs. They know that the rankings of schools’ sports programs have nothing to do with that.

Nor do expensive athletic facilities or fancy gimmicks on campus.

Consider the main connection between alumni and the institutions they attended. Almost without exception the good memories of their college experiences have to do with a professor that inspired them, or an academic moment that taught them things that they later used in their professional career or life in general. Those things that they later refer to as “life changing experiences.”

Additionally, the venues that are most successful at reaching these potential students have changed. A couple of years ago a study published by The

Chronicle of Higher Education showed that prospective students spend more time exploring the social media of the colleges they are considering than looking at the official webpages of the institutions – and pay practically no attention to expensive brochures or billboards.

Further, as non-profit organizations colleges forget that they have free access to a lot of media that will be happy to run their messages in the form of articles, radio or TV shows, just as long as they are of good quality. Most advertising agencies will not recommend this route because part of their revenue comes from fees they charge when they place paid advertisements in the media.

So, what is the approach colleges and universities should take? It is what I called some time ago “sustained marketing saturation.” First you need leadership that is savvy about new means of communication and who listen to what students have to say via both surveys and focus groups. As anybody who is anybody in advertising knows, you need not only to identify your audience but also to listen to what it wants.

Second, you need to emphasize academics. That is what colleges and universities can provide that no other institution can, and it is what is going to make students both happy and successful. Leaders must understand what makes a difference in the life of students, the kind of experiences that will be unforgettable and the lasting life lessons that will make them life-long learners.

Third, you need to use all the free media that is available, from social media to conventional media

willing to trade space for good content. To that end you need to develop sound strategies that include know-how approaches to placing content through the multiple platforms available today. There is no need to spend huge amounts of money in advertising to do that.

Fourth, you need to be consistent, persistent, stay on message and relentless in distributing your ideas so that what you are saying sounds neither empty in a world saturated with advertisements of all kinds, nor that looks like a short-term campaign to enhance the sales of a product. As the Canadian educator Laurence Peter (author of the “Peter Principle”) once said, “Early to bed, early to rise, work like hell, and advertise.”

At the end of the day higher education leadership needs to understand that the world is changing, that new generations of prospective students think in ways different than they do, and that old ways of marketing will no longer work. And, more importantly, they must understand that there is a lot at stake when it comes to image. The current vogue of anti-intellectualism, demagoguery and populism are the real enemies of higher education.

To combat them you need a fresh approach at marketing, one that is more efficient not only in terms of results but also financially. Unless we realize that, we will become dinosaurs. And traditional advertising will never bring those animals back to earth.

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