

What marketing in higher education really means

A good question

A few weeks ago I was asked to give a talk to newcomers to marketing in universities. Which got me thinking, What do we mean by 'Marketing' in education?

Do the standard definitions work? According to marketing guru, Philip Kotler, "Marketing is human activity directed at satisfying needs and wants through exchange processes", whilst the Chartered Institute of Marketing view is "Marketing is the management process for identifying, anticipating and satisfying customer requirements profitably."

So in part, yes; and, in part, no. Of course, marketing in education is about anticipating and satisfying customers needs and wants. But 'profitably'? Not in its strict pecuniary sense for many of us, that's for sure, although for almost all education institutions, student recruitment is the most important income stream.

But more important to me is that marketing is a philosophy, of how we do things. It's also one that sometimes puts us at loggerheads with our colleagues, for whilst we think about our customers, their priority is their subject or 'the institution'. Or worse. Sometimes, it's 'the process'. Don't you just love the bureaucracy that riddles the education world? Yes, I know some object to the very notion of 'students as customers', but let's not get into that argument.

So what do we mean by marketing in higher education? What do we do? How do we describe our work to newcomers? To my mind, there are five key elements.

First is brand and positioning, a point emphasized by UUK President Eric Thomas when he spoke to university marketing directors earlier this year, emphasising the need to "turn up the volume on the brand". And at the same meeting, UCAS's chief executive talked of the need for institutions to be much clearer on the narrative about what it's like to study and about the learning experience. So how we present ourselves is ever more vital. And whilst every educational institution is unique, we just aren't very good at articulating our differences.

Second is market research and portfolio planning. If any one area of activity is becoming more important, then in my view this is it. We need to know much more about our audiences and our markets, to be able to segment and to differentiate. We need good data and good analysis too.

Third and fourth are promotional activity and campaigns, and producing marketing collateral, both the 'bread and butter' of our work. It was ever thus, of course, everything from open days and events, advertising and social media, prospectuses and websites. And a lot more besides.

Fifthly, and by no means last, is developing 'customer' relationships. Yes, I have used the word 'customer' again – and I make no apology for having done so – but my point is that decision-making in education is a drawn out process. UCAS may open in the autumn a year in advance of registration but, thanks to the work of our educational liaison and outreach teams, engagement can go back over

many years, building up a positive relationship between potential students and the institution. And with decision making in higher education being both an educational and sociological decision, factors such as views of 'the place' are just as important and also may have been built up over many years.

Put them all together, and they all support recruiting students and staff, winning contracts and building a reputation.

Marketing is sometimes described as the 4 P's, or the 5 P's or & P's, or a seemingly ever lengthening list including product, place, price, promotion, process, placement, physical evidence, packaging, positioning, people, perception – how many P's do you want? (I'd add philosophy.)

In my own university, we have adopted the 4 R's: recruitment, relationships, reputation, all based on research. Short and sweet. All about what we do, rather than how we do it.

For many new entrants to marketing in education, it has some unusual characteristics, especially so for those coming from marketing posts in other sectors. For a start, most 'purchases' are made at one time of the year only, at registration every autumn, and most are 'lifetime purchases' – with no repeat business. Less than ten per cent of university students register for a second degree at the same institution.

Then there's 'price'. A lot has been said about the impact of fees in higher education, as if price is now an influence. But is it? With almost all universities charging the same price – which in England means £9,000 per year – we are in effect in a fixed price market. But yet there is a price, and one with which we are all familiar: the academic qualifications required for entry to the course, whether as tariff or A-level grade points.

Another characteristic is that higher education is a market with lots of players – 130 plus universities at the last count, and over 350 separate institutions listed by UCAS as offering higher education courses. So critical is to gain an understanding of which institutions are competitors, and this will vary by course as well as by location. For example, relatively isolated universities will have many fewer competitors than those in major conurbations – depending on how you count them, there are at least 40 higher education institutions within the M25 – so the market will be very different in, say, the north-east of England to in London.

I have concentrated on, and drawn my examples from, the student market but research is a major market too, just as are business and commerce, government both national and local, and various agencies, charities and other stakeholders. And we should not forget our internal market either.

So what advice should we give to newcomers as tips for success in our business? First, education is a 'people' business; forget that at your peril. And that working with people and building partnerships builds success. So giving advice is better than compulsion and, although this has improved over the years I have worked in education marketing, it also avoids confrontation with staff who because they teach, think they have all the answers. But never forget, nor do we either.

I also advise that being up to date with the market and with market research is vital. It never ceases to amaze me the number of marketers who appear to be ignorant of what is happening in their market. Yes, they are great on technique but do they have an up-to-date understanding of what is

happening in the market itself? Simply reading the newspapers, and that means the trade press too, is an essential part of gaining professional knowledge.

Thirdly, whilst education marketing is increasingly competitive, collaboration still has a role. There are many areas of work, internal marketing and crisis management to name but two, where we can still learn from each other and where collegiality still exists.

But the most important piece of advice is to evaluate all that is done – and to learn from results.

Finally, we need to give some tips for newcomers as to what to avoid. First, hype – to avoid their own and of those trying to sell to them. Secondly, marketing ‘jargon’ and acronyms are a turn-off particularly for academic staff although, ironically, acronyms are a way of life in the academic community. Thirdly, believing decision-making is logical; just in all markets many ‘consumers’ make decisions which appear not to be rational. Fourthly, you can do without training; the old adage is true: you are never too old to learn.

And, lastly, you’ll ever have an adequate budget.

Have fun!