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Marketing in college admissions

Abstract

The first rule of effective marketing in business is that you cannot be all things to all people, and you cannot expect to sell to everyone. Marketing higher education is considered by some to be a somewhat undignified or unprofessional approach to the recruitment of students. However, with declining populations of traditional college students and the increased financial stringencies placed on both public and private colleges, many institutions have already adopted marketing approaches and still others may consider changes in their recruitment and admission strategies in the coming years.

MARKETING IN COLLEGE ADMISSIONS

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Master of Arts in Education

by

Deborah Jo Sienknecht

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The first rule of effective marketing in business is that you cannot be all things to all people, and you cannot expect to sell to everyone. Marketing higher education is considered by some to be a somewhat undignified or unprofessional approach to the recruitment of students. However, with declining populations of traditional college students and the increased financial stringencies placed on both public and private colleges, many institutions have already adopted marketing approaches and still others may consider changes in their recruitment and admission strategies in the coming years.

Definition of Marketing

First, it is necessary to define what marketing means in terms of higher education. Ihlanfeldt (1980) defined marketing as a

methodology that permits decision makers in any organization to think systematically and sequentially about the mission of the organization, the services or products it offers, the market it currently serves, and the extent to which these same markets and possibly new ones may demand its products or services in the future (p. 13).

Too many people confuse marketing with sales and promotion. Sales and promotion are the end results of a

true marketing approach. Decisions must be made about the four p's (product, price, place, and promotion) before a sale can be attempted. Marketing should be consumer oriented rather than customer oriented; quality oriented rather than quantity oriented. Unfortunately, too many admissions personnel are concerned only with the sale rather than being actively involved in the marketing of a college or university. Marketing involves a two-way communication between consumer and producer. If that communication stops in the admissions office, or does not include the entire hierarchy of the college, the admissions officer may be trying to fit the customer to his/her product instead of to the most appropriate product.

Choosing a college is not like selecting a major appliance. Most consumers make the decision to "buy into" only one or two colleges. The high degree of consumer involvement with the decision creates some complex choices for the applicant. The College Entrance Examination Board (1980) listed cost, frequency of purchase, product complexity, and similarity of choice as major factors in the product selection. The CEEB report defined marketing in higher education more specifically:

Marketing consists of more than promotion, or even recruitment activities. Effective marketing includes

research, planning, communication, and evaluation. Among the institutions' characteristics and policies that constitute academic marketing mix are pricing, curriculum development, extracurricular program offerings, admissions and graduation policies, and the location and timing of educational programs. (p. 41)

The purpose of this study was to review recent literature about research, planning, communication, and ethics in collegiate marketing.

Marketing Research

The College Entrance Examination Board's 1980 report, Marketing in College Admissions, listed ten areas which require marketing research in higher education: (1) recruitment of all types of students, (2) student retention, (3) placement of graduates, (4) alumni relations, (5) parent relations, (6) community relations, (7) development of resources, including donors to the institution, (8) faculty and staff recruitment and retention, (9) campus programs, for example, the arts and athletics programs, and (10) auxiliary services such as housing, food service, counseling services, etc. (p. 44). If there were to be research on each of these ten areas separately, the cost could be prohibitive in terms of both time and money.

There must be trust, communication, and overall support, starting from the top, to determine what and how the institution is doing to serve its consumers--the students.

Hosler (1986) reported:

Surveying the attitudes of current students about the campus environment, faculty, administrative offices, curriculum, and extracurricular activities provides direct feedback as to how the students are experiencing the institution. This information can assist in the development of more effective policies as well as in evaluating functional areas within the institution.

(p. 12)

Litten, Sullivan, and Brodigan (1983) pointed out that "when a study is begun with admitted students or applicants and with local research personnel, an opportunity is afforded to sharpen and refine, at minimal cost, the questions to be posed in subsequent, broader research" (p. 37). Instruments have been developed to measure student attitudes and opinions. The Student Satisfaction Scale, for example, is a 66 item assessment of how satisfied the matriculant is with the college (Corrado & Mangano, 1982). This type of scale could be used for an institution-wide study.

This data base should be invaluable to the admissions office when defining the strong and weak points of the college.

What better way to attract new students than to tell them what the institution does well and what it is doing to become even better? Unfortunately, this type of research and commitments from the college usually does not come until there is an enrollment or budget crisis.

Ihlanfeldt (1980) urged an even more inclusive analysis of the college's marketing position. He suggested that research should be done on the program offerings, the quality of facilities, the nature of the faculty (student-centered or research-oriented), attrition/retention rate, location, community attitudes concerning the college, and the current economic condition of the college.

One way to assess the competition is to determine to which schools the applicants for admission sent test scores when making their decisions (Tierney, 1984). If the institution is publicly funded, this can create problems.

As Tierney pointed out:

On one hand, state-owned institutions tend to compete primarily with one another for the same in-state students. Thus, certain state colleges will be able to maintain their enrollments only at the expense of other state-owned institutions. States will therefore be faced with either reducing the size of all of its institutions, or selectively eliminating individual

campuses. Neither alternative is likely to satisfy state objectives with respect to student access and "efficiency," let alone be politically feasible. (p. 243)

This seems to be the point where marketing research and planning in higher education differs from business. An appropriate goal for a business might be to produce the best product at the lowest price, with little concern for the competition. Limited access and loss of institutional choice or diversity can be the high price paid for competition in higher education. Cooperative enrollment planning, based on marketing research, could be to the students' and postsecondary system's mutual advantage if the educational needs of the applicants are addressed.

Marketing Plans

Marketing research is the prerequisite to establishing the marketing plan in higher education. Before establishing a marketing plan, the college should determine primary target markets for their planning. Ihlanfeldt (1980) suggested the following procedures to determine primary target markets and strategies:

1. Identify the high schools of those students who entered the college during the past four years.

2. Study the present undergraduates, through interviews, questionnaires, and/or focus groups, to determine why they chose your college.

3. Use the same procedures to study the next entering class.

4. Identify high-density population areas within a 300 mile radius of the college. Ascertain what marketing efforts have been undertaken in those areas in the last few years and what the results have been.

5. If the prospect lists have been used in direct-mail activities, focus marketing on those prospects who have academic interests similar to the present undergraduate students.

6. Institute or maintain a press service to provide hometown newspapers with information about entering students and the activities of present students.

7. Invite a number of selected secondary school counselors and teachers to the campus for special programs.

8. Involve alumni in teams, if possible.

9. Identify friends of the college in the primary target market and inform them of the activities of the admissions office through a regular newsletter.

10. Inform parents of current undergraduates and prospects of alumni-sponsored events that are taking place in their communities.

11. Encourage the college's public relations staff to form working relationships with the members of the media from the primary market area.

12. Communicate that a systematic effort such as the one outlined above takes time to develop but is necessary for a primary market.

Ihlanfeldt (1980) emphasized that it takes three to five years to assess the effectiveness of the marketing plan. Modifications must be made periodically as need arises; however, the basic plan should be adhered to for long-range evaluation and results.

The American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) surveyed 1463 two- and four-year public and private colleges and reported that less than half of the institutions had conducted marketing surveys (AACRAO, 1980). The recruiting procedures reported most frequently in marketing plans were:

1. Direct mailings to prospective students (64%).
2. Participation in college nights, fairs, and other group activities with other colleges (64%).
3. Expense-paid visits to campus for prospective students and their families (38%).
4. Telephone calls to prospective students or toll-free lines for incoming calls (36%).

5. Expense-paid visits to the campus for high school personnel (27%).
 6. Advertisements in local newspapers (26%).
 7. Visits to noninstitutional central locations, with students and families interested only in the same institutions invited (15%).
 8. Advertisements in promotional films, on videotapes, etc. (12%).
 9. Advertisements on commercial radio and television (11%).
 10. Advertisements in high school newspapers (5%).
 11. Advertisements on billboards or posters in buses or subways (5%).
 12. Advertisements on educational television (3%).
 13. Advertisements in professional journals (3%).
- (p. 40)

Several universities have done marketing research and have designed marketing plans to increase enrollment. For example, Pan American University tried Phillip Kotler's strategy for marketing to non-profit organizations (De Los Santos, 1984). Rather than increase the market segments, Pan American attempted to be more aggressive in the market they were currently serving. The students chosen as subjects were applicants who had not enrolled and students who had

left Pan American voluntarily. The subjects were sent a questionnaire, a partially completed application, and a stamped envelope for their reply. The incremental cost of recruiting each student was estimated at \$2.39 each; the total investment of \$4721.82 resulted in tuition and fees collected in excess of \$60,000. An Ad Hoc Recruitment Task Force of 22 members was selected, on the basis of their interest in the project, from several areas around campus. De Los Santos reported that the success of the project came as a result of cooperation in planning and implementation by everyone involved.

Bradley University surveyed its freshman and transfer applicants to determine who the competition was and why students chose Bradley. Based on this information, "Bradley considered two programs of equal cost (\$5,000 a year); purchasing a toll-free telephone line and flying high school counselors to the campus" (Huddleston & Wiebe, 1978, p. 522). Also, two academic majors were added. Results of the study were shared with the academic colleges to assist them in improving and reinforcing their marketing efforts in the recruitment of new students.

A University of Maryland study revealed that half of the students who had been admitted but did not attend had not been personally contacted by someone at the University (Grites & Teague, 1978). Of those contacted, 75% reported

that the contact made a favorable impression. It was recommended that the department chairpersons send a letter of welcome to each applicant and include the name and number of the applicant's academic advisor. The University also initiated phone contact to increase the personalization.

President Brendan McDonald of St. Cloud State University wanted to "make his campus a 'user-friendly' environment" (Greene, 1987, p. 28), and established a study committee for that purpose. As a result of the committee's findings, student loan processing is now done in one week, more extracurricular activities are planned for the weekends, and campus visits by applicants are encouraged.

Communication: The College Prospectus

When the marketing research is completed and the marketing plan is established, the next step is communicating the plan. The college prospectus is a primary method of communicating the marketing plan to potential applicants. The first college prospectus came from Harvard in 1643. The five-page "New England's First Fruit" included a statement of purpose and brief history of Harvard along with descriptions of the faculty, staff, admission requirements, student responsibilities, institutional rules, academic schedules, and graduation requirements (The Carnegie Council of Policy Studies in Higher Education, 1979).

Many colleges have expanded the prospectus to include marketing information. Carleton College, the University of Rochester, and Cornell University are examples of institutions which have made changes in the prospectus as a result of marketing research.

Carleton College (Minnesota) revised its college brochure in response to applicant and parent responses to a survey (Litten, Sullivan, & Brodigan, 1983). The faculty was shown as both serious and jovial, photographs went from full color to subtle tones, and questions and answers from the survey were included. Lolli and Scannell (1983) reported that regional cover letters were sent with the brochures in response to different geographical areas' positive and negative perceptions of the college and its location in Minnesota.

The University of Rochester (New York) had many of the same climatic and image problems as Carleton. In addition to the usual prospectus, all students applying to the University of Rochester were mailed an audio-tape describing the campus and a testimonial from a currently enrolled freshman (Greene, 1986).

Cornell University (New York) used a different strategy after it was discovered, through a student survey, that the attractiveness of the campus was a significant factor in matriculation. Cornell chose to include color photographs

and verbal descriptions of the campus in its literature (Lolli & Scannell, 1983).

When the prospectus is used as a marketing tool, there can be a danger of misleading applicants. If the information about the college is considered inaccurate or exaggerated, there are ethical issues to consider.

Ethics in Marketing

The College Entrance Examination Board (1980) identified two forms of product abuse in collegiate marketing. The first abuse is lowering standards, which devalues the degrees of graduates, and the second is communication abuse, which is not giving full and accurate information about the institution. As Campbell (1982) delineated in greater detail:

Most top administrators were keenly aware that the recruitment function was vital to maintaining their position in the college marketplace. A number voiced the fear that the pressure to generate prospects and applicants and to matriculate students could lead to unethical recruitment practices. Such practices might include: admitting unqualified applicants; enrolling poorly qualified students without adequate remedial programs; admitting suspended students without qualification; guaranteeing graduation to select students such as athletes; misrepresenting facilities, costs and

job opportunities after graduation; exploiting foreign students and headhunters (hiring nonprofessional outside agencies to recruit). (pp. 13-14)

A case study of "hiring nonprofessional outside agencies to recruit" is Fisher Junior College in Boston (Gleazer, 1982). The privately-owned college, organized in 1903, was faced with economic failure in 1974. Private consultants were brought in, and they recommended an aggressive marketing campaign to attract veterans. The consultants were given a five-year contract to manage the veteran recruitment, and they received a percentage of gross receipts for their services. In return, the consultants estimated full-time enrollment would triple. Fisher had a predominantly female enrollment in a business curriculum which was accredited by the New England Association of Colleges and Schools. By January 1975, the enrollment was predominantly male, and 18 off campus locations had been added. The Massachusetts Board of Higher Education expressed its concern about the blatant advertising techniques, and the New England Association expressed concern about the expansion from five campuses to twenty-three.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Many issues will face higher education in the future. Changes in eligibility criteria and financial aid programs

will certainly be a consideration for marketing higher education. Admission requirements will cause changes in recruitment strategies and the student market segments. Remediation may shift to the high schools if their graduates cannot be accepted by the college of their choice. Junior colleges may have an expanded role in this remediation.

The admissions office that strategizes exclusively for the traditional student market may find itself in an intensely competitive market. S. K. Bailey remembers when in 1940, 50 college representatives from Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia traveled to Warren Harding High School in Warren, Ohio to recruit two applicants (CEEB, 1980).

As the pool of traditional applicants decreases, colleges may begin to market more actively for foreign and nontraditional applicants. Foreign students are reported to be an expensive target market, unless they are attracted to a specific curricula. Nontraditional students are more difficult to recruit through traditional efforts and are usually more costly to retain because of their varied needs and educational goals. Market studies may show an increased need for part-time curricula. "Higher education is approaching lifelong learning with standards, forethought, and a sense of dignity reminiscent of the California Gold Rush" (Sawhill, 1978-79, p. 7).

Because no college can be all things to all applicants, the admission officer's job will be much easier if the image and credentials of his/her college do the recruiting. "Most colleges that lack definition with regard to uniqueness are likely to find the future grim" (Ihlanfeldt, 1980, p. 4\51). Without a clear statement of mission and philosophy, it will become more difficult to convince an applicant to select a particular college.

Marketing higher education is a trend that will continue. The president of the college needs to emphasize that marketing does not happen in just one office on the campus. Each college should have a code of ethics which is clearly stated and strictly observed by admissions personnel and all representatives of the college. Personalization of the admissions process and increased college student development services appear to be trends. A student-centered campus attitude would be a good hook on which to hang promotional efforts.

Walters (1982) summarized the coming trend in collegiate marketing: "Students will become the center of attention between now and the year 2000--it will be their golden era. They will be recruited as never before, and institutions will provide better counseling, better teaching, and better placement" (p. 19).

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