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Selling the Academy Without Selling Out

by Ken Steele

Marketing expert Ken Steele argues that university marketing, far from dumbing down the university mission, can have the opposite effect, raising entrance averages and enhancing institutional selectivity.

Faculty at Canadian universities are rightly concerned about a number of threats to academic quality and integrity, including the growing ranks of contingent faculty, larger class sizes, corporate research sponsorship, grade inflation, and a “new managerialism”¹ on campus. University marketing, however, should not be one of them. For decades now, institutional “marketers” have been among the most dedicated professionals on campus, working in a range of offices from student recruitment, high school liaison, and public affairs, to advancement and alumni relations. These marketers aim to support academic quality and advance the purposes of the institution and its faculty. They seek to raise public awareness and enhance the reputation of the institution, attract more (or more qualified) applicants, and position the institution as worthy of public, corporate, and philanthropic support. Functionally and teleologically, university marketing is a staunch ally of faculty.



Of course, in practice this alliance is often strained, largely because of mistrust and misunderstanding. As a lapsed academic who has now spent more than a dozen years in education-related marketing, I appreciate and respect the virtues of both worlds and believe it is possible to maintain a kind of cultural bilingualism and bridge what can sometimes be two solitudes on campus.

THE IMPETUS TO MARKET UNIVERSITIES

University education used to sell itself. The past five decades saw unprecedented growth in Canadian universities, thanks to baby boomer demographics, an increasingly knowledge-based economy, and rising participation rates. New institutions were established, and existing institutions expanded to meet steadily growing demand. Entrance requirements inched upwards as leading institutions could be more and more selective in admissions, and new applied and professional programs were introduced to meet the objectives of undergraduates uninterested in pursuing scholarly careers. The domestic supply of new undergraduates was also augmented through international recruitment, particularly from China and India.

The enrolment boom for most Canadian universities is already over. Overall post-secondary enrolment by traditional-aged students in Canada is projected to decline by more than 100,000 between 2012 and 2026.² Although the Association

of Universities and Colleges of Canada predicts stable undergraduate enrolment at Canadian universities, it assumes strong participation rates. Moreover, some of this university enrolment may well come at the expense of Canada's community colleges. More significantly, national projections disguise increasing regional disparities. In major urban centres such as Toronto, Calgary, and Vancouver, immigration is leading to surging youth populations. Our studies have demonstrated, however, that new Canadians and first-generation Canadians are significantly less interested in leaving their parents to attend university away from home. For cultural and financial reasons, they are much less mobile students. In contrast, some universities in the Atlantic provinces, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and British Columbia are already feeling the enrolment pinch, as those regions of the country begin what is projected to be a precipitous slide of as much as 35 per cent in their youth cohorts by 2026.³ Even in northern Ontario youth cohorts are shrinking rapidly. The Lakehead Public School Board has closed more than half its schools in recent years. It hardly seems coincidental that Lakehead University has become one of the country's more daring and aggressive marketers.

Despite the demographic challenges facing many universities, none wants to contemplate downsizing. Instead, institutions investigate student engagement and retention strategies, strategic enrolment management, distance education offerings, and non-traditional markets. Many of these strategies have major implications for student support services and affect the academic quality of students and classes. Some of these strategies have a limited lifespan as many overseas markets establish their own universities at a staggering rate. The election of Barack Obama will make the U.S. a more attractive destination for international students again, and

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distance education markets are dominated by multi-billion-dollar corporations like Apollo Group (parent of the University of Phoenix and Meritus University).

Most Canadian universities are therefore broadening their recruitment efforts beyond their traditional catchment areas, to keep classrooms full and faculty employed. Virtually every regional university now seeks to recruit students nationally, and our national universities are jockeying for position as Canada's *international* universities. Canada's few youth demographic "hot spots" have attracted a student recruitment feeding frenzy, from university fairs and mass media advertising campaigns, to the construction of satellite campuses and new universities to serve these growing markets. With about 100 universities across Canada and thousands in the U.S. and overseas competing for a diminishing pool of applicants, it is becoming more challenging for university marketers to cut through the clutter and establish a memorable position in the higher education landscape. Some have opted to take the "hard-sell" approach.

UNSEEMLY COMPETITIVENESS?

In recent years, Ontario has seen a number of controversial, aggressive advertising campaigns for postsecondary institutions.⁴ In spring 2004, York University launched a "subway domination" campaign at the St. George subway stop, just coincidentally at the doorstep of the University of Toronto. In August 2006, Lakehead University made international headlines with its very low-budget "Yale Shmale" campaign, consisting of a few hundred posters in downtown Toronto featuring an unflattering photograph of U.S. president George Bush and the subhead, "Graduating from an Ivy League university doesn't necessarily mean you're smart." Just last fall, newly minted Algoma University launched an even more blatant negative ad campaign targeting "Colossal U," complete with a mock booth at the Ontario Universities' Fair and a fictitious website, with menu options for "Current Sheep," "Prospective Sheep," "Shepherds", and "Mutton." For some institutions, collegiality has given way to bare-knuckled competitiveness.

Whether these aggressive ad campaigns are effective or appropriate is a controversial question. Lakehead's student council and faculty union both publicly denounced the "Yale Shmale" campaign as tasteless and repugnant. Yale, to its credit, declined comment, but the campaign sparked a firestorm of international media attention worth millions of dollars. Something about the negative campaign approach smacks of desperation. Yet it is difficult to argue with the results. Within a single month, Lakehead had logged almost 83,000 hits to its recruitment website, and more than 1,100 prospective students entered the contest to win a SmartCar. Although market studies suggest that few of the target audience recall the campaign, by spring it was clear that applications to Lakehead had increased noticeably.

Evidently, Lakehead and Algoma share the belief that desperate times call for desperate measures. As a marketer, I emphasize to university clients that negative campaigns, particularly in Canada, run the risk of backfiring and damaging institutional reputations in the long term. The more positive and effective long-term strategies involve developing a distinctive, credible, and compelling institutional position, such as the University of Waterloo's strong association with engineering and technology, or the University of Western Ontario's promise of "Canada's best undergraduate student experience." Competitive differentiation is more positive than competitive denigration, although it can seem just as simplistic and narrow-minded to faculty, who know their institutions in all their complexity.

A ZERO-SUM GAME

As a taxpayer, I share faculty concerns that our universities are being forced to divert much-needed funds into a marketing arms race, whereby they compete with each other—and with universities worldwide—in an increasingly cluttered and fragmented media landscape. There are limited numbers of bright students, top-notch faculty, and wealthy philanthropists to go around. The traditional undergraduate market in most regions of the country will only shrink in the decades ahead, and non-traditional markets may be particularly



receptive to non-traditional institutions, such as accelerated private colleges, online multinationals, open courseware, and open source learning. Few provincial governments, unlike public school boards, are willing to make the politically unpopular decisions to close or relocate postsecondary institutions.

Those concerned about the growing profile of university marketing can take some solace from the fact that Canadian institutions invest nowhere near as much in recruitment marketing as their American counterparts. A 2007 study found that public universities in the U.S. spent an average \$398 to recruit each student and that private universities spent a staggering average \$1,941 per student.⁵ If universities were commercial enterprises, like Apollo Group, they might well spend as much as 15 per cent of their total annual operating budget on marketing. (The University of Phoenix spends about a *half-billion* dollars annually on marketing, out of \$4 billion in tuition revenues.) With regulated tuitions and limited resources, no public university in Canada will market at that scale in the foreseeable future.

MARKETING BEYOND THE AGE OF ADVERTISING

For those uncomfortable with university marketing, another encouraging trend is a steady transition away from expensive and inefficient print materials and mass-media advertising campaigns towards more sophisticated and efficient reputation management tools, including online marketing, media relations, social media, viral marketing, ambassador programs, and other forms of enhanced word of mouth. Printed viewbooks are becoming slimmer, and printed course calendars are moving online. It will always be vital to distill the mission, values, and distinctive essence of a university and to express it in a compelling, credible way (what marketers understand as branding), but universities are ideally suited to make use of alternative channels to communicate that brand and to engage with their audiences. Universities generate newsworthy science, political, and human interest stories daily, and many have become masterful at media relations. Universities have

literally an army of students, faculty, staff, and alumni ready, and in most cases eager, to spread positive word of mouth about their institution. Prospective students are the one demographic that is 100 per cent online and extremely active in social networks. University websites are highly-trafficked hubs through which rich audiovisual messages can be shared with interested stakeholders.

Academic purists and skinflint taxpayers alike can take comfort from the likelihood that universities will increasingly use subtle, sophisticated, and intelligent communication channels, steering away from traditional mass-market advertising. Campus marketers are increasingly focused on encouraging and supporting enthusiastic students to blog, post YouTube videos, connect on Facebook, and spread the word about their campus experience. Interested faculty will be assisted to promote their research, podcast their lectures, reach out to high school teachers and students, and be available for media commentary and interviews—becoming public intellectuals in an era of new technologies.

CAMPUS MARKETERS NEED TO REINVENT THEMSELVES

In my experience, when misunderstandings and mistrust arise between university faculty and campus marketers, they usually spring from negative preconceptions about marketing, cultural misunderstandings, or the lack of a common language or conceptual framework for discussing the operations of the institution. Many universities are now hiring marketing expertise from the private sector, often from knowledge-based industries like high technology or information systems, and the two environments could not be more dissimilar. Campus marketers need to recognize that common marketing terminology—“branding”, “targeting”, “product”, and “competitor”, to name a few examples—is emotionally loaded and intellectually suspect in academic circles. Campus marketers also have to accept the fact that



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they influence only one of the traditional “four Ps” of marketing: Promotion. They can expect to have little input on Price (tuition, scholarships, and bursaries), Product (program offerings), or Place (campus master plans and distance education offerings).

Universities are highly complex communities of intelligent and vocal stakeholders in which decentralized authority and academic autonomy are cherished principles. A campus marketer who hopes to transform attitudes throughout the institution will face immense challenges. Rather than shifting campus culture to embrace mainstream marketing, it is far easier, and ultimately more productive, for marketers to transform themselves and their discipline, to listen attentively, rethink their approaches, and build rapport on common ground. If campus marketers learn to bend a little, faculty will come to understand and support their efforts.

FACULTY NEED TO UNDERSTAND BRANDING

Academic training and the academic mindset teaches critical thought, cherishes complexity and consensus, and abhors oversimplification. University faculty often identify with their institutions and, consequently, may dislike institutional marketing that does not reflect the way they see themselves or want to be seen. Nonetheless, I urge faculty to understand that effective marketing brings great value to a university. It can achieve broader public awareness and understanding of the research and scholarship conducted on campus. It can differentiate an institution’s mission and values from its peers, thus attracting faculty and students who will cherish the institution and advance its success. Ethical marketing does not fabricate untruths, but it does absolutely require the distillation of the essence of the institution—a grand oversimplification—in order to cut through the media clutter and communicate meaningfully with audiences. Effective university marketing must identify what is credible, compelling, and truly distinctive about an institution, and express that kernel

of truth creatively in language that resonates with the target audience—usually high school seniors.

Faculty, alumni, and current students should remember that in most cases they are *not* the target audience of university marketing efforts. Effective recruitment marketing will often appear to be a dumbing down of the academy, but if it attracts more—and more higher-achieving—applicants, it will actually have the opposite effect, raising entrance averages and enhancing institutional selectivity. The central purpose of university recruitment marketing is to attract the attention of prospective students with very little true comprehension of higher education. Marketing aims to resonate with its target audience, addressing their current concerns and priorities with a simple, focused, and often emotional appeal. Marketing does not and cannot challenge the intellect, open minds, or expand horizons; namely, perform the transformative role of faculty, once applicants become students.

Ultimately, selling the academy is not about selling out the academy but about raising its perceived value amongst the general public, alumni, donors, and prospective students and faculty. ■■

¹ Rosemary Deem, “Unravelling the Managerialist University and its Implications for the Integrity of Academic Work,” in James L. Turk, ed., *Universities at Risk: How Politics, Special Interests, and Corporatization Threaten Academic Integrity*, Toronto: Lorimer, 2008.

² Canadian Council on Learning, *Report on Learning in Canada*, 2007.

³ Statistics Canada, *Population Projections for Canada*, projections for the 18-21 age cohort.

⁴ Academica Group preserves some of the more notable, innovative, or controversial ad campaigns in the “AdSpotter” section of our website, at www.academica.ca/AdSpotter.

⁵ 2007 study of marketing expenditures, including salaries for recruitment and marketing, at American universities and colleges, conducted by Noel-Levitz.

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