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## Doing the Math

*Making the most of your market research*

*At a time of limited financial resources, institutions are eager to make smart choices with their marketing dollars. Market research can cut through misperceptions and help institutions understand what works.*

By [John Pulley](#)

On a spring morning two years ago, the president of a public university in Indiana was enjoying his daily commute to campus when he barreled headlong into disaster. Both sides of the highway were littered with wreckage. The president, recognizing the parties involved, cringed.

On one side of the town's main thoroughfare was a billboard promoting the university's undergraduate programs. Opposite that advertisement, on the other side of the road, was a billboard promoting the institution's extensive programs for nontraditional students.

The messages were different. The designs were incompatible. The president was sick to his stomach.

"It happens all the time [because] marketers are spread across campus," says Elizabeth Scarborough, a higher education consultant. (Citing professional confidentiality, she asked that the institution not be identified.) "That was a huge investment. How much more powerful would it have been with a unified message?"

Eager to sharpen the university's marketing efforts, the president retained SimpsonScarborough, which uses research to improve the market position of colleges and universities. The university went on to create a new "chief marketing officer" position to coordinate campus communications and "ensure that the right hand knows what the left hand is doing," Scarborough says. "They are realizing that the decentralized approach to advancement isn't working."

Coordinating advancement functions of units and divisions accustomed to independent operation and discretionary budgets isn't easy. Market research can help bridge those divides.

"Without data, my opinion is better than yours," says Scarborough.

And at a time of limited financial resources, institutions are eager to make smart choices with their marketing dollars. Market research can cut through misperceptions and help institutions understand what works.

"Most colleges and universities have no idea what they are spending on marketing," Scarborough says. "They want to measure ROI [return on investment], but they don't know what the 'I' is."

### The same page

Building a brand in the absence of market research is like igniting wet wood without the benefit of matches. It can be done, but not easily and not quickly.

Heather Swain, assistant vice president of university relations at Michigan State University, is focusing more than half of her efforts on the institution's internal audience. As is the case at many institutions, the staff and faculty are somewhat disinclined to think of the enterprise of education as a business to be marketed.

Swain is a proponent of projecting an institution's brand from the inside out. In her first year on the job, she surveyed Michigan State's deans to plumb their views of the university.

"I asked deans, 'Who are we?' and got diverse answers," Swain says. "If you're fuzzy on the inside, you're fuzzy on the outside. We found out that we're fuzzy on the outside."

More recently, the university completed a comprehensive research project that used quantitative and qualitative methods to reveal how its brand is perceived by various internal and external constituencies. The result, more than 300 pages of charts and reports, pulls back the veil that had obscured stakeholders' attitudes about the institution.

The research found, for example, that constituents put a premium on the university having a global brand. (This spring Michigan State announced the launch of the MSU Dubai Academy in the United Arab Emirates.) Market research and creative firms are working to translate that data into positioning statements and messages aimed at influencing MSU's stakeholders.

In a series of nine presentations, Swain's office presented the results of the research to various campus groups and electronically surveyed their reactions. Not surprisingly, group affiliation strongly influenced the views of faculty and staff. People on campus who interact primarily with undergraduate students, for example, were more likely than their colleagues who work in graduate programs to value messages that emphasized global perspectives. That's because undergraduates tend to have global orientations, Swain says.

"We are all differentiating on our flavor," Swain says of institutions' efforts to uniquely position themselves in the marketplace. "A brand is about projecting personality into the world so that it accrues value and people who share that value gravitate to it."

Her biggest marketing challenge is to unite the university's many divisions, each with its own marketing budget and idiosyncratic tastes, behind a coherent institutional brand. Unable to dictate compliance, she hopes to entice the decentralized units to get on board in much the same way that the "Got Milk?" celebrity advertising campaign united the U.S. milk industry. She's hoping that the units will want to join in a more centralized marketing plan because such a move will benefit everyone.

"I'm trying to start a fire. There is more marketing money spread across campus than there will ever be at the central level to support an enterprise brand," Swain says. "If those resources don't come in line with that brand, it won't fly."

At Tompkins Cortland Community College, marketing trumped even external competition. The college concluded that the benefit of a significant image and perception market-research study was greater than the desire to shield market data from a competitor. The college partnered with another two-year institution in the New York system to conduct research that neither college could afford on its own.

"We felt that if we were successful in strengthening the image and perceptions of community colleges in our area, we would both win," says Bruce Ryan, dean of external relations at Tompkins Cortland. "We didn't get hung up on the fact that we compete in some programs. We didn't go down that road."

The research showed that the college didn't need to talk to the market about affordability or, in the case of people who had some familiarity with the institution, quality.

"The fact that we are a relatively inexpensive option is well-known," Ryan says. "We found that the more they have direct experience with us, the more quality they perceive in us. ... We are like the Honda Civic—excellence that you can afford."

The college was also eager to understand why enrollment of adults in the 25–45 age group was flat or in some cases declining slightly, even as the institution's popularity among younger students was soaring. The research showed that students in this age range were highly heterogeneous in terms of desired course offerings and class schedules. Meeting a broad range of needs is difficult for a small college like Tompkins Cortland, which has 3,600 full-time equivalent students.

The college is currently devising a marketing plan that will strategically integrate the findings about Tompkins Cortland's intrinsic value, including how to meet the needs of its older students. Perceptions of the college are highest among people who know the most about it, which "suggests some support for an overall branding presence throughout the year rather than a registration-period campaign," Ryan says.

"I think it tells us we're not going to try to compete with Cornell or Syracuse or Ithaca College on quality issues, but we do want to talk about who we are, the experience people have on campus, what our outcomes are, and the relevance to our market."

### **Investing in the future**

Despite an economic recession that has led to widespread spending cuts, many colleges and universities are maintaining their marketing budgets. If anything, intense competition for resources has led some institutions to market more aggressively.

The fading Echo Boom generation means that the pool of high school graduates is decreasing. Prospective students who at one time would have attended a local college by default are more mobile and more aware of their educational choices. Donors who in the past might have given to an alma mater without thinking twice now must decide which organizations, among the growing number that make appeals, deserve their support.

"It's a far more competitive world out there," says Susan Mesheau, executive director for recruitment and retention at the University of New Brunswick in Canada. "We can't sit on our laurels and expect the same number of students to come in the door. We have to steal from the competition or look farther afield or look into niche markets."

Moreover, institutions must work harder to keep students who "make a purchase decision every day," says Mesheau. "We have to continually market to retain them."

In the course of conducting recruitment research, she found market research revealed that the institution's overall enrollment was declining at a time when recruitment was booming. The university was losing students—433 in one year—faster than it could replace them. Driving the attrition were undergraduates who left after completing two years of college.

The university was obviously recruiting students who couldn't cut it, concluded one dean.

"A lot of folks make the mistake of thinking they are their own customers," Mesheau says. "If you're not a prospective student, you don't know what turns their crank."

Mesheau's preliminary research found that 95 percent of defectors had good GPAs. Academically, they were succeeding. Next, she paid a firm to call the 433 dropouts and ask them why they left. Researchers found that most of the students had come to the university in pursuit of a degree that would lead to a good career. After two years, they were less clear about how their programs of study related to career options and opportunities. About half the students left New Brunswick to take a job, and the other half transferred to a postsecondary institution, such as a community college, that taught job skills.

The university used those insights to develop a career-connections program that draws on faculty, alumni, and online resources to help students explore career options. The university's recruitment office became the office of recruitment and retention.

The research driving those changes cost \$10,000. The return on investment is expected to be invaluable.

"If you know how to connect with customers and clients through solid market research, your bottom line improves," says Mesheau.

The competition for donors and students affects independent schools as well.

"I'm spending more time than ever doing market research," says Amanda Chaborek, director of communications at Detroit Country Day School. The institution competes with private and parochial schools as well as top public schools—three of which recently paid \$25,000 each to appear in a televised infomercial.

"You always want to stay a step ahead, and you always want to know what everybody else is doing," Chaborek says. "If you keep doing what you've always done, you'll keep getting what you always got."

## Reaching diverse groups

Research helps institutional leaders delineate market segments and understand how to best reach different groups.

Susie Nicholson, a marketing expert, left the banking industry to work at Arkansas Tech University 10 years ago. At the time, she was the institution's entire communications and marketing department. Prior to her arrival, the institution had undertaken "a major investment in facilities that transformed the campus from an appearance and programmatic standpoint," but it was unclear how much those upgrades resonated with the university's off-campus constituents.

A comprehensive market-perception study in 2002 "confirmed that people who hadn't been on campus in a number of years had a different perception [of us] than those who had been back recently," Nicholson says. "It helped us to make some messaging decisions that we might not have made otherwise."

The research validated television advertising, underscored the value of campus tours for prospective students, and "helped the alumni relations folks to look at different groups that have different perceptions and plan events and communications specific to those groups [that reflect] what's important to them and what they think about us and how they feel about their experience."

Subsequent market surveys in 2006 and this year have refined the institution's understanding of stakeholders and confirmed the value of its marketing strategies.

"Market research helps you to really target your audience, target your messages, and target your media," Nicholson says. "It helps us to feel good about the decision we are making with the budget dollars we have."

The most recent survey yielded an unintended insight: the difficulty of reaching prospective students. Reaching and interviewing college-age kids via traditional media is becoming increasingly difficult.

"High school students are hard to find," says Nicholson. "They are not at home, and it's difficult to get them on the phone. ... We will be looking for a new approach to this research the next go-round."

Murdoch University, in Western Australia, has focused much of its recent research on the Gen Y market as well. The institution wants to understand how its brand works with the strategic plan of the university, from student recruitment to fundraising, and how constituents relate to it.

"We are keen to understand how people perceive us, how they perceive our strengths and weaknesses," says Lianne Cretney-Barnes, the university's director of corporate communications and public relations. "The trick is to be very clear about what you want the market research to achieve. Clarity around the question you want answers to is vital."

Sometimes the results are unexpected, as when the university asked current students who are nearing graduation what they expect to take away from their education. A large percentage of students indicated that they wanted to make a difference in society.

"People had this perception about that age group being very self-absorbed, but they are very conscious of the world in which they live. They want that world to be a better place," Cretney-Barnes says.

Disabused of an unfounded bias, the university's advancement office is using insights derived from research to tell stories and select campus speakers that better resonate with students' values.

"It opened our eyes to how we need to be talking to that market," Cretney-Barnes says. "We want to understand those emotional connections. Research helps us to get through to that."

## Solid strategy

More than ever, colleges and universities are using market research to inform and execute their strategic plans.

Subsequent to drafting its long-range blueprint, American University in Washington, D.C., undertook a comprehensive stakeholder study to better understand how 13 different constituent groups view the institution, including what they think of the strategic plan itself. Results of the survey will determine, in part, how the university engages with various groups in pursuit of its strategic goals.

One objective is to enroll more students who identify American University as their first-choice college. Elements of the AU brand—a beautiful, safe, traditional campus in a vibrant city—make the university an appealing alternative for

applicants who would prefer to enroll elsewhere. The upside, a larger applicant pool, is offset by enrolling students who would rather be somewhere else.

"Every brand has positive and negative associations," including "double-edged swords" that cut both ways, Scarborough says. Institutions turn to market research "to understand liabilities they need to market against."

AU's challenges aren't limited to its great location. The 116-year-old university also seeks to focus public perception on an element of its brand that has remained stubbornly indistinct.

"We're more of a blank slate in terms of academic quality," says Terry Flannery, AU's executive director of university communications and marketing. She notes that a survey of high school guidance counselors ranked AU as the country's 53rd best university, yet in a survey of national universities conducted by *U.S. News & World Report* magazine, AU tied with five institutions for the 83rd spot. That disparity suggests a blurred brand.

"The academic reputation should be more recognized," she says. "This market testing will look at what might work for us."

AU's leadership theorizes that raising awareness of the university's academic excellence will help it to boost "first-choice" enrollment, resulting in undergraduates who are more passionate about the university and alumni who are more engaged with their alma mater.

"We need to communicate clearly and proudly what a good choice American University is," says Flannery, who is hiring five new people to help carry out the marketing plan. "If we can do things on the admissions side to identify the students who are most interested in us, and we communicate very clearly and proudly what makes AU special and distinct, the combination of those things will make a difference in the percentage of students who come to us as a first choice."

Loyola College in Maryland is using market research to chart its future as well. Founded in 1852, it has evolved in the past quarter-century from "a very local" commuter college to a residential institution that serves mostly out-of-state students. During that time, Loyola began enrolling women, earned accreditation for its school of business, and established a chapter of the Phi Beta Kappa academic honor society.

"Loyola is perceived as a really good institution," says Marc Camille, vice president of enrollment management and communications. "The marketing initiative sprang from an observation and realization on the part of the leadership here and by our board, which basically said 'We're not thrilled with the position of Loyola in the marketplace. It's got a good reputation and has done well for years, but we don't think its perception is as strong as it should be.'"

A main goal of the institution's strategic vision is to be the leading Catholic comprehensive university in the country. Peer institutions include Providence College in Rhode Island, California's Santa Clara University, and Villanova University in Pennsylvania. Market research provides a map for getting there and helps the institution stay on course.

Insights into alumni attitudes about the college allowed leaders to unveil a new name—always a risky proposition—with minimal blowback. The college, which will henceforth be known as Loyola University Maryland, anticipated potential concerns about loss of intimacy and crafted messages that preemptively defused them.

From the beginning, Loyola embraced "a major research component to help inform and support decisions," says Camille.

Avoiding branding accidents like the aforementioned two-billboard debacle is a key component of market research. "Our field is becoming more sophisticated," says Scarborough of advancement professionals' growing reliance on market data. "They understand that understanding stakeholders is more important than ever."

## In Short

**MIX AND MINGLE.** Escape from your office and find out what other marketing professionals are up to. CASE's Institute for Senior Communications and Marketing Professionals ([www.case.org/conferences](http://www.case.org/conferences)), from September 30–October 2 in Chicago, will encourage attendees to think about the "why" of their work while discussing current issues in management, technology, and politics on campus. Later in the fall, the American Marketing Association is sponsoring the Annual Symposium for the Marketing of Higher Education from November 15–18 in Boston, which will

cover how institutions can build strong brands, improve competitive positioning and enrollment success, and use new technology effectively. For more information, go to [www.marketingpower.com/Calendar/Pages/marketingevent\\_highereducation\\_2009.aspx](http://www.marketingpower.com/Calendar/Pages/marketingevent_highereducation_2009.aspx).

**MONEY MATTERS.** While many prospective students care about academic quality, cost is an increasingly important factor in enrollment decisions. UCLA's 2008 American Freshman survey found the number of students attending their first-choice college dropped from 63 percent in 2007 to 60 percent in 2008. Financial concerns, such as the availability of financial aid and the cost of attendance, are among the factors cited by students who declined their first-choice college. College Board's 2008 Student Poll identified the following top-five factors that influenced students' and parents' decision to attend a particular college: academic quality, safety of the campus, financial aid, cost of attendance, and high standards for academic achievement.

**GLOBAL OUTLOOK.** The Institute of International Education ([www.iie.org](http://www.iie.org)) reports that the number of international students studying at U.S. higher education institutions increased by 7 percent to a record high of 623,805 in the 2007–2008 academic year. Interest in American institutions was particularly strong in China, South Asia, and the Middle East, says Kathy Harrington, executive director of Linden, which organizes recruitment tours abroad. Many students from these regions take college rankings into consideration when choosing a college, she says, but it's also important for an institution to articulate what makes it unique. Recent alumni from prospective students' countries can be effective in recruiting students overseas, she advises.

**WELCOME TO THE DIGITAL AGE.** It probably comes as no surprise that college administrators are increasingly turning to social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, to stay in touch with alumni and current and prospective students. According to research released by the National Association for College Admission Counseling in April 2009, 33 percent of U.S. colleges and universities manage a blog, 29 percent maintain social networking Web sites, 27 percent have message or bulletin boards, 19 percent manage video blogging, and 14 percent issue podcasts. Also, 89 percent of admissions offices say that social media are an important tool for their future recruitment efforts. For more information, go to [www.nacacnet.org/AboutNACAC/PressRoom/2009/Pages/SocialNetworking.aspx](http://www.nacacnet.org/AboutNACAC/PressRoom/2009/Pages/SocialNetworking.aspx).