

By Pete McGinty

Aligning marketing efforts in a decentralized environment

Can universities market like the private sector? Should they?

This is an exciting time in higher education marketing. The industry going through a paradigm shift of sorts, as more institutions are recognizing the value of branding and marketing. But in general, most institutions have a very long way to go and find themselves in a very crowded sector. In a 2015 Washington Post article, titled, “How many college and universities do we really need?” it cited there are over 5,300 institutions ranging from beauty schools to Harvard. The article cited that if the university financial model was that of the private sector, institutions would be closing at a rapid pace, but because of their many sources of revenue, even those deemed unsuccessful remain – at least so far.

But, with the changing industry dynamics, this is bound to change. I think institutions need to think more like the private sector. They need to be customer-centric. They need to think outside in instead of just inside out. They need to understand they are in an extremely competitive environment. They compete everyday: for students, faculty, development, and corporate partners just to name a few. They compete for the opinions of their peers – which is so important in the rankings game.

Institutions who recognize the need to shift the paradigm of how to apply marketing and communications to build their brands (instead of simply managing them), to market with a customer-centric approach and to apply fundamental marketing communications principles across all channels will separate themselves from the pack.

My experience is that most university presidents, provosts and deans would agree. But there are two critical barriers that hinder this approach. First, because this is a relatively newly perceived need, there hasn't been any muscle memory built in this area. Since marketing hasn't been a priority, universities typically have not yet assembled the skill sets needed to manage and lead this sort of initiative. Second, most universities have a decentralized operating structure, spreading ownership and decision making across multiple sectors, making it very challenging to manage with any central authority. This results in fragmented efforts and inefficiencies in many areas, the most harmful of which can be the failure to build a consistent brand voice. In fact, many universities consider themselves more of a “house of brands” (think P&G) as opposed to a “branded house” (think Apple). I believe the most successful model for a university is more of a “blended house of brands” (think Marriot).

Overcoming these barriers and marketing more like the private sector is simple to understand but difficult to execute. There are some basic fundamentals that need to be in place, fundamentals that challenge the traditional operating model.

What is needed:

- Support and leadership from the president
- Alignment of deans and unit VPs
- Board support
- Central marketing leadership
- Ensuring added value for units (not taking anything away)

- Financial resources to get the job done

If there isn't a dedication to ensuring alignment of each of these areas, I can assure you that the ultimate goal will not be fulfilled. So, if a university isn't ready to commit to this, they shouldn't try. Failure breeds failure. Efforts that are stalled or don't succeed are easily explained away – "We tried that, it didn't work." Or, what I've heard far too often in this category, "This is higher education. What works in the private sector won't work here." And, indeed, if that's the attitude, the conclusion is correct.

When a university is ready to do it, it can be done!