

7 Tips For More Effective Higher Education Marketing Materials

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A higher education is one of the costliest—and potentially most rewarding—purchases most Americans make. It is also one of the least tangible and most difficult to market effectively. Here are seven broad, common-sense concepts to bear in mind when developing marketing materials for an academic institution.

1. Marketing is an invitation to conversation.

People seldom make choices based on marketing materials alone, particularly for such a significant decision as which college or university to attend. Campus visits and contact with real people—such as recruiters, faculty and other students—are far more influential factors. The goal of a good marketing piece must be to invite further conversation.

2. Images are more important than words.

As a writer, I hate to admit it, but it's true. Prospective students might be prepared to read volumes once they matriculate in your college, but they're unlikely to read a lot about it, at least at first. The words in college marketing materials must be few, carefully chosen and evocative of the institution's unique attributes. They must also complement the design and photographs, which are what will attract prospects' attention and get them to dream about how wonderful it would be to attend your school.

3. It is not possible to speak to everyone at the same time.

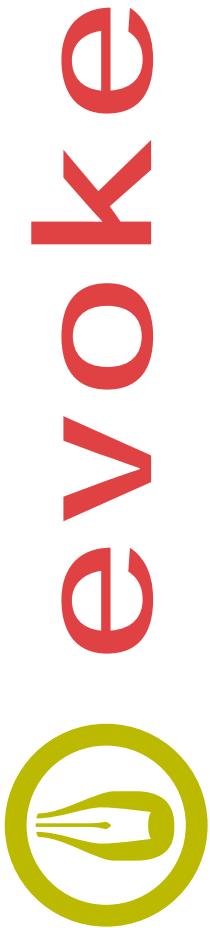
When I was an academic administrator, we used to joke that the university would admit anyone with a pulse and a checkbook. With increased competition for students and rising costs, this comes much too close to the truth sometimes, but it's not effective to market that way. Know your audience and speak to it. Big universities have several potential targets, and they should cater to them with separate, specially written pieces. Smaller institutions probably do better to concentrate on fewer target groups. Examples of target groups include sports fans, students interested in science, and commuters. There are plenty of others, but you get the idea.

4. Listen to your current “customers” for clues about where to get your next customers.

In any marketing effort, it's essential to find out from customers what hooked them in the first place and what's keeping them hooked. It's a great idea to form informal student focus groups each year. Ask what drew them to the school, what has exceeded their expectations and what has disappointed them. Be sure to capture some of the best quotes and ask for permission to use them in your next set of marketing materials. Real statements from real people are one of the best ways to create an image that invites further contact. One note of caution—this has to be done in person; only the very satisfied and the very unhappy are going to take the time to fill out a form.

5. Know the competition.

What other schools consistently net some of the students you pursue? If you're in the Ivy League or at a Big Ten school in a state that has two, the answer is easy. Most schools don't have such a straightforward time identifying their real rivals. This is something else that your current students can tell you—the other schools they considered and why. It's also worth following up with the ones that got away. What choices did they make? Why? These can be difficult conversations to have—and it may require all the people skills



you possess to get reasoned answers—but it will pay off in the long run. Once you've got the information, you'll need to make a strategic choice: either align your marketing messages to parallel those of your competitors or emphasize the differences to create a contrast. Either way, you'll turn some people off, but you'll do better than if you didn't bother to assess the landscape in the first place.

6. Don't let your vision appear stale.

With everything else you have to do, revising viewbooks, search pieces and bulletins can seem overwhelming and hardly worthwhile. After all, the basic information hasn't changed much, and you already have plenty of campus photos. All you have to do is add a letter from the new dean, pop in a photo of the new athletic facility, insert the three new programs into the list and update the admissions policy section, right? Wrong. More has changed than you realize, starting with the biggest population in your community—the student body. While it's important to maintain a sense of history and enduring identity, it's critical to appear fresh, lively and future facing. You can only do this by substantially revising your marketing kit every five years or so. The best approach is to start with a blank slate—don't get stuck in the ruts made the last time you drove down this road. New designs and new words are the surest way to appeal to new groups of students.

7. Get an outside perspective.

As an admissions professional or other academic administrator, your job is to focus on people and policies. At most institutions you've probably got your hands full with that. Even if you do have ideas for bold new marketing materials—and the skills to write them yourself—you probably don't have the time. You also probably don't have the kind of independent perspective that an outside consultant can give you. Really good consultants can help clarify your own ideas while seeing some angles that may have eluded you. Look for someone who's experienced and reasonably priced, but don't fall into the trap of worrying about cost first. If your new materials attract one or two students you otherwise would've missed, they've paid for themselves. On a practical note, be sure to hire either the designer or the writer first and let that person subcontract for the other services. That's the best way to ensure that the team works together well and that you don't end up wishing you'd just done it yourself.



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