That Old College Try

Standing Out from the Crowd in the Face of Growing Competition

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In New York City, where I live, it seems that it’s impossible to go more than a few blocks without seeing an ad for some college or other. In some ways, it makes sense: we have many good — and some great — institutions of higher learning here and an enormous audience hungry for self-improvement, career advancement and exposure to new ideas. What is surprising, though, is how few of the ads really stand out. In most cases, I could substitute the colors and logo of one college for another and the ad would still make sense.

That spells big trouble for those particular colleges and universities — especially the smaller ones — and those ads are just the highly visible tip of the massive iceberg of undifferentiated communications these institutions are putting out.

Think about it: almost every higher education institution publishes reams of material every year: viewbooks, marketing brochures, program descriptions, course catalogs, student handbooks, parent handbooks and packets of information and forms. Each one of these publications presents an opportunity to engage the audience, to speak to readers as nobody else does.

Unfortunately, most colleges and universities fail to seize those opportunities for a wide range of reasons, none of which have to do with lack of intelligent effort. I could explore these reasons, but I wouldn’t be telling you anything that you hadn’t already thought of. You know you’re overworked, you know the pressure to meet your enrollment numbers is high and you know that you’re lucky to get some publications out at all, let alone turn them into powerful communications tools. So let’s look at some things you might not have considered: the big, strategic flaws that prevent you from communicating the way you really want to in the marketplace.

1. Second-Choice Syndrome

Economics and a nostalgic view of the liberal arts education have forced smaller colleges and universities to stretch the bounds of credibility by offering an ever-wider range of programs. While there’s nothing wrong with this on the face of it (and I’m certainly not faulting a liberal arts education), it does dilute the institution’s ability to focus on what it does best and to attract the students who really need it.

Recently I ran into an old friend who is a department chair at one of the many technical colleges in the City. As we were comparing notes, he mentioned that he had survived yet another hard-fought budget negotiation, although he had not received the increases he had hoped for — and that he felt his enrollment numbers warranted. It seems that the college decided to add a new degree program in an even more popular subject area. The problem with this, from my perspective as a marketing consultant, is that the college is seeking to increase supply of something that exists elsewhere in the City (New York University and Columbia University, for example, both offer world-famous programs in this particular discipline), while cutting back on supply of something that only it previously offered. So my friend’s college, in rushing to be like everyone else, has stopped being like itself. This will make it harder for the institution to differentiate itself; all it can hope to do with the new major is attract those who
cannot afford the same programs at NYU or Columbia or who do not have the credentials to get into them. In other words, this particular college is embracing the “second choice” position. This is not a proposition I would want to be charged with marketing: second choices do not typically command as much money as first choices, they do not readily create loyal customers and they can leave organizations more vulnerable to market trends. In short, demand for second choices is always soft.

Let’s look at another example of an institution that was really feeling the pinch of second choice syndrome. Some years ago, a design firm I work with in Pittsburgh contacted me. They had just received a commission to produce a completely new look and feel for Robert Morris University (RMU), and wanted my help with the messaging. RMU had just completed the necessary steps to call itself a university and various administrators were excited to revise and extend its branding. But they had some anxiety, too; it seems that the old materials had not done a very good job of attracting the students RMU wanted. As we reviewed those materials, we saw the issue right away: all the market-facing publications made RMU look just like any other small liberal arts university. In an area like Pittsburgh which, like New York, has plenty of good institutions, this was not a very compelling position, making RMU again a “second choice.” And it wasn’t even accurate; Pittsburgh is one of the biggest centers of corporate headquarters in the United States and RMU was founded to train highly competent, business-savvy people to work in those headquarters. This practical focus remained RMU’s core strength and the reason why most students chose to attend. So we refocused all the marketing materials on this far more compelling message. Within a few months of publication, RMU was attracting the students it wanted and enrollment was up substantially. And incidentally, one piece of the new package won an award from Admissions Marketing Report.

When your institution is content to be a student’s second choice, chances are good that the students you’ll attract will be your second choice as well.

2. The Ivory Tower (of Paper)

When you think of a marketing or communications program for your college or institution, your mind probably goes immediately to the beautiful, full-color materials your admissions team puts out. But marketing doesn’t end there; anything that your college or university spends time and money to publish is an opportunity to connect with your intended audiences — students, prospective students, parents and alumni.

Think about what this means. Your course catalogs, student handbooks, policy documents and even the endless packets of forms can be powerful marketing and communications tools that engage and inform the people they’re intended for. Literally hundreds of pages that you publish every year should be part of your integrated marketing communications program. Take a look at any of the publications your institution has put out in the past year. Are they engaging and informative? Do they create an accurate — and interesting — picture of the institution? Would you send your kids to the college they describe?

Chances are good that your answers were overwhelmingly negative (or at least not exceptionally positive). The “everyday” publications serve to inform students of the rules. At worst, they can take a chastising tone; at best, they are usually boring. Nobody is going to read them until it’s time to look up a particular degree requirement, refund provision or rule of conduct. Yuck.

One of our clients has taken a completely different approach to its “everyday” publications, cleverly leveraging each one to build a positive impression of the institution and continue the conversation begun by its more typical marketing materials. Using every single publication to put its message out there is essential for Landmark College. Just entering its third decade of existence, Landmark has a
critical mission that's not always so easy to sell students and parents on: the College provides an unequalled two-year program for bright students who should be great candidates for any college except that they have ADHD, dyslexia or some other diagnosed learning disability. It's not easy to explain to high school guidance counselors exactly what types of students the College is intended for. And it's certainly not easy to explain to parents why they should spend the kind of money it takes to offer an innovative program like Landmark's. But most of all, it's tough to convince potential students that Landmark can offer them a fun college experience and a great education along with a strategic, empowering approach to dealing with their diagnoses. Every single publication counts.

In addressing this, Evoke has had the opportunity to invent a new kind of college catalog, one that's as interesting and engaging as any traditional marketing piece, with the kind of substance and contractual information that needs to be in a catalog. Students and their parents are encouraged to have fun with the piece by exploring such sections as “Get Going” (degree requirements), “Get Into It” (department and course listings) or “Go Beyond” (study abroad and what to do after graduation). They also meet approximately 40 of the staff on the pages of the document, each talking about his or her own particular experience as an educator at Landmark. Finally, they have an opportunity to see themselves in four composite profiles that extend from pre-admission to post-graduation. The language is lively and engaging, talking to students, parents and counselors the way any intelligent person would like to be spoken to by another intelligent person. The catalog won two awards from Admissions Marketing Report.

We have also worked with Landmark on a parent handbook and a post-enrollment forms and information package, among other things. In each piece, the voice of the College comes through loudly, clearly and thoughtfully. Tough issues are addressed directly, but with full explanations, such as where we explain why the fee structure is what it is or how difficult it can be for parents of students with learning differences to let go — and why they must. It's truly a different way of talking to people.

If your publications are not engaging your chosen audience, you might as well spend the money on something else.

3. Losing Sight of the Forest

Very often when a college or university asks for Evoke's help with a project we find that a big underlying issue is the embrace of jargon, technical language and an organizational structure that is puzzling at best. Many of the publications we are called upon to evaluate meander improbably from one area to the next, often repeating themselves to allow for internal political considerations and using language that Thomas Aquinas might not enjoy deciphering.

Most of our projects involve unearthing the intention and restoring a sense of logical order to the piece, eliminating redundancy and rewriting the material so that it has an appropriate degree of formality but is nonetheless intelligible.

A few years ago one of New York University's professional schools came to us with a clinical procedures manual that had not been given a unified overhaul in about a decade. The manual was issued in a three-ring binder, with each department issuing its own rules. Changes were made by adding more pages to the binder. The book was wordy, redundant and very difficult to use, so students and faculty simply did not use it. This publication, intended to serve as an on-the-spot reference and ensure that patients received the best possible care, instead became an albatross while its function remained unfilled. Fortunately, professional standards at the school are very high and no patients suffered because of the lack of a usable document, but getting these results
entailed very heavy supervision by senior faculty. The clinic manual is not glamorous or pretty, but it is intended to convey essential information that’s accessible while a patient is in the chair. Evoke completely reorganized the document to eliminate repetition, make things easier to find and give the core information a crisp accessibility it previously lacked. Now students and newer faculty wondering about a specific protocol can readily find the information in the manual, read it quickly and get back into action. Stressed senior faculty no longer have to rely on their memories of advancements in procedures and rules. Finally, patients get excellent care more efficiently than before and caregivers can focus on providing it.

*Tactical publications that do not inform quickly and efficiently are wasting resources you may not be able to spare.*

**The Last Word**

More than perhaps any other enterprise, institutions of higher learning are in the business of communication. They communicate ideas, how to create them and how to use them. Yet, when it comes to their own publications, these organizations are often notoriously bad communicators. It’s hard to calculate the costs of this, but they come in three forms:

- Settling for “second best” students while the students you want go elsewhere or go un-served.
- Generating indifference or ill-will where an opportunity exists to generate excitement and positive feelings.
- Creating frustration and wasting time by promulgating rules that are simply too hard to follow.

Fortunately, it is not difficult to address these issues once you become aware of them. Certainly it will require time and money to do so, but far less time and money than your institution is losing by failing to leverage its communications properly and differentiate itself appropriately in external and internal marketplaces.

Many colleges use their promotional and other communications to say what’s acceptable, rather than what’s true. Our clients find the pursuit of truth in all of their publications is incredibly powerful to them and to their audiences.

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**Get an education in effective communication when you work with Evoke.**

We’ll evaluate your current publications, work with all of your internal stakeholders, and conduct focus groups with your students and faculty. Working with us will transform the way you communicate — both in the marketplace and within your institution. We have over fifteen years of experience in higher education, making the dull interesting and the interesting irresistible. Whichever category your institution fits into, working with us is bound to be a thought-provoking experience. Visit us on the web at [www.evokestrategies.com](http://www.evokestrategies.com) for more information. You can also call **212.967.7611** or email [info@evokestrategies.com](mailto:info@evokestrategies.com) for a free consultation.