

Critical role of the dominant coalition in higher education marketing strategy formulation

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ABSTRACT

In current brick-and-mortar colleges and universities, we see a dominant coalition in higher education that drives how marketing is formulated and put into action. The political structure impacts the success and growth of the organization based mainly on old ideals that are thought to appeal to the community. This paper discusses the impacts and views on the challenges in how a marketing strategy for academic institutions is created.

Keywords : Dominate coalition, educational marketing, organizational ideology, communication practitioners, organizational power



INTRODUCTION

Although college and university administrators began years ago to adopt a number of time-tested for-profit business strategies — various accounting practices, financial management systems, personnel and administrative policies, and more — acceptance of key marketing concepts has been far slower. When enrollments were high, budgets healthy, and support from legislators strong, many faculty members considered marketing antithetical to the academy. They were largely disinterested in analyzing the "buying behavior" of potential students. As we venture into the 21st Century recession, much of the same approach is still in effect. Now that budgets are slim, legislators can still be supportive, yet distant, due to the political ramifications of belt tightening in government. And faculty viewpoints remain much the same. Ivy and Naude (2004) noted that in order to succeed in an educational marketplace, such as with MBA programs, academic leadership must recognize that prospective students have increasingly more choices in schools and programs. As such, with this increased competition, the role of marketing in student recruitment, as well as retention, is key to support the necessary differentiation from competitors. Advertising, web marketing, blogging, web promotional campaigns, traditional media promotional campaigns, direct mail, and special events still, to many, seem better suited to selling automobiles than encouraging students to tread the hallowed (and virtual!) halls of academe. Marketing is, to many (and particularly older) faculty, simply too slick for the purposes of promoting the academic environment. Many would undoubtedly still agree with Bingham (1988) that the use of marketing as a strategy to combat declining enrollment and to boost legislative appropriations is unprofessional and perhaps even immoral.

As early as 1983, Keller argued that marketing on college and university campuses has a poor reputation because it is often confused with selling, merchandising, and advertising. Litten, Sullivan, and Brodigan (1983) maintained that marketing is most highly developed in societies where entrepreneurial activity is actively encouraged and where the concept of a market has long been accepted. With that in mind, it is not surprising that marketing techniques have been slow to catch on in academe. Only within the past two decades has the "marketplace" even been considered in higher education. But as enrollment and financial pressures have increased, corporate marketing strategies are increasingly seen as acceptable means to attract students and garner additional resources. The specialized vocabulary of marketers has, since the early 1970s, been merged with the specialized language of the academy. Such key concepts as marketing mix, segmentation, positioning, and product differentiation have been adopted by many academics and revamped to suit the special needs of higher education. Newman and Jahdi (2009) discuss the "marketisation of education" as being extremely important in order for brick and mortar institutions to meld their rigid structure with the latest technological methods of marketing across a number of generational boundaries. The development of marketing and advertising techniques is needed to meet current and emerging enrollment. Emergence into social networking sites is a necessity to focus on the large population user community. The use of simple banners and links to draw communities of interested people is a key focus.

Academia and marketing

Beginning with seminal articles by Fram and Krachenberg (1972), academics were introduced to key marketing concepts. Other marketing writers and researchers soon followed (e.g. Bassin, 1975; Berry & George, 1975; Berry & Allen, 1977; Gorman, 1974; Rothschild,

1977) as did academics interested in the new concept (Huddleston, 1976; Ihlanfeldt, 1980) as well as private consulting firms interested in the profitability of this burgeoning new field (Johnson, 1972; Barton, 1978).

Kotler (1975, 1976, 1979) became an active participant in the development of marketing concepts in higher education. In a text designed solely to discuss marketing concepts in higher education, Kotler & Fox (1985) argued for the use of corporate marketing techniques in academe. The authors noted that marketing is key to today's institutions, and that this has grown out of a mission to serve the need of education in the community. As such institutions must understand their markets, be able to attract useful resources, convert such resources into the appropriate programs, and then efficiently distribute them to their consumers. This is all carried on within a framework of voluntary action by the parties involved. Thus, today's institutions rely on the offering and exchange of values propositions with various parties in order to gain their cooperation and therefore, achieve the goals of the institution.

Barton (1978) focused on the dimension of college presidents and marketing. He noted that while the term "marketing" was once frowned upon, the terms "positioning", "strategy", and "break-even levels" are much more acceptable and highly utilized by these individuals. Academic deans were once only concerned with research grants and merit raises. They are now examining such issues as saleable programs and creating solid markets for older adults. Admissions and financial aid staff are focusing further on the facets of institutional marketing. Overall, the concept of marketing, or the exchange of something that has value for some set price, has a stronger focus for college presidents now. The dimension of marketing that focuses on providing the right product at the right time to the right people is something that is being put forth in colleges and universities from the top down, going from the president's office, to college administrative offices, to faculty clubs, and to classrooms.

For the most part, faculty members and administrators at modern colleges and universities are no longer disdainful of carrying on discussions about such traditional marketing principles as positioning, strategic management of resources, effective pricing, and promotion. Marketing research is used ever more effectively to develop a solid information base about student needs, often leading to changes in the curriculum, the educational "product." Communication audits, focus group studies, and environmental scanning techniques are used so that an institution may better target its programs and services to student consumers. Both internal and external marketing studies are utilized to better focus on the needs of a variety of constituencies and to determine their perception of a particular institution and of competing institutions (e.g. Krampf & Heinlein, 1981). As we move forward into the 21st Century there is the overwhelming need to market to a specific program in a specific area. In some views, this would be considered a niche market for a specialized program (Maringe, 2006).

And yet despite the recent attention being paid by academics to for-profit marketing strategies, no deep theory has been formulated to describe not only *how* college and university marketing programs are structured, but *why* they are structured the way they are. Although several researchers (e.g. Grunig & Hunt, 1984; J. Grunig, Dozier, Ehling, L. Grunig, Repper, & White 1992) have conducted theoretical research to describe in a systematic manner how various organizations practice public relations, very little systematic research has been done to explain how institutions of higher education practice marketing, to describe the relationship of marketing to the overall college and university communication function, or to relate the structure of the marketing function to key organizational variables. Wright (2008) indicates that many of the specialized efforts today have produced a bigger value for the money spent to draw students to

the college and the specialized programs. This niche approach can be more successful for those academic organizations that lead versus follow in developing new programs (Bridges & Kelley, 2005).

This paper therefore introduces the hypothesis that the structure of the marketing effort on a college or university campus is determined by such “key indicators” as institutional culture as well as overall support given by top administrators (the dominant coalition or “power elite”). Overall, this paper will review how the foundation for college or university marketing efforts is planned and executed in the manner it is.

Leadership and culture

Effective communication influences the perception of institutional excellence in higher education. It should follow, then, that a symmetrical campus culture — one that is open and holistic in nature — should, in a majority of instances, demand an open and symmetrical communication system. Openness and symmetry in communication mean direct interaction with many active publics and, therefore, relate in a direct way to the amount of power held by the communication/public relations office. A closed communication unit operates as little more than a technical service function. One this is powerless to grapple with more complex issues that affect the institution. If the culture does not allow the dominant coalition (power elite) to authorize the chief communication practitioner to employ whatever communication techniques are most effective in monitoring the environment, then the institution is operating as a closed culture. It can be argued, therefore, that campus culture must be considered a determinant of public relations and marketing strategy. When thinking about making change in the leadership of the administration, there is a need to understand “who is calling the shot” as this will define where and how an organization will arrive at decisions that set direction (Estler & Nelson, 2005).

Culture relates in large part to the philosophy of the dominant coalition. According to Mulnix (1996), leadership is a key element in defining and promulgating campus culture and in granting the authority (power) to the chief communication officer to implement a strategic public relations and/or marketing plan. A college or university with an open-system mentality logically will attract leadership that supports such an open system operating philosophy. Those leaders should, in turn, support open and honest communication policies and grant the necessary authority (power) to public relations and marketing personnel to develop two-way symmetrical communication programs (Mulnix, 1996).

The literature supports the relationship of leadership to culture and, in turn, of the relationship of culture to the structure and staffing of organizational units. Mintzberg (1983) defined three separate stages an organization goes through in defining its culture: 1) a sense of mission identified by a founding leader; 2) development of culture and ideology through traditions and sagas; and 3) reinforcement of ideology through continuous communication. Clark’s (1970) study of the “distinctive college” illustrated how a strong ideology shapes the destiny of a college or university and how ideology is based in large part on effective and inspirational leadership. He introduced the notion of an “organizational saga . . . a collective understanding of a unique accomplishment based on historical exploits. . . . Believers give loyalty to the organization and take pride and identity from it” (1970, p. 178).

L. Grunig and J. Grunig (1992) stated that the concepts of organizational ideology and culture suggest that models of public relations/marketing communication may operate at two levels: first, as a component of the ideology that frames the dominant coalition’s choice of

communication strategies and, second, as a set of strategies that public relations/marketing communication practitioners apply in specific situations, either with or without approval or knowledge of the dominant coalition. Ideology, therefore, is a component of organizational culture. Grunig and Grunig maintained that ideology determines the openness of a system's codes. Those codes would therefore define the organization's relationship to the environment and, in turn, the model of public relations and/or marketing structure generally accepted by members of the dominant coalition.

Cutlip, Center, and Broom (1985) maintained that "open systems public relations . . . has the capacity for initiating corrective actions within the organization and for directing efforts to affect knowledge, predispositions, and behaviors of publics" (p. 196). It can be argued that open systems marketing can be defined by the same parameters and is a direct result of the institutional culture that surrounds it. Martin (1982) related an open, ethical culture to the building of a solid institutional image. He defined a "college of character" as an institution having "disciplined, evident, enduring commitment to principle, usually to goals and purposes seen as moral or ethical, and expressed individually and institutionally" (p. 19). According to Martin, a requisite for character in a college or university is strong leadership. Keller (1983), Reisman (1981), and Gilley et. al. (1986) also emphasized leadership and the strong relationship between a talented president, the development and maintenance of a superior institutional culture, and overall institutional excellence.

Riesman (1981) argued that marketing can, and should, be part of an open systems culture. He implied that an open systems approach is not possible without employment of certain marketing principles. He described an institution that had adopted an open systems approach in marketing. He noted that such an adoption of marketing is not caving to the strong pull of a crass commercialism in order to just survive. The aim and mission of this marketing approach are what are key. Colleges may seek to survey for distinct segments of students that are currently being served and then address whether their needs are fully being served. Also colleges need to focus on the pipeline of students served so as to project for future plans. This would include staying the course and the traditional program or seeking to amend programs for future student segments that may be focused upon. The performance of marketing surveys may provide results that can better focus recruiting efforts. These may show the paths to new and growing constituencies which would be key to the institution's long-term mission as well as survival.

The dominant coalition as an indicator of marketing structure

For the past several decades, communication scholars have attempted to define exactly what is meant by "power" and its relationship to organizational structure. L. Grunig (1992) said that "power is a personal attribute. It can also be seen as departmental or organizational" and often refers "to the department's ability to mobilize what are typically scarce resources" (p. 483).

From an organizational communications perspective, L. Grunig (1992) maintained that when it was discovered that the environment and structure of an organization cannot completely account for why some communication departments are better than others, public relations scholars then began to focus on the sociological theory of the power-control perspective for a better understanding. The power-control perspective notes that organizations perform a certain way due to the focus and decisions of the people with the most power in the organizations, or the dominant coalition. As such, organizations approach public relations in a way that is led by that

powerful dominant coalition. And it follows that public relations would have a better chance of success if the senior communications manager is a part of that coalition.

According to White (1986, 1987) communication/public relations practitioners make their greatest contribution to management decision-making by providing information about the organization's environment, about the organization itself, and about relationships between the organization and the environment. In much the same way, marketing practitioners are also instrumental in predicting trends and interpreting environmental threats and opportunities so that organizational autonomy is protected and maximum viability is maintained. Effectively interpreting the environment and then mapping out appropriate strategies is difficult, if not impossible, unless the chief communication practitioner is an active participant in management decision making. Strategic marketing and communication, therefore, requires access to decision-making authority. Success, or failure, depends to a great extent on the power given to the function by the dominant coalition (power elite).

A number of researchers in both public relations (e.g. Broom & Dozier, 1985; White, 1986, 1987; J. Grunig & L. Grunig, 1989; and White & Dozier, 1992) and marketing (e.g. Kotler & Fox, 1985) have established a direct relationship between excellence in institutional communication systems and organizational power. In other words, they have argued that the dominant coalition is instrumental in determining both public relations and marketing strategies and therefore is instrumental in defining the focus, scope and structure of those systems.

Several researchers (e.g. L. Grunig, 1987; Pollack, 1986) also maintained that public relations managers who have a policy-making role in an organization generally have a high level of education and choose to work in organizations where the dominant coalition finds real value in open communication. These individuals, therefore, would demand the necessary power to employ whatever communication strategies would be necessary to allow for successful interpretation of environmental threats and challenges. It is hypothesized in this brief paper that, to be successful, such a communication strategy would likely include at least some elements of strategic marketing and tools of marketing communication.

At a college or university, the dominant coalition either identifies and prioritizes, or else isolates and ignores, strategic publics in the environment (consumers, legislators, potential students, parents, activist groups, employees, and others) as prime targets for communication activities. The power that the dominant coalition has in determining institutional communication strategy therefore lies largely in its choice of strategic publics. In other words, if a particular public is not seen as particularly important to senior-level administrators, or particularly to the president, then it is unlikely these same administrators will allow resources to be directed toward mitigating challenges and/or concerns expressed by that public. And only when the chief communication practitioner is a participating member of the dominant coalition will he or she be likely to influence the decision-making process in order to include important publics that may otherwise be ignored.

As Kotler and Fox (1985) noted, a strong marketing orientation will not develop until a institution's president truly believes in it, understands it, and wins support for it from other top-level administrators. This will build a strong foundation for this function. It's important to remember that the president of the institution is the highest marketing executive and as such must create a positive climate for marketing. The president must continually provide focus to the issue of serving the students. This focus must cut across many levels and all departments. The president thus lays a strong foundation for providing responsive service to students that will strengthen the institution during either short- or long-term changes.

Without access to the dominant coalition, communication practitioners seldom rise above the role of communication technicians, handling the more routine and day-to-day tasks associated with the communication/public relations function: publications, press releases, speech writing, and so on. This is also true with the marketing function. Without practitioner access to the dominant coalition, marketing is rarely seen as more than a technical (largely promotional) support function for the admissions office.

Broom and Dozier (1985) maintained that “involvement of practitioners in the dominant coalition is perhaps more important to the profession of public relations than any other measure of professional growth” (p. 8). They concluded that isolating public relations professionals from members of the power elite limits the profession to the role of merely explaining and justifying others’ decisions. Grunig and Hunt (1984) supported this argument and maintained that there is little justification for the practice of public relations at the organizational level unless practitioners are directly involved with the decision-makers.

The dominant coalition is, therefore, key to the success in establishing an excellent organizational communication program and in defining just how broad-based that function is going to be. On the other hand, the communication unit itself is instrumental in interpreting the environment so that the proper decisions *can* be made.

Without having the power to effectively interpret the environment, the communication unit cannot likely achieve excellence. Just as important, however, the unit must have the expertise to develop and nurture the proper communication strategies and the power (as well as the resources) to be able to follow through.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps no other single variable is as important as the dominant coalition in determining not only *how* a communication strategy is planned but *why* it is planned and executed in the manner it is. Without question, the president of a college or university plays a key role in interpreting, and defining, institutional culture. He or she alone also has the opportunity (power) to make significant organizational changes in the dominant coalition and in the structure in the communication system.

According to Smith (1986), success in institutional advancement depends ultimately on the chief executive and that officer’s willingness and capacity for leadership in the advancement effort. In this role, the chief executive must provide both initiative and inspiration. If the president does not take an active interest in the communication program, it is highly unlikely that it will achieve dominant status in the institutional hierarchy.

Brooker and Noble (1985) stated that, ultimately, the president of the university has to take full responsibility for success in any formal marketing or public relations plan. However, Lovelock and Weinberg (1978) found that many senior-level administrators are simply not interested in marketing and see it more as a tool for fund raising and enrollment management than as a fundamental concept to assist them in managing environmental interdependencies. It is difficult, therefore, to imagine that communication practitioners can affect marketing ideologies without the direct support of the institution’s top management team—particularly the president.

With the increases of college tuition over the past several years, it is imperative that colleges and universities be able to effectively differentiate themselves from competitors. As the United States faces continued economic stress, this will be an on-going factor with regard to annual budgets as well as shrinking private endowments (Merritt, 2002, National Center for

Public Policy and Higher Education, 2010). Such trends will continue this increased competition for those prospective students. Therefore, it is important to understand how the “key indicators” of institutional culture and the support of the dominant coalition, such as the president and top administrators, are strong determinants of the structure of the marketing effort of a college or university. These key indicators form a solid foundation for a successful college or university marketing effort.

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