

Higher Education Marketing and Communications Challenges for 2009: Dealing with New Issues or Struggling with Old Ones?

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Budget cuts. Branding issues. Defining and reaching target audiences. From perennial concerns about setting priorities to today's economic woes, communications and marketing professionals at our nation's institutions of higher education face a variety of challenges.

The Challenges

As consultants serving the higher education community, we hear every day about the challenges facing marketing professionals. How, we wondered, did the anecdotal stories we were hearing compare with other people's experiences? Hoping to gain a broader, more quantitative sense of the big issues, our firms researched these topics among communications, marketing and public relations professionals at colleges and universities across the country.

The results were interesting and surprising. But first, a description of the survey.

About the Survey

We started in October 2008 by inviting about 125 thought leaders in higher education marketing to identify their top marketing communications challenges for coming year. These initial respondents represented institutions as diverse as Williams College and Stanford University and included CASE commission members and trustees, PRSA leaders, and other professional colleagues.

Looking at the initial, open-ended responses, some trends and common themes emerged. We developed a list of the nine top challenges facing these respondents—that is, those challenges that appeared most often, and most often as the respondents' top three issues.

We then deployed a second survey in November asking a wider group of communications professionals to choose their own top three challenges from among our list of nine, and to share their strategies for addressing those concerns. We emailed invitations to hundreds of professional colleagues; publicized the survey on listservs (Communications-L; Pubs-L; UWEBBD); and sent email to bloggers with links to the survey. CASE V also sent an email to its members inviting them to respond to the survey [we led a panel at the CASE V conference in December where we reported on the survey findings].

Response was enthusiastic. We heard from 245 respondents, primarily from the fields of marketing, public relations and development. We heard from institutions small, medium and large, with an equal number of public and private institutions represented. Most respondents were

in the Midwest, largely due to strong participation among CASE V members.

And the results, coming as they do during a distressed economy, are interesting. Dare we say that some things never change and that institutions are still challenged by fundamental questions about how to market themselves effectively?

Here, in order of prevalence, are the top nine challenges identified by respondents to our second survey:

Challenge ▼	% rating it in Top 3 ▼
1. Branding and messaging	62%
2. Rethinking and expanding communication outreach approaches and formats	52%
3. Incorporating new media and/or technology strategies	37%
4. Economic downturn in general	36%
5. Appealing to a wider range of prospective students	36%
6. Budget cuts or insufficient funding	35%
7. Decentralization within the university and/or marketing department	20%
8. Internal organizational struggles and staff turnover	18%
9. The cost of higher education	10%

Challenge 1: Branding and Messaging

With today's grim economic outlook, we expected that financial constraints might top the list of key marketing challenges. They didn't. Instead, the most pressing concerns for our respondents were issues around developing a strong brand and getting heard in a crowded marketplace. What makes your institution different? Does your brand effectively communicate who you really are? And how do you stand out and gain visibility?

Respondents cited a number of strategies for clarifying their brand and gaining visibility. Chief among them were:

Research and Evaluation

Understanding the needs and preferences of institutional audiences ranked high on the list of strategies cited by survey respondents. Whether it's a large-scale survey run by an external agency or informal focus groups on campus, leaders in higher education clearly recognized the value and importance of research and evaluation.

"We are continuing to run focus groups to determine differentiation points that matter to constituents," wrote one respondent. Another cited "Surveys to understand needs and interests," while a third mentioned "Research on image and competitive positioning." Another wrote, "We continue to draw on both primary and secondary research to identify opportunities that will allow us to design strategies to effectively advance our brand building initiatives."

Hiring Consultants and Subcontractors

Recognizing the difficult nature of branding efforts, a number of respondents said they employed consultants for a wide range of ventures, from strategic initiatives to entire branding efforts. As one respondent put it, there was "not enough time or expertise to address this entirely in house."

One respondent was "working with enrollment management consulting firm initially to assure we understand our targets and priorities before moving to branding exercises," while another hired a public relations firm "with national ties to raise [our] visibility." A third respondent wrote of hiring a consultant "to help us develop our brand

promise and creative ways to communicate that promise," while another wrote, "Hired an outside firm that crafted new branding/messaging approach."

Coordination and Revision of Branding Efforts

Respondents also recognized the need for standardizing and enforcing branding efforts across an institution.

For example, one respondent wrote of "implementing branding standards with regards to logo use, external publications, etc." Another cited "Coordinating all marketing materials for consistency." A third wrote that branding was "just a matter of focusing our existing resources and putting all 'image makers' in one room and creating a consistent baseline feel for all online and printed materials. Just a matter of communication (and bruised egos)."

Challenge 2: Rethinking and expanding communication outreach approaches and formats

In today's fast-moving technical environment, institutions continue to grapple with new technologies and new forms of communication, such as social networking and online videos. As one respondent put it, "It seems like there's always something new in the communications formats and approaches." And another: "Our approach is not linear--communication will be different for different segments of our constituencies."

Here are some of the tactics respondents are using to clear through the clutter and rethink communications approaches.

Social networking

A number of respondents are experimenting with social media tools, such as Twitter and Facebook. One respondent, for example, wrote about starting to use "new media including Facebook, YouTube, MySpace, iTunes U and other. Create ways for the target audience to find us ... " Others cited the use of e-newsletters and student and faculty bloggers for news coverage and general messaging purposes.

New—or revamped—website

Similarly, institutional websites emerged as a critical component of an effective marketing effort. One respondent wrote about “Unveiling a new website that focused on a more targeted content experience,” while another planned to implement a new site directed toward the institution’s alumni.

Going electronic

With audiences and financial considerations in mind, several respondents said they were moving much of their communication effort to electronic format. “Very few print publications--moving to e-mail and Web,” wrote one respondent, while another wrote simply, “Doing more electronic communication.”

Reassessing what works—and what doesn’t

Respondents showed a strong tendency to evaluate and assess the effectiveness of existing communications techniques. “We’re evaluating our current strategies and adjusting our staff assignments accordingly,” wrote one survey participant. Another wrote about “Using data to drive decisions instead of gut feelings.”

Technology use

In general, respondents appeared committed to harnessing the power of technology to communicate more effectively. From podcasts to PowerCampus to “a variety of formats in order to be ahead of our competition,” survey participants are very much cognizant of new technologies and what they can do.

Challenge 3: Incorporating new media and/or technology strategies

When times get tough, as in today’s economic downturn, people find new ways to do things—because they have to. Our survey respondents cited a number of ways they’re adapting by incorporating new media and strategies.

Assessing web content

Survey participants recognized the vital role an institution’s website plays in communicating with target audiences, citing such strategies as “Overhaul our university web pages,” “Reorganize and restructure

how we manage the web,” and “Emphasizing our website—all roads lead to the website.” Measuring a website’s effectiveness received considerable attention as well.

Using new communications technologies

New technologies play such a prominent role in higher education marketing that comments about these technologies appeared among the top two overall challenges. As we’ve seen in Challenge 2 above, respondents wrote about trying new tools and technologies as they communicate with their audiences. One respondent wrote, “Experimenting with ‘communities’ – video, social site channels, blogging,” while another cited “Video and RSS feeds, and have just initiated a Facebook site.”

New staff and training

New technologies require new training—and, often, new staff. “We hired a Web marketing manager to help us identify opportunities,” wrote one respondent. “We have just set up a new web unit within the Public Affairs office to help us with this,” wrote another. Other strategies included “Trying to take in training opportunities,” “Employ a multimedia producer,” “Professional development for staff,” and “Expanding staff on this area to capitalize on opportunities.”

Challenge 4: Economic downturn in general

Although the economic downturn failed to make the list of top three challenges, it’s clearly causing concern among communications professionals in higher education. Strategies for coping with the downturn included:

Strategic fund raising

A number of respondents identified new or refined approaches to their fundraising efforts as a key strategy. Flexibility and an appreciation of gifts of all sizes resonated: “We are looking at ways to drive home that every dollar counts, not just limiting to large scale gifts,” wrote one respondent; another mentioned “different methods of giving and more liberal timeframe”; and a third wrote of “using great stewardship and communication.” Another commented, “We know there is still money out there...we are making more asks because of the economy.”

Examining expenditures

"Like everyone, we are doing a lot of belt tightening," wrote one respondent, summing up a pervasive sense of the need to trim budgets and examine expenditures closely. "Being mindful of all expenses," wrote another. Specific belt-tightening strategies included a hiring freeze, layoffs, and delays for new programs and initiatives.

Strategic messaging

When people everywhere are cutting back expenses and looking for ways to economize, marketing and communications becomes especially critical. Survey respondents indicated that they're adjusting their messages in a variety of ways to emphasize both the affordability and the value of a great education. For instance: "Messaging about affordability," "Emphasis on financial aid," "We are stressing the value of bachelor's degree," and "We're going to try come up with a strategy to make the case for the Return On Investment for our graduates."

Challenge 5: Appealing to a wider range of prospective students

As demographic trends shift across the nation, colleges and universities are honing their efforts to reach prospective students through market segmentation, broader geographic reach, and more. For example:

Audience-specific marketing

Respondents cited a variety of efforts to target messages and materials to specific audience segments, both for niche programs and for institutional marketing as a whole. "We're beginning to do vertical marketing by job function (IT professionals, scientists, etc.), in addition to our mass consumer marketing," wrote one respondent. "This gives us a chance to connect at a more meaningful level with people through their industry associations ..." Meanwhile, another cited "developing more targeted communications."

Expanding the reach—geographic and otherwise

In an effort to attract students, many institutions are reaching beyond their traditional geographic borders. One respondent, for example, wrote of "Expanding our recruiting efforts to other states," while another referenced "Finding ways to broaden our already substantial

international reach." Others spoke of "marketing in Spanish," trying to "diversify our student population," and "underdeveloped prospect niches."

Refining messaging and tools

With the goal of reaching a wider audience, higher education marketing departments are working to improve their existing branding and exploring new marketing tools. As one respondent put it, "new staff is rethinking—evaluating stale market tools." Others wrote about "stronger messaging," "trying to find new avenues for reaching our audience," "using more consistent branding and messaging," and "using a wider variety of outreach methods and media."

Challenge 6: Budget cuts or insufficient funding

Funding issues present a significant challenge for survey participants, with 35 percent of respondents citing "budget cuts or insufficient funding" among the top three challenges facing them. Among the strategies used to deal with funding issues were:

Evaluating and adjusting expenditures

Respondents are closely examining their expenditures with an eye to cut costs while still reaching goals as much as possible; as one respondent put it, "We're having to be very critical about where we spend each dollar." Specific tactics including comparing prices and renegotiating; publishing communications online to save money on printing and postage; fine-tuning advertising placements; and using student workers to complete tasks previously handled by regular staff.

Identifying new sources of funding

Several respondents indicated that they're investigating alternative sources of revenue, such as contracting with private companies to publish directories and other publications and charging departments for "extra work on projects."

Pooling resources

Sharing costs and making strategic use of available resources emerged as common tactics in facing funding challenges. "We are looking (division-wide) at ways to work collaboratively and create

smart redeployment of resources,” wrote one respondent. Other comments about pooling resources included “sharing media space with other programs at the college,” “combining efforts with other departments,” and “We are addressing ways to ‘share the wealth’ with our 16 different departments.”

Demonstrating impact

For a few survey respondents, fiscal challenges present an opportunity to make the case for the fundamental importance of marketing and communications efforts. One respondent wrote of “Tracking current efforts to show the benefit of our efforts thus far, and using our incoming research to support an expansion of those efforts, as well as encouraging ‘buy in’ from the administration.” Another cited “Lobbying efforts from both faculty and staff as well as students.”

What’s Next

As 2009 takes shape, we’re interested to see how marketing challenges change—or don’t. Will branding and messaging continue to top the list next year? Or will economic woes move out of the number-four position and take center stage? We’ll keep our ears to the ground, and we’ll keep you posted.

For more information about the mStoner/Slover Linett survey, please contact Katie Jennings at katie.jennings@mstoner.com or 802.388.2408.

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