

Up front and personal

While academic marketers now can reach prospects through an increasingly wider array of channels, the structure of discourse and the content communicated hasn't changed as much as it might. And change, even in this generally risk-averse environment, might yield deeper connections and better results.

By Roger Sametz

When I applied to colleges forty years ago, I wrote letters to six schools, received a view book from each with a friendly cover letter, an invitation to visit the campus, an application, and a pointer to an alum or two who would be glad to sit down with me and discuss my future.

In the intervening four decades, purchasing leads and college fairs have become a bigger deal and, of course, Web sites and other e-communications provide options beyond the classic printed view book. But how academic marketers think about connecting to prospective students—and to those who influence their decisions—often doesn't leverage what newer technologies offer, connect new with old, nor take advantage of practices that increase personal connection.

It's important that academic marketers understand which communications they can *control*; which can be *influenced*; and which are *beyond their control*—but where concerted influence and a strategic response to liabilities—can help.

There's room for improvement, in different dimensions

Whether you're a well-known school or one few know about, prospective students need to be moved through a common progression:

awareness
↓
comprehension
↓
interest
↓
application
↓
acceptance
↓
conviction
↓
matriculation

Movement through this “sales cycle” is supported by messages and communications of different kinds. It's important that those involved in marketing academic institutions understand—

+ which communications (formal and informal) a marketer can *control*;
+ which can be *influenced*; and
+ which are *beyond control*, but where concerted influence—and a strategic response to perceived liabilities—can help.

You can control your printed publications and Web site, and orchestrate a campus tour to best advantage. You can influence what your alumni/ae think and say about you, the “buzz”

That said, there is often a lot of headroom to improve communications you can control and more effectively influence the influencers. For that which seems out of your hands—

ratings are influenced by the strengths and weaknesses, and the desired *and* un-desired attributes that constitute your brand meaning.

Your brand modulates the impact of all that you, or others, communicate about your school. Prospects, parents, alums, guidance counselors, and ratings are influenced by the strengths and weaknesses, and the desired *and* un-desired attributes that constitute your brand meaning. Defining what your brand is—and needs to be managed to be—is important.

Defining what your brand is—and needs to be managed to be—is important. Communications that you can control, influence, and even those where you have less control, can help you promulgate what you want to be known for—if brand-building messages are consistently presented and reinforced. Expressing your brand through the structure, content, and visual choices in your view book is great (and necessary); having some part of your brand meaning already lodged in a prospective student’s head before he or she receives your view book is even better. Brand provides context and, ideally, increased receptivity.

that connects to your school or program, and what guidance counselors understand and advise. But you’ve little or no control over published rankings or the location of your school—both of which can transmit meaningful messages.

weather, your campus, rankings—what you can control and influence will, over time, help to manage these un-manageable facts and communications if addressed creatively. Six feet of snow is less of a liability if you can have great snowball fights, sit around a fire with mulled cider, and make friends for life. Rankings will be affected if students, alumni, and employers of graduates generate a different buzz.

Because brands are learned, ensuring that all communication opportunities are informed by a common verbal and visual voice shortens the time it takes to establish or re-direct your brand and boosts the effectiveness of each effort. One-off communications, uninformed by a shared brand platform, can, when experienced across the sales cycle (a search piece here,

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Brand matters

Your brand—that mix of what you promise and deliver, your value and values, and what you’ve been known for and are now trying to be known for—modulates the impact of all that you, or others, communicate about your school. Prospects, parents, alums, guidance counselors, and

Web site there, invitation to visit, acceptance package) create an unfocused, less-than-compelling image: What is this school really about?? Why is it a good match for me?

You may also need to re-draw the playing field. Define success in terms on which you can win—terms that are honest and differentiating—and then get the word out.

And while brand is often talked about as big and over-arching; it is also personal. One goal for academic marketers: help prospective students see how their “personal brands” align with your institution’s brand.

Stake out a position

In an increasingly competitive landscape, “owning” a differentiating position is important. You may have 100 majors, great labs, a new theatre, and a championship hockey team, but what do you want to be known for? Is it a unique curriculum that connects theory to global practice, an unexpected pairing of engineering and arts, an emphasis on truly personal courses of study? Getting to a position that you can own—and invest in—involves both understanding your strengths and knowing what’s already owned elsewhere. Integral to your brand meaning, a clear position helps prospects and influencers to better understand you and what you’re about. It provides a handle; prospects can see where they might fit in.

You may also need to re-draw the playing field. Sure, there are mental images of what success at a school, perhaps similar to yours, looks like. But those images may not be what you’re positioned to deliver—and that difference may well be valuable (and in sync with) prospects who would be a good fit (if they only knew). Success might be preparing students for professional careers, or educating doctors who have a more humanistic take on medicine and health, or providing the environment that helps students who don’t have a firm sense of direction

to find one. Define success in terms on which you can win—terms that are honest and differentiating—and then get the word out.

Sometimes a liability needs to be re-positioned. We’ve worked with a graduate school of business whose campus was definitely not an asset—especially troublesome as an immediate competitor’s campus was a significant draw. But because the school was located in the middle of one of the country’s foremost centers of technological and biotechnological research and development, we were able to successfully (and honestly) re-cast “campus” to include this area of vital interest to students. And, because so many programs enabled

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students to apply classroom learning to real projects all around the globe, we were able to build a concentric circle model of ever-widening campuses that was compelling and differentiating.

Look before leaping

But if you’re to communicate more effectively, and connect more personally, you need to get specific.

Big, general statements are rarely differentiating or resonant. Whether renovating a desired set of brand attributes, preparing alumni to be better ambassadors, or identifying “ways in” for a prospect to understand your school, it’s important to first know your current strengths and weaknesses, what prospects are looking for, and the intersection set of what you can promise and deliver—and what prospects and influencers need and value.

Both quantitative and qualitative research are valuable. Collecting data from students who matriculate (and why); from those who don’t (and why); from those who abandon the application process (and why); and from those who have been on campus for a few years and can compare their pre-matriculation thoughts with the experience as they’ve lived it—can help every school to better define its positioning, promises, brand attributes, and core differentiators. This

information can then inform communications. Survey data, increasingly cost-effective via Web-based tools, helps you to understand choices, actions, and history; more qualitative interviews and focus groups help you to understand the thinking and motivations behind choices.

Think relationships, not transactions

Academic marketing, from eliciting interest through to matriculation, is a process, not an event. Every step along the way is an opportunity to advance a dialogue and to build and nurture a relationship—a relationship which will markedly improve the chances that a desired student will matriculate. Influencing influencers, too, requires a relationship mindset. Focusing on relationship-building, and not specific communication vehicles, will help you to tune up your architecture of communications and build brand meaning. More specifically...

Support different points of contact

Understand that prospects (and their influencers) zig-zag from print to pixels to people—and back again—all the while being influenced by your brand “out there.” While it’s important, therefore, that all outbound communications cohere to reinforce desired brand messages and increase visual recognition, it’s equally important that communications acknowledge where a prospect *is* in the sales cycle, provide information appropriate to that “distance,” and move the prospect closer to you. While a print overview is perhaps needed for a new prospect, for a prospect further along, a range of communication tools—personalized “MySpace @ __,” specific RSS feeds, videos of particular classroom experiences, online chats with students—provide increasing detail and advance a relationship.

Learn about the prospect

To communicate more personally, you need to learn about the person. The classic view book “pushes” information out—and the prospect, historically, could take it or leave it. But Web and other e-based communications can “pull” information and help you to learn about a prospect—so that communications can become increasingly targeted and more personally relevant.

If you learn that a prospect is drawn to the opportunity for hands-on scientific research at a level not generally available to undergraduates, then you can advance a dialogue by getting more specific about these research opportunities. If a prospect is intrigued by your position as a leader in advancing green building technologies, you can respond with details of several very green projects that students participated in.

Tell your story so that the prospect can see him / herself in it

Like admissions officers, prospects are looking for fit. And prospects may have some reservations and concerns. If, through quantitative and qualitative research, you’re able to identify some often-cited concerns and you’re able to positively (and honestly) address them, you will build comfort and connection. One strategy is to use stories. For instance, working with

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And in both print and e-communications, you can provide “tours.” You’re not a monolithic organization, and your prospects aren’t uniform either. Some prospects may desperately care about your academic programs; others not so much. For some, athletics may be paramount; perhaps not for the budding thespian. Providing different paths—and thinking in terms of more customized communications—might also mean that your view book shrinks—and that more specific, targeted print or Web communications expand. All the more personal.

Move beyond “what” to “why,” “how,” and “so what”

It’s easy for a school to talk about “what” it is—history, campus, programs, facts. It’s more challenging (and more engaging for others) to go a level deeper and talk about “why”—the programs, position, and vision, and “how” the faculty and campus contribute to delivering the “what.” Most important, and often most difficult, is to build the “so what” into communications—the benefits all the “whats” and “hows” make possible.

a graduate school of business, we knew from research what concerns women applicants had: “Will there be a support network for women?” “Will I survive given I was a French major at Wellesley?” “Can I be successful and care for my two children?” To positively address these reservations, we crafted a brochure that featured six women and their stories. Each story progressed from a concern to its resolution, once the woman was on campus. The book was particularly powerful because it had no third person text; the only voices were those of the women—talking to prospective women.

The goals of story-telling are straightforward: help the prospect to say “I can see myself here,” and bring your main messages, differentiators, and the enrolled, on-campus experience to life. Students can tell their stories in print, through blogs, via video “answers” to often-asked questions, in audio clips, and as docents for a virtual tour. Alumni, faculty, and senior leadership can also be story-tellers. All can bring the school, campus, and its community alive—and start to build and strengthen relationships.

Reinforce the experience and relationship through behavior

The most effective, integrated, personal communication program can be undercut by behavior. Sending a generic email to a specific request; having a lag time of three weeks after a request for more detailed information on research projects; putting people on hold for five minutes; having a campus tour guide who can't answer questions; connecting people to alumni whose knowledge of the school is decades out of date—all this can un-do the best “controlled” communications. Every communication is an opportunity to advance the process and relationship, or not.

Engage your organization

While printed and e-communications can always be improved to better connect and further a dialogue, real people, not surprisingly, are best cut out for the job. So in addition to using broad- and narrow-cast communications more effectively, it's important to engage students, alumni, trustees, staff, and faculty as ambassadors. Knowing that you can enlist the drama professor or the head of research projects to help you to deepen a relationship is very valuable. Alumni, while willing, often need to be coached and brought up to date. And all ambassadors need at least some training, so they can internalize, and then use comfortably, the main brand messages that you want out there—even in the most casual conversations.

Lastly, take some calculated risks

Academic marketing is often very conservative. The list of “we need to do a...” is always longer than “we might try and do...” and the former is more easily funded. But in an era where differentiation is increasingly harder to achieve—and even harder to communicate—“inventing” different ways to engage and communicate is increasingly less risky, more necessary, and potentially, more rewarding.

Academia is both about preserving and understanding old ideas—and discovering and advancing new ones. Marketing can also connect old and new: using what you know has worked combined with new approaches to foster more personal connections and build relationships. The communications you can control will be more effective; those people and organizations you can influence will be of more value; and over time, even that which you thought was beyond control will help advance your efforts.



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About Sametz Blackstone Associates

Sametz Blackstone Associates, founded in 1979, is a Boston-based, brand-focused strategic communications practice that helps leading academic, cultural, corporate, professional service, and government organizations to better navigate change.

The firm has years of experience helping both start-ups and centenarians to articulate their vision and value, and to build and nurture relationships with groups critical to an organization's success. Through strategic consulting and message development; the creation and production of integrated print, digital, environmental, communications; supporting and improving internal and interpersonal communications; and by transferring knowledge and tools to clients so that they can fully own their communications systems and engage their organizations, Sametz Blackstone helps clients to realize both their strategic and tactical goals. The firm collaborates to help organizations build or re-energize brands, promote products and services, recruit and retain the best and the brightest, raise philanthropic dollars, build membership and participation, strengthen their competitive position—and add value to the enterprise over the short and long term.

Located in Boston's historic South End in a 150-year-old brownstone, Sametz Blackstone works with clients around the corner and around the world.

Sametz Blackstone Associates

Compelling communications—integrating brand-focused strategy, design, and technology to help evolving organizations navigate change

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