

# COMMUNICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

# Thought

## TROUBLING TRENDS IN ADMISSIONS MARKETING

BY ALFRED KAHN

Quick - what makes your institution special?

Where does its heartbeat and its soul spring forth?

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If you have to think more than five seconds about that question, or ask a consultant, or read a research report - then I submit that something is amiss. I submit that marketing has replaced passion, that branding has replaced believing, that the pressure of competition has pushed aside the power of conviction. I've been involved in admissions marketing at the national level for 22 years and I remember when higher education was a calling, not a commodity.

Admissions' marketing today is incredibly competitive, tremendously complex and sometimes damned expensive. Buzzwords abound: brand architecture, brand alignment, strategy, positioning, touch points — they say selling a bachelor's is the same as selling a Buick. Research rules, demographics decide. That's just the way it is, right?

But is it the way it should be? Is an education simply a product? Is learning just a substantially more spendy version of lunchmeat? Or is your institution, with its 50 or 100 or 150 years of history and alumni, worthy of a more personal, less corporate approach to its marketing, to its mission, to its public face?

I'm not suggesting that any of today's useful tools or techniques be thrown away. As a hobby, I race cars, and believe me at 140 miles an hour I like to have every bit of modern technology available to me - but you still enter the corner, find the apex and drive the fastest line using your mind, your skills and the seat of your pants. Winning a race requires the proper balance of tools (the car and all its technology) and skills (driver). One cannot completely compensate for the other. In admissions marketing today I see an increasing imbalance that over-values tools and processes and under-values the talent of those behind the wheel.

There are two areas in particular where tools are trumping talent, and both concern me. They are the RFP and the Brand.

### The Failure of the RFP

The biggest trend I see in admissions marketing over the last few years has been the move to more formalized procurement processes in the engagement of outside marketing agencies and consultants, via the RFP or request for proposal. In 2005 my firm received around 120 requests for proposals for marketing services from educational institutions. Five or six years ago we would get about a dozen. I see two issues driving this proliferation, both of which stem from higher education increasingly taking cues from corporate America.

The first trend is something that began about ten years ago when corporate America began to look to the marketing department for greater efficiencies. Costs had been cut and efficiencies realized in manufacturing, human resources, distribution and other areas and now the softer functions of advertising, marketing and other professional services provided by outside consultants and counselors were quite rightly being

looked to for greater financial accountability. The challenge however was that the procurement processes that worked so well for manufacturing didn't easily translate to marketing, particularly when it came to engaging a creative services firm. Blair Enns, president of Enmark Performance Development and an expert in client-agency relationships explains why the methods used to procure goods fail when used to procure professional services: "Part of the procurement process is about removing personal bias from decision making when it comes to sourcing suppliers so a standardized process is applied that keeps the ultimate buyer at arms length from the vendor and serves to eliminate any undue influence over what should be a fact-driven decision-making process. But when one person is buying the contents of another's head, as is the case in most professional services, a more fluid buying process becomes necessary for each party to determine one's ability to help the other."

Enns asserts that the mediation of a more natural and fluid buying process by the professional purchaser-driven RFP has degraded the quality of client agency relationships and ultimately the work that is being done by agencies. "The average client-agency relationship now lasts about half as long as it did 20 years ago and the biggest culprit is the RFP." The process of buying professional services and creative services in particular is one of comparing apples to oranges to pomegranates, and the RFP is all about how to get the pomegranates into the apple crate. It doesn't work and most large marketers will now tell you it doesn't work.

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The second trend driving the proliferation of RFPs is the post-Enron world of greater corporate responsibility, backed by toothy legislation that demands greater accountability from corporate executives and directors. The Sarbanes-Oxley Act, passed by Congress in 2002, is the vanguard legislation of a long overdue movement in cleaning up public companies, and a lot of the spirit of the movement has made its way to private corporations and now educational institutions. But of all the benefits this movement has brought, one of the detriments has been the further entrenchment of the flawed RFP process in bureaucratic organizations.

It is my strong belief that the very reasons the RFP process exists - corporate-style cost containment and the removal of the personal element from purchasing - work powerfully against passion and inspiration when it comes to hiring a marketing firm. Sure, some costs have been reduced - but so has product quality, when that product is supposed to push through the clutter and create a powerful response. Take an honest look at today's admissions marketing - how much of it matches the great accomplishments and exciting possibilities of the institutions it is supposed to represent? How much of it feels like it came from a mind and a heart as opposed to a well-programmed risk mitigation machine?

I am not against formalizing the decision-making process when it comes to hiring an admissions marketing firm, but I am concerned with processes that try to quantify creativity and serve to force the nation's best firms to reduce their offering to the lowest common denominator in order to get it onto a spreadsheet. The ultimate irony may be that at a time when the largest marketers are starting to recognize the flaws in their procurement processes, higher education is just starting to embrace them.

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