



Best Practices in COMMUNITY COLLEGE MARKETING & PUBLICATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

It's no secret that most community college marketers began their career in the media. Whether they started as broadcasters, reporters or disc jockeys, nearly all know the importance of media relations in a community college setting. However, marketing two-year institutions is more than shopping press releases and calling television stations. It's leveraging not only the uniqueness of the brand, but developing strategic partnerships in the community to create a robust campus that students want to attend. In the changing world of our State community college funding, in order to meet the funding goals, college marketers need to be marketing and communication strategists, not just communication strategists.

It is vital in this setting to consider how taxpayer dollars are spent. It is a marketer's fiduciary responsibility to be cost-effective and successful in their pursuit of pitching the college to future students, media outlets, business leaders and local residents. This involves conducting market research to understand your target market, employing marketing tactics both digital and traditional, and yes, within that marketing strategy, will also be included communication strategies such as press releases, events, etc. But both marketing and communications need to be part of an integrated marketing communications plan.

At a community college, comprehensive marketing plans attribute to a college's growth, retention, graduation rates and student satisfaction. Yet, while non-college marketers often have control over all aspects of their brand, community college marketers do not have control over the college's Product, Price or Placement, as these have been previously set or are under the purview of other areas of the college. But, college marketers do have some control over Promotion which allows focus and the ability to excel in one area of marketing. It's important to clarify that "some" control in this case may mean that activities, such as outreach, may not fall under the purview of the marketing team, and if that is the case, then it's recommended that marketing and outreach work collaboratively to develop shared marketing tactics to help support the organization's goals.

Effective marketing takes into consideration more than enrollment numbers. It takes into account the position and view of the college within the city, county and state; collaborations between contract training with local businesses and industry partners; revenue that can be generated through fundraising efforts; internal and external communications; public relations efforts and community influencers should all be considered as part of the college's marketing efforts. Further, athletics, arts, activities and the work of the college's foundation should also be included within the marketer's master plan.

WHY MARKETING IS IMPORTANT

Marketing for a community college goes beyond placing a billboard on the busiest street, sending out a press release, or purchasing an advertisement in the newspaper. Community college marketing requires consistency and commitment in both effort and budget. It's less about what is spent and more about how dollars are spent; less about blanketing the media with press releases and more about shopping newsworthy notes; and less about meeting people and more about cultivating relationships. Each of these, if done efficiently, can catapult a college's position to meet its marketing goals.

"Evaluate best practices from other industries," says Contra Costa Community College District Director of Communications and Community Relations Tim Leong. "Yes, the community college world has its unique qualities and considerations, but observing what is working in other industries is informative and helps you to see 'outside the box' of community colleges. But, you are not done yet, because the real hard work is to figure out what is working in other industries and if it can be applied in our world, understand why, and what is the best way to apply the best practice."

YOUR COLLEGE IS YOUR BRAND

We often think of colleges in terms of a service and less of a product, but colleges are both. You're marketing the service of providing degrees, certificates and training, but your product is the college itself - its position and clout within the community. Everyone knows what a community college is, but what is your brand promise? An example of a brand promise for a community college would be, "to improve the quality of life for students and future generations" or "to improve local economies and quality of life through academics, arts and athletics."

What type of customer service are you providing? Are campus employees striving to keep a positive image in the minds of potential and current students and within the community?

McDonald's has built its brand on "simple, easy enjoyment with great service, cleanliness and value." Likewise, Geico's brand promise is the center of its entire marketing campaign: "15 minutes could save you 15 percent or more on car insurance." These are two brands that have used their promise to build a stronger company. Consumers attach value based on how these and other brands live up to their promises. By knowing what your promises to students and the community are and living those promises everyday, you're building that same value and trust consumers need to have in order to buy a product.

Something as simple as your logo needs to make a statement of who you are or where your college is located. Well-meaning individuals can make damaging decisions with your logo, tagline and official college colors if you don't monitor, re-direct and teach them the proper way to use your brand's identifying characteristics. Be protective of your logo, but if it is no longer serving your needs, don't hesitate to rebrand - or re-promise - your college. If you do choose to rebrand, market research will be essential to conduct so better understand the perceptions that your target audience has of your brand and thus brand promise.

Think about the voice of your college, and don't be afraid to have a personality. While you want to be seen as a place to learn and grow, students learn better when they're enjoying their experiences and gravitate toward those they would consider entertaining. Let your sense of humor show through simple things like college quirks and fun facts. Keep your tone authentic, light and be sincere. When things aren't going well, let people know that you know, you care and you're working on a solution. Every college has its share of mistakes and there's no need to broadcast those details, but be prepared to offer honest and concise answers when questions or concerns arise.

Excellent customer service experiences also keeps your promise and your brand in good standing with the community and your direct consumers. Whenever possible, provide a telephone number that directs the caller to an actual person and not a system that frustrates potential students by keeping them in a recorded loop. Use email and direct messaging features on social media channels as an option for after-hours correspondence. It may seem impossible to monitor these sites 24-hours a day, but responses do not need to be provided immediately. Keep a "contact us" link in an easy-to-locate spot on your college website, allowing individuals to quickly send questions and assign one or more people to respond to all inquiries within a day. This can be shared by marketing and outreach staff and even supervised and trained student workers. The critical takeaway is that all messages, no matter their entry point to the college, are responded to within a maximum 24-hour period.

YOUR COLLEGE IS YOUR BRAND

Almost every community college has an honors program, cares about its students and has services to catapult enrollees toward their educational goals. None of these make your college stand out from the crowd when a student is searching for a college to call home. Touting similar characteristics as the college or university down the road won't increase enrollment numbers. There has to be more, and knowing not only the market, but the community, and looking to your current students for guidance is a good place to start.

Talk to your students. Ask them why they chose to attend your college. Walk around the campus and look at the college through multiple lenses - first-time college students, returning students, second-career students, student families, students with young children. Identify what makes your college unique. What programs and awards are unique to your college?

If your college is near a military base and has been designated as a veteran or military-friendly college by a reputable organization, that's something to share. Veterans will look to your centers for guidance for themselves and their family members as they transition to civilian life. If your college has ample parking, that's a selling point. Students arriving midday or those taking evening classes want to know they can park and get to class quickly. Do you offer onsite childcare for students with children who are attending classes? Not every college provides childcare and it's important to promote services that give all potential students the opportunity to attend.

Even though all colleges offer financial aid and most offer scholarships, this is the one service that should always be marketed, especially with the rising cost of attending college and the coverage this issue is receiving by mainstream media.

If your college offers free tuition through a Promise Program, don't assume that students will come flocking to your door. You still need to ensure that you have a strategic marketing plan that includes K-12 counselors, faculty and parents. We caution you on the use of the term Promise Scholarship. The word "scholarship" to many means a high grade point average. Students with a low to medium grade point average may think they don't qualify. Be careful when writing about these programs by staying away from jargon such as "scholarship" and "fill out the FAFSA." Explain what the FAFSA is and how it works and why it is needed. Yes, this means more words, but this is what will make your college stand out.

What are the demographics of your community? Look at the average household income and culture to help determine which aspects of your college you need to focus on to serve these communities and gain these enrollments. For example, does your college have extra support for DREAMers? A strong Black Student Union or active Filipino-American club? If yes, and local high schools and nearby communities are predominantly diverse, then it's important to use different cultures in your marketing.

If you are using diverse cultures in your marketing, be sure your colleges have clubs and support services for these cultures before you launch your marketing campaign. It's not just about enrollment, it's about serving your community.

MARKETING IS A FUNCTION OF YOUR COLLEGE

Oftentimes a marketing director will receive an urgent request from a faculty member or a Dean. “I need a flyer to promote my class. I need three more students or it will be cancelled.” We know that marketing directors do their best to meet these last minute demands because they too want the class to go as scheduled. But, there are so many more things that can be done to assist faculty with recruitment.

First, start with integrating marketing as a function of your college. When a new program is being developed, marketing should be at the table. Not to infringe on academic freedom or question the program, but to understand the faculty member’s idea for the program, who they see as their students, how they see the program developing, and whether or not there are corporate partners involved. With these answers in the development process, the marketing director can create the marketing plan so when the program has received all required and necessary approvals, the plan is ready to go. This will help reduce those last minute requests because the marketing plan has already been written and a timeline and budget established for launch.

It’s a win/win/...for the faculty, the marketing director, and most importantly, the student.

ENGAGE YOUR STUDENTS, FACULTY AND STAFF

Talking to your students isn’t enough, it’s important to listen to them. It’s easy to focus on the positive and discard the negative responses, but poor student experiences are more likely to be shared.

Survey your current students. Ask them everything from their reason for choosing the college to experiences with various departments, and their involvement in activities. Ask them if they would recommend your college to their peers. Use a focus group leader outside of your organization, if needed, to ensure a cross-section of your student body is represented. Once research is complete, create a list of the top responses. If there’s a problem that needs to be addressed, students will be the first to let you know. By taking progressive steps to correct issues, students will feel they have been heard and transparency will build trust between your college and your students.

Ask students what they want from their college experience. Are they craving a campus club or intramural activity? Have they been dissatisfied with campus security, parking or food choices? What would they change about the college if they could? Find out where they go for information.

Likewise, look to your faculty to assist with student accountability over summer and winter semesters and make sure that retention is everyone’s role. By ensuring everyone from your president to your adjunct faculty, knows the steps to enrollment and where to find important information online, they can become ambassadors for your college. Ask every employee to read through the admission application process every few years or after any major changes to the enrollment process.

Keeping a list of students who applied but didn’t register each semester is a good way to reach potential students. Life events happen and a student may not be able to enroll for a variety of reasons. Just because they didn’t attend this semester, doesn’t mean they won’t attend next semester. Applied/not registered lists and lists of students who drop between or during semesters convert significantly higher than lists purchased from another company.

While the insights and suggestions of your college leadership and board of trustees are valuable, if they believe marketing should be limited to newspaper, radio ads and community events, respectfully explain that while these all do serve a purpose, some marketing dollars need to be allocated in ways and in places where your prospective students are looking for college information, namely social media advertisements and music or television streaming services.

AUDIT YOUR WEBSITE AND PROCESSES

The website is your college's digital front door. It is your number one marketing tool. Your college website should be mobile responsive since that is where many of your current and prospective students are engaging with your site. Information needs to be found quickly, easily and website text needs to be succinct, this means that your academic program's landing page should not be the course syllabus.

Keep websites clean. Rotating banners, embedded videos and audio files are great and interactive, but having these items on your website is pointless if students can't find the information they need. Not every student has time to watch a five-minute video on the enrollment process, or read a detailed description of how to register for classes. Some students will take the time, but for those who need their information quickly, keep those details succinct.

Look at your academic program pages. Are they engaging or do they simply list a roadmap of classes? Students want to know what they can expect, but they need to know something about the program. If your NCLEX pass rate is high or your nursing program doesn't have a waitlist, put that information front and center. Keep program information up-to-date and entice students to want to learn more by using pictures of students in active learning situations. Have a contact name, phone number and email address listed for every program and make sure that person is available to personally respond to inquiries within 24 hours, even during academic breaks.

Take the time to audit your website and language. Many colleges have websites populated with text written by multiple people, in various roles, over many years. Failing to check to make sure all links are live and that your website text has a consistent voice and tone leads to a confusing website that will send students elsewhere. Having one person, ideally a marketer, comb over every page on your site and update each page so it maintains a voice that is clear, informative and friendly will go far. Most students visit more than one page when researching possible colleges and majors. Seeing one page with a class roadmap and no text and another page with text and no roadmap will prompt them to look at a nearby college with a clearer picture of the outcomes and requirements for their programs.

In the same vein, strive to make searches on your website intuitive and logical. People often think of the same things in different terms. Ensure your results have multiple links to information across your website so everyone can find what they're looking for. Additionally, make the financial aid process as simple as possible for students, clearing your website of extraneous information. In this case, it helps to have a work study student review the process to inform you what information is and isn't needed, as well as what's missing. Student workers can also be valuable in reviewing your admissions process, which should be done annually, to ensure the process is easily understandable and logical.

DIGITAL MATTERS, BUT SO DOES PRINT

In a digital world, it's easy to forget about print media, but both are equally important.

Whether you're creating advertisements for digital or print, some basic principles apply. When Twitter first jumped on the scene, users were forced to tweet within a limited number of characters. The beauty of this model was that tweets got immediately to the point and purpose without fluffy language. Although Twitter has expanded its character limit, write your ads as if you are only allowed a certain number of words. Quickly get to the key point of your ad through short, simple and effective language.



If you conduct a Google search for anything education-related, you will almost instantly begin seeing targeted ads for colleges and universities. Look at these ads. Some have been deftly crafted to relate directly to the terms you just searched, while others are so generic you have no idea what they're selling outside of the college name. It's an example of good and bad marketing that can be easily tested.

When developing your digital campaigns, create multiple ads, each with a specific target audience in mind and direct those ads to your target. Ads specifically designed for single parents, ESL students, career-changers, students who don't have a high school diploma or GED, professional development students, veterans, students needing to recertify their credentials, dual enrollment students, DREAMers and the like should be directed in a way that gets ads in front of their intended audience. Whenever possible, install digital pixels to help track metrics. Ad copy should replicate your landing page content. This gives the ad serving platforms an instant connection to relevancy and in turn, you will pay less and generated leads will be more qualified. Keyword, location, and device targeting is important. Use keywords specific to your college, but also to your competitors. It's critical that each digital ad takes the user to a landing page on your website that engages them and has clear, succinct language with a call-to-action of what you want them to do next such as "search our class schedule" or "apply now."

Buttons are a great way to do this. Landing page URLs for campaigns should be verbs. This offers the reader, viewer, and listener a short url that they can remember on the fly, and without writing it down. Visit a great example here offered by our client Seattle Central College: <https://seattlecentral.edu/go>.

DATA DRIVEN CAMPAIGN MEASUREMENT AND OPTIMIZATION

What does that really mean? Data in all shapes and forms can be derived from your campaign reporting. This can happen almost immediately upon the start and will continue to deliver data well after. So what data do you use when? Beginning campaign data can point to targeting gaps. As marketers, we can do our best to put our prospective student attributes in a “nice little box” but predicting human behavior can be tough. Low performance in the beginning can mean the targets are too narrow or that additional work needs to be done with keywords and creative assets. Data showing drops in engagement, mid campaign can signal over saturation of the target audience or a needed shift in ad scheduling. A great checkpoint in the middle of the campaign is to look at ads, and messages. Turn off the ads that are the lowest performing, giving the ad serving platform the chance to serve only the best performing ads.

Data points to consider at the end of the campaign are click rates, conversions on your landing page buttons, applications to the college or ticket sales (the completion of the call to action), and inquiries. Internal measurement is also important, such as calls to the college, foot traffic, and appointments set with admissions and records.

Every advertisement, whether print or digital, should include contact information and a URL. Frame your messages to your audience and avoid acronyms whenever possible. Look to social media and email marketing for campaigns during summer and winter break to keep students engaged. A prospective student will spend no more than a few seconds absorbing your information so avoid putting too many concepts into every ad. Stick with single subject ads that focus on one aspect of your college and let those ads build to create the big picture of your institution.

“Digital is changing the way we do business, mainly for the better because it allows us to better target our audiences, but it also means students have a wider selection to choose from,” said CCC California Virtual Campus Online Education Initiative Director of Communications and Strategic Partnerships Andrea Hanstein. “Previously they were typically bound by physical distance.”

In addition to writing concise advertisements, always use real photos of your students in marketing materials and invest in a good photographer who will capture portraits of students as well as students in active learning situations or socializing

Glossy purchased photos will never be a solid representation of the students you serve.

Set up “Student Photo Days” on campus to photograph individual and small groups of students. Include students of diverse backgrounds. Being inclusive can set your college up for success, but skip the troupe of choosing “one of each” race in your marketing. It’s trite and students can see straight through staged diversity in flyers, brochures and images.

When it comes to advertising, annual contracts for media buying are not always the best deal, even if they appear to be. Sales people want you to spend your advertising dollars with them. Negotiate a deal that best serves the needs of your college, not what “package deal” they’re selling. If you don’t need print ads or their digital advertisements can’t target in the way you desire, avoid locking your college into a contract that’s “giving” you what you don’t need for a price outside of your budget. Encourage the ad representatives to work with you to customize a package that meets your needs. It’s also important to build relationships with your sales representatives so they learn your college and can anticipate your needs each semester. Establish regular buys and ask if they can offer better pricing than what you’re currently paying.

If your budget doesn’t allow for larger digital or print buys, look internally and increase your content marketing game through your social media channels. Create blog posts offering career-finding assistance through surveys or “quizzes” that link directly to different pages on your website. Although this will involve more effort than a standard blog post, offering this service to students truly baffled and overwhelmed by going to college, oftentimes provides increased web traffic and serves as a recruitment tool when these leads are captured. Use content marketing heavily over holiday breaks when prospective students are spending the most time researching colleges and universities they’d like to attend and possible career paths.

MARKETING AND THE MEDIA

Marketing roles typically include public information officer and media relations duties. Knowing the local media and developing relationships with reporters can lead to widespread coverage in newspapers, on radio and television and through social media. It's vital for the community to know who you are and what you're doing to better the city where your college is located, but avoid spraying and praying with your press releases. Oversaturating your market with every campus or club event could have adverse effects. While there is a need to stay at the forefront of reporters' minds, the information disseminated must be topical and of general interest.

If your college is having a pajama dress day for faculty and students, there's no reason to share that with the media unless the city's mayor is also a student and wore PJs to their night class. A month-long series of events to celebrate a particular subject is better served in a single release overviewing everything happening on campus and through select follow-up releases for specific events that would be of interest to the community, say if a local, well-known historian is discussing their book or a former congressperson is speaking on national politics. Most publications will not care about who your commencement speaker is unless that speaker played an important role in the lives of locals AND the ceremony is open to the public. Your theatrical presentations or major concerts, however, should at least be sent to calendar editors and local arts and entertainment websites, and any time your executive staff changes or new programs are added the media should be made aware.

Media is not limited to local newspapers, radio or television. Try to team up with lifestyle and regional magazines or publications focused on education. See if there are any opportunities, pay-to-play or not, to write articles of general interest that promote specific aspects of your college.

Just like in your advertisements, keep your news media pitches clear, concise and focused. Journalists are often inundated with press releases so make sure your pitches get to the point and share information that is important to the community, not just your college.

SOCIAL MEDIA

While social media has become a major communication tool, it can drive a community college marketer crazy. A college should have one official page, handle or site. Quite often, divisions, departments and even programs will want their own site without understanding the level of work that goes into growing it. If your college has multiple pages, handles and sites, perform a social media audit to identify all of the existing pages, review how they are interacting and engaging students. If the accounts are not active it reflects negatively on the college as a whole. Request that the creator close the accounts and funnel all information through the college's main accounts. Best practice is for everything to funnel through the college's main accounts as it provides more activity and more engagement for the posts because the main accounts for the college tend to have the majority of followers. One exception to that is Athletics. Athletics social media accounts can actually cross-promote the general college accounts and vice versa. Social media users that follow athletics are engaged and loyal. Use this opportunity to spread your key messages.

STAFFING AND RESOURCES

Every community and technical college is different so it's impossible to design an organizational structure or budget in this venue. So we have listed some best practices related to staffing and budgets.

In terms of staffing, regardless of the size of the marketing team, the director should report to the President or Chancellor and should be a member of their cabinet. This position brings a unique perspective to cabinet and is able to look at issues with a neutral filter, dissecting them from many lenses and helping determine the best way to rectify them.

Budget. This is a super sensitive issue with every college as taxpayer dollars are scarce and must be treated with the utmost respect. Regardless of your budget, it is important that every marketing budget have a mix of traditional and non-traditional promotional tactics, based on research. As mentioned previously, survey your students on an annual basis. They will help guide your advertising so you can ensure that you are getting the best return on investment of those dollars. However, it's highly encouraged, for long-term success, that a marketing budget is part of an annual budget, so that its efforts are consistent and recurring with your target audience.

WHY IT ALL MATTERS

“For community colleges in particular, we need more marketing practitioners versus only communicators,” says Guisselle Nunez, Chabot-Las Positas Community College District Director of Public Relations, Marketing and Government Relations. “With the new funding model in place in the California community colleges, meeting those goals calls for strategic marketing that includes tactical and results-oriented strategies. No longer can we just rely only on communication tactics of press releases and events. Marketing needs to become an integrated marketing communications strategy, involving all parts of the marketing mix. Make sure you become marketing generalists, know where your blind spots are and call upon experts - consultants, etc. - to help you address those blind spots and build an integrated marcom plan.”

With the state of community college in flux and more and more two-year colleges offering free tuition for incoming freshman and baccalaureate degree programs, it's more important than ever for college marketers to know their brand, what works and how to use all available resources to best serve their community. Through comprehensive marketing communication plans that take a college's strengths and weaknesses into consideration and knowing which forms of advertising work best in their region, community college marketers can meet and exceed enrollment and communications goals.



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