

## Pull or push?

### Does marketing drive corporate planning?

The need for organisations to “learn and adapt” is central to the demands placed on strategic marketing processes. After all, if an institution’s marketing and market intelligence functions are not monitoring the market place and reporting back to central management teams, who is? In higher education, however, we know that the reality is often different.

The change in influence of marketing functions within higher education is well documented: we know it can range from the fully integrated marketing unit with cross-organisational functions to the emergent marketing operation that is viewed as a “bolt-on” luxury, tied down, perhaps, in the delivery of material or events, rather than driving strategic direction.

With the current changes in the higher education sector it is increasingly likely that marketing will become a critical success factor for institutions as a driver and deliverer of the corporate planning process: so just how much influential push can marketing have, or is it simply pulled along in the wake of the corporate plan?

#### MARKETING AND CORPORATE PLANNING

As part of its diverse remit, marketing should be able to operate effectively for the organisation as a two-way information channel to assist the university or college’s corporate planning process.

**It should be able to:**

- [1] Monitor markets, emerging opportunities and competitive issues, for example, and so feed relevant information into the corporate planning process.
- [2] Assess the published corporate plan and determine what demands this places on the corporate marketing function, plus what the marketing function will need to deliver on behalf of the organisation to enable the university or college to fulfil its avowed plan and mission.

For all of us engaged daily in the marketing management process, it is heartening to map the rise of the applied discipline in higher education and to plot the tangible changes it has made to organisational success, direction and engagement with stakeholders. Of course, it isn’t always this easy! Problems and barriers abound at the interface of corporate planning and marketing and experience suggests that these are mostly generated by the nature of the management processes and culture of the organisations themselves. In some cases it seems almost too difficult (or painful) for organisations to integrate marketing functions with their traditional management operations.

#### HIGH JUMPS AND HURDLES

For institutions tackling the corporate application of marketing for the first time, there is an excellent opportunity to start with a clean slate and consider how marketing management should fit into the development and delivery of corporate planning processes. This doesn’t always happen, of course, but in a few significant cases it is beginning to be a major part of the development agenda.

Difficulties arise where organisations are newly embracing marketing orientation and find it difficult to “make room” for marketing processes in their traditional management framework. Corporate planning may have been historically a senior management team “closed shop” process, the outcomes of which might be a non-negotiable strategic plan. In such cases, new communications lines and systems are required to understand and deliver a way in which marketing can both inform the planning process itself and deliver on its subsequent demands.

As the sector so aptly demonstrates, the position of the marketing operation within the organisation also plays its part. In some cases, marketing might be said to have been hindered by an institutional "glass ceiling": it is influential, but perhaps not privy to senior management team discussions and therefore unable to deliver information as it would wish or provide feedback about corporate plans in process and development. In such cases, marketing operates in a "pull" context: it is pulled along by the demands placed upon it by corporate planning, but has little opportunity to redress the balance or influence the plans and the decisions that form them.

Unsurprisingly, even where marketing is well established, the "plug-in" to corporate planning may still be absent. Even though, or perhaps because, marketing is well established in an organisation, its role may have been traditionally more of a deliverer than a driver/pusher of corporate planning. Changing this situation is potentially more difficult than starting afresh: the cultural shift required to enable marketing to take on greater responsibility or to be viewed as a pivotal player at the corporate planning table can be an uphill struggle.

#### Common barriers to the engagement of marketing in corporate planning include:

- Political: marketing planning is seen as a resource allocation process.
- Opportunity cost: marketing is viewed as a "luxury" against day-to-day issue management.
- Reward systems: these may be geared to shortterm delivery rather than long-term fulfilment of key strategic goals.
- Information input: marketing cannot demonstrate its value and influence if it has no "voice" within the organisation.
- Culture: marketing orientation may still be at variance with the traditional/historical organisational culture.

#### IN THE DRIVING SEAT...

It can work, however. Marketing can and does take a seat at the highest levels of corporate planning in a number of higher education organisations and can make a major difference to the way in which universities and colleges tackle their future planning. Where it works well, for example, where marketing is valued and integrated successfully within cross-institutional management or benefits from the endorsement of the senior management team, it acts as an effective driver for planning, "pushing"

change. It can report key or emergent issues, opportunities and threats and provide tactical information about everything from resource and staffing implications to long-term forecasting for student numbers or the income potential of new business opportunities. Essentially, it can help the organisation assess the viability and costs of the promises it would wish to make.

#### MAKING IT WORK...

In an ideal world, marketing should be a balanced mix of the push and pull. It needs to assist in corporate decision-making but it also needs to be part of the delivery process. The key is to have some element of measured control over delivery demands to ensure that marketing is not required to fulfil promises made on its behalf and over which it has little, if any, control. The real trouble starts when there is an imbalance in this push and pull equation.

There is no hard and fast formula for making this work or for keeping or gaining a place for marketing on the corporate planning tightrope, but one or two factors can make a real difference:

- Top-down support is everything: work to achieve a mandate from the most senior level within the organisation for a major role for marketing.
- Match your planning systems for marketing to the organisational culture: for example, ensure that marketing activity and operation is described in terms of long-term outcomes and tangible results and benefits for the organisation.
- De-politicise outcomes: ensure that internal communications about marketing build a culture that demonstrates marketing as a benefit and for the common good, rather than about building empires.
- Clear communications: internal information management and the internal promotion of the marketing activity and process itself is crucial in the development of an organisational-wide appreciation.
- Culture: get staff involved in marketing; find key "champions" who will support the cause internally.
- Demonstrate tangible results: show the difference that marketing could make to an existing situation or will make to future planning outcomes.

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