

Marketing that delivers: Cyclical marketing planning

It is critical to make sure that marketing not only works well but that it also improves year on year. For many institutions marketing planning can be a complex process, especially if marketing is devolved across the organisation and managed in diverse ways with varied objectives.

How should institutions decide which communications methods or channels to use with their target audiences, for example? It is easy to succumb to reactive responses to opportunities such as social networking, for example, without a thorough assessment of what will work best for which stakeholder groups in specific circumstances.

NINE CRITICAL STEPS

Whatever the scale or complexity of the marketing task, a cyclical approach to marketing and a simple nine step checklist provide an excellent starting point to bring clarity and focus to the marketing planning process.

The critical nine steps of marketing planning provide a robust foundation for marketing activity whether it is institution-wide or focused on a specific school, department or service. These nine stages provide an incremental approach to the development of marketing: the critical factor is that each stage within the cyclical process builds upon the one before it and informs the next.

In outline, the steps include:

[1] ANALYSE THE MARKET

- This provides the starting point for marketing planning.
- In which markets does the institution, department, service or school operate?
- Where and whom are the target audiences?
- What trends will influence these markets and audiences now and in the future?

[2] ANALYSE THE INSTITUTION'S POSITION IN THE TARGET MARKET

- Is the institution, department or school a leading provider in its markets or following in the wake of others?
- Which competitors also operate in these target markets?
- How does their offer or service compare?
- How do other providers market their services?

[3] UNDERSTAND THE STRATEGIC IMPERATIVES

- What is the school, department, service or institution hoping to achieve?
- What strategic objectives have been set and must be met?
- These factors will help to identify and drive marketing priorities.

[4] UNDERSTAND TARGET STAKEHOLDERS

- What are the needs, wants, concerns and expectations of target consumers, stakeholders or audiences?
- Are the target stakeholders diverse?
- What are their decision making time scales?
- Who influences their decisions?
- What is the best way to communicate with them?
- What is the best way to build mutually beneficial relationships with them?
- What can be provided for them that is beyond the capability of others?

[5] MATCH SERVICES TO KNOWN NEEDS

- Services, the portfolio, new product development and investment should be matched to what the markets and stakeholders need now and will need in the future.

[6] MAP THE IMPLICATIONS OF THESE FINDINGS FOR THE INSTITUTION, DEPARTMENT, SCHOOL OR SERVICE

- For example, will the institution, department, school or service need to develop new programmes or service offers to meet emerging needs?
- Will it need to update the existing portfolio to make sure that it stays relevant?

[7] DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT THE MARKETING STRATEGY

- Develop a marketing plan to implement strategic marketing objectives.
- This can be achieved through the practicalities of scheduled marketing and outreach activity, stakeholder engagement and communications matched to the decision making cycles of target audiences.

[8] EVALUATE THE PERFORMANCE AND RECEPTION OF MARKETING ACTIVITY

- How well did the complete range of marketing activities perform?
- Did they meet their objectives and were results as hoped?
- Would some changes bring greater benefits to the institution and the stakeholder next time?

[9] USE EVALUATION OUTPUTS TO INFORM FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

- Refine and revise marketing plans and activities in the context of the findings of the evaluation process.
- This will ensure that marketing activity improves year on year and keeps pace with market changes.

Once step nine is complete, the process begins again, with an analysis of the constantly changing market.

KEEP PERSPECTIVE

While the Nine Steps will help marketing planning, it is also paramount to keep perspective.

For example, while institution, department or school marketing may improve year on year, this will only reap real benefits if it also:

- Keeps pace with competitor activity.
- Matches the changing needs and expectations of its stakeholders.

RECOGNISE THE REAL COMPETITION

To do this, marketing must be seen within its broader context. Inevitably, stakeholders do not judge HEI marketing solely against that of other HEIs, but against the marketing communications or relationships that they have with other services or organisations. It is critical for institutions to keep pace with the broader communications and marketing context. For example, what non-education service providers drive expectations and set the benchmark for your stakeholders' positive experiences?

HEIs do not compete only with other HEIs. Rather, they compete for their target audience's attention, time and commitment to engage with them.

PLANNING THAT WORKS

Even complex marketing challenges will benefit from a straightforward cyclical approach to the initial marketing planning process. The Nine Steps help to guard against knee-jerk marketing responsiveness and ensure that marketing activity, whatever its scope and scale, is founded on research, is well thought through, matched to real stakeholder and market needs and evaluated against objectives.

Rosemary Stamp is Director of Stamp Consulting. She provides specialist management, marketing, skills development and strategic planning support to a wide range of organisations.

Her consulting portfolio includes international marketing strategies; competitive brand development; location brand strategy; nation branding; business, foresight and policy response planning; competitor analysis plus digital and online strategies.

Rosemary has advised a wide range of institutions striving to achieve successful competitive positioning. During the last three years she has led twelve brand development strategies for organisations in the public and education sectors. Rosemary facilitates decision-making seminars, competitive briefings and strategic planning programmes for senior management teams throughout Europe.

First published in Newslink: January 2010.
rosemary.stamp@stampconsulting.co.uk
www.stampconsulting.co.uk
© Stamp Consulting Ltd: 2010