

The Marketing Edge

by Sharon Shinn

There's a business school in Waco, Texas, where the director of communications and marketing reports to the dean, serves on the business school's executive council, and heads the marketing and public relations committee for the strategic development council. In short, Cynthia Jackson is always part of the conversation when it comes to setting goals for Baylor University's Hankamer School of Business.

She's not the only b-school marketer with a prominent place at the strategic table. As today's management education landscape gets more cluttered and more competitive, many business schools are considering how they can use marketing efforts to give themselves an edge.

Says Jackson, "At Baylor, we have a strategic plan for the business school and for every initiative within that plan. The marketing function is a key component of getting each initiative completed."

Critical as marketing has become, however, there are no real guidelines for how business schools can most profitably deploy their communications teams. It's hard to pin down how many people a typical department has, how big its budget is, or even what its primary responsibilities might be.

As competition for students heats up, business schools turn to marketing professionals for help in making their own programs stand out. A recent survey helps these marketers determine what tactics bring students through the doors.



“In the for-profit world, there are a lot of benchmarks, particularly for public companies,” says Margaret Andrews, founder of Mind and Hand, a higher education consulting firm in Medfield, Massachusetts. “You can tell what percentage of revenues they spend on marketing. There are no such statistics for business schools.”

To determine how schools organize their marketing efforts and assign responsibilities, AACSB’s Marketing and Communication Council Affinity Group (MaCC) recently conducted a survey of b-school marketers. Andrews was one of the prime movers of the survey, along with Yvonne Martin-Kidd, executive director of marketing and communications and adjunct assistant professor at Vanderbilt Owen Graduate School of Management in Nashville, Tennessee.

Says Martin-Kidd, “Another one of our goals was to create a strong collegial network so that all of us will have someone to turn to when we need information or another opinion.” Martin-Kidd, Andrews, and participants in the MaCC group hope to conduct a series of surveys to expand on data collected in the first one. The 30 percent response to the first survey makes one thing clear: There are many marketing and communication professionals who are eager to learn more about how to do the best job for the business school.

Skill Set: Generalist

The first piece of information gleaned from the survey is that today’s b-school marketers must be generalists, comfortable juggling a wide array of responsibilities over a broad spectrum of media. Branding the b-school? Maintaining the Web site? Communicating with alumni and students? Managing public relations? These are all functions handled, to various degrees, by the b-school marketing department.

“Our respondents are responsible for many different things, from ad campaigns to strategy to media relations to Web sites,” says Andrews. Considering that 59 percent of survey respondents work in marketing departments with four or fewer employees, she says, “That’s amazing.”

It’s tricky to offer absolute numbers denoting which responsibilities b-school marketers handle, because survey respondents were divided into three distinct groups: centralized with budget, centralized without budget, and partially centralized. Those that are *centralized with budget* handle all marketing functions for all educational programs and decide how the money will be spent, Martin-Kidd explains. Those in departments that are *centralized without budget* operate in much the same way, but they don’t actually control the pursestrings; that power might reside with the program directors. At *partially centralized schools*, the central marketing function works with marketing specialists in each individual program.

As might be expected, those departments that are fully centralized and control the budget tend to have the most responsibilities. For instance, these respondents are deeply involved in determining branding strategy (according to 70 percent); determining overall marketing strategy (53 percent); and promoting awareness of new research (40 percent). The other groups also are involved in these areas, but not as heavily. But all of them take an appreciable amount of responsibility for a wide range of functions. (Full survey results are available in PowerPoint format at business.baylor.edu/hsb/AACSB_ICAM_2008/.)

That level of responsibility isn’t likely to drop any time soon, as business schools continue to compete for new students. “When the marketplace gets competitive, organizations turn to marketing,” says Martin-Kidd.

Eventually, she believes, business schools will develop norms for their marketing departments, much like those that exist in the consumer world. “You can look at most corporations—say, in the auto industry—and pretty much know what the marketing function is like,” says Martin-Kidd. “I think that before too long, you’ll be able to look at a b-school and know what that marketing function is like.”



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Today's marketing departments aren't just dealing with the traditional media of print, newspaper, radio, and TV. Today, we pay as much attention to Forbes.com as we do to *Forbes* magazine.

— Gary McKillips, Georgia State University

Skill Set: Strategy & Branding

One critical role for today's b-school marketers is to help support the school's overall strategic plan—a role played by 53 percent of centralized departments with a budget, half of the centralized departments without a budget, and 27 percent of the partially centralized marketing departments. About three-quarters of the survey respondents report directly to the dean, meaning these marketing professionals are in key advisory positions.

Marketing departments also are involved, to varying degrees, in campaigns built around image advertising, e-mail marketing, online advertising, program marketing, and direct mail. Professional marketers can build support for these campaigns, while keeping everyone on message, says Gary McKillips, director of communications and external affairs at the Robinson College of Business at Georgia State University in Atlanta. McKillips and Jackson also are co-chairs of the MaCC Affinity Group.

"Marketing requires an all-out effort," McKillips says. The marketing department should "identify the school's key message and key selling points, repeat them as much as possible, be very consistent, and put its resources behind those efforts."

That consistency is crucial when the school is building its brand, another area where a marketing department can be extremely useful. "The schools' viewbooks should look like their Web sites, which should look and sound like what the admissions staff members say when they go on the road and talk about the programs," says Andrews. "Similar words should be used. The marketing department can play a huge role in making sure the platforms are integrated."

Marketers have other strengths when it comes to building a brand. "Sometimes that means asking the right questions, sometimes that means keeping an initiative on track," says Jackson.

And sometimes, adds Andrews, it means presenting data. "Very often faculty will say, 'This is what people think of us.' And admissions people will say, 'No, *this* is what people think of us,'" she relates. "Marketing people can respond, 'Let me show you surveys that indicate what people *really* think about us.'"

Branding works particularly well at the program level, says McKillips, as schools promote part-time and specialty programs. "Instead of positioning the entire institution, schools can focus on niche programs, because that's what really sells," he says. "In marketing efforts, it's better to concentrate on Mercedes than Daimler-Chrysler. It's better to concentrate on the Robinson Professional MBA than the Robinson College of Business at GSU."

Challenge: Electronic Media

The one area that seems to produce the most anxiety among business schools and their communication departments is Web marketing. All groups of respondents claim a great deal of responsibility for the external Web site—but 46 percent say online interactive marketing represents their greatest opportunity for improvement. In fact, 25 percent of respondents say that if they could only hire one more person, they'd look for someone to take care of interactive Web efforts.

"Every marketing person in the world knows that using the Web is one of the best ways to reach consumers—but I don't know many people who feel that they're on top of it," says Martin-Kidd. "At conferences, I talk to the chief marketing officers of large organizations who spend megamillions on their Web sites, and *they're* not sure they're doing it right. It's such a new field, and it's changing at such a dramatic rate."

A few years ago, McKillips points out, many b-school marketers didn't know about Google AdWords, an application that allows advertisers to specify key words that will trigger the appearance of their ads when a user searches for a particular product. "It's now a real science," he adds. "You want to make sure your program pops up when someone types 'leadership' or 'I'm interested in an MBA.' Today's marketing departments aren't just dealing with the traditional media of print, newspaper, radio, and TV. Today, we pay as much attention to Forbes.com as we do to *Forbes* magazine. We have to be aware of blogs, Twitter, and Facebook—particularly because those are what students use."

Baylor also has a presence on Facebook and Twitter, says Jackson. In addition, she prepares a weekly podcast that airs on the local NPR station and is available through iTunes. She might interview Baylor professors about their research or talk to the newest winner of the Texas Family Business of the Year award. The podcast is downloaded more than 1,000 times weekly.

Such online media will only continue to grow in importance, says Jackson. "I'm sure the Web site is where prospective students go first to evaluate a school," she says. "More people see a school's Web site than will ever see its magazine. Yet I think that many times, schools don't move fast enough to put resources into online communications. Those of us who are in communications and marketing need to understand online media. We have to be cross-trained in all aspects."

At the same time, Jackson knows that she cannot just focus on electronic and social media, because more conserva-

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tive stakeholders, such as donors and alumni, still prefer to see the traditional print ad or glossy magazine. “The medium we use depends on the audience we’re targeting and the objective of our communication.”

Stakeholders also want each medium to offer somewhat different content, Andrews notes. “A Web site might tell prospective students that a school’s representatives will be in San Francisco to deliver an admissions road show. But when those prospective students show up in San Francisco, they want to hear something that’s not on the site. The viewbook should give them additional information. It’s important to integrate across platforms, but each one should say something slightly different. No school wants a student to pick up its viewbook and say, ‘Oh, this is exactly what’s on the Web.’”

Challenge: Small Budget

Creating an integrated but nuanced message across many media becomes even more difficult when there’s not enough money to do it right. Fifty-two percent of respondents say their greatest challenge is working within their budgets.

To get the most from those limited budgets, marketing professionals recommend using less expensive communications channels, such as e-mail marketing, social networking, webinars, online chats, and other Web-based efforts. For

instance, says McKillips, an online annual report can look impressive but cost very little.

In addition, budget-strapped marketing departments can put more effort into PR than advertising, says McKillips. They might encourage faculty to get involved with conventional public relations activities, such as speaking at local events and writing op-ed pieces. Meanwhile, the marketing department can pitch stories to local and national media, a labor-intensive but relatively inexpensive option. Jackson also recommends looking for help close at hand: hiring tech-savvy students to handle IT work and journalism or marketing students to write articles and press releases.

Schools with limited budgets also should invest in research *before* they launch ad campaigns, says Andrews, so they can target their audience more precisely and produce a crisper message. “Every school wants to send *just* the right amount of marketing, but it’s difficult to know what that is,” Andrews says. “Some schools are now looking at how many e-mails they can send before recipients unsubscribe. Schools can use that kind of data to determine what kind of marketing works.”

While the MaCC survey was not detailed enough to determine how much a typical marketing department has to spend, it did ask respondents how their schools establish their budgets. Martin-Kidd notes that, in most industries, there are rules of thumb that guide the way budgets are set.

The Right Hire

When overworked and understaffed marketing departments get the go-ahead to hire additional employees, what kind of candidates should they look for? Many business schools are interested in hiring professional marketers from outside academia, says consultant Margaret Andrews of Mind and Hand.

“In the past, some schools wouldn’t even call what they did marketing,” she says. “But as competition increases, schools have to get the

word out about how they’re different, so there’s been an uptick in the amount and sophistication of marketing being done. At the same time, new technology has really raised the bar.”

Faced with an onslaught of new responsibilities, today’s marketing professional must first be able to manage priorities, Andrews says. “Schools have limited resources in terms of money, people, and time,” she says. “They must know where they’re going to put

their emphasis.”

It’s equally critical for a new staff member to excel at execution as well as strategy, says Gary McKillips of Georgia State. “Make sure the person you’re hiring can do things, such as draft copy and design materials. If you have the luxury of bringing in a great marketing mind, make sure that person is willing to contribute more than just ideas. Or hire the ‘great mind’ as a consultant whom you call on periodically for advice. The marketing war



is won in the trenches with people who can develop compelling copy—people

“For instance, the food industry usually puts 18 percent to 21 percent of the top-line revenue into its advertising and promotion budget,” she says.

But no such standards exist for business schools. Their idiosyncratic and highly customized marketing budgets seem to have evolved individually over time, depending on what the schools are used to paying. Says Andrews, “People don’t know whether 2 percent of the overall budget is a lot, or if that’s one-tenth of what a competitor is spending.”

Adds Martin-Kidd, “This is an area where I think deans and business school marketers would like to compare notes.”

Goal: Shared Knowledge

And comparing notes is one skill that today’s b-school marketers already possess. “When I go to one of our conferences, no matter what the topic is, the other attendees will say, ‘Oh, we tried that, here’s what worked,’” says Andrews. “There’s a sense that, if we share information, we’ll all win.”

Martin-Kidd illustrates the point by describing a conference on social media that was co-organized by Stanford University and the University of California, Berkeley. “We were all in a room together, hearing about the state of social media from the presidents of Facebook and LinkedIn,” says Martin-Kidd. “There is no other industry I can think of where that kind of sharing would happen.”



They believe that the networking opportunities of the MaCC have already provided group members with desperately needed information about Web sites, budgets, and proven approaches. Their hope is that the first survey, and any subsequent surveys, will help both b-school deans and marketers understand how valuable the marketing function is. They know of one respondent who already has used survey results to sell his dean on the necessity of a new staff position. As schools grow even more competitive, they expect to hear additional stories about how marketing has altered the playing field—and even changed the game. ■

who know the institution, the program, and the market—and people who can react to changes quickly.”

In a presentation given at AACSB’s International Conference and Annual Meeting last year, McKillips and Baylor’s Cynthia Jackson also discussed what to look for when hiring a PR marketing professional. The full presentation can be accessed at the link given on page 40, but following are some of the highlights:

- Ask yourself how the position will contribute to your school’s mission and what specific functions you want the new hire to execute. Define what traits matter most to you. Are you looking for wise counsel? Project management skills? Support for your strategic objectives?

- Determine how well the candidate handles the requirements of the job. Can he meet writing challenges and complex deadlines? Does he have experience

influencing management on marketing or PR goals? Has she created a communications plan that supported an organization’s overall strategic plan and objectives?

- Look for proof that the candidate understands instruments such as benchmark research, annual audits, program assessments, survey data, and return on investment. Has the candidate ever developed measurable goals for her program or department?

- Seek out likely candi-

dates at conferences held by groups such as the Public Relations Society of America, the International Association of Business Communicators, the American Marketing Association, and AACSB’s Marketing and Communications Affinity Group.

McKillips and Jackson suggest having a team of interviewers meet the candidates, ask questions, and consolidate scores before the right individual is identified—and hired.