

Improving the Relationship between Continuing Education Leadership and Marketing Directors

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DIAGNOSTICS PLUS

INTRODUCTION

In this economy, college and university continuing education units will not automatically reap the benefits of returning adult learners as in past recessions: this economy caused a drastic reduction of resources available to the workforce and for personal revenue. As a result of decreased personal income and workforce training funding, competition for a potentially smaller market of adult learners in the US will be more focused and intense. Further compounding the complexity of marketing challenges is a shifting marketing environment:

- The Nielsen Company reports a 12 percent decrease in overall advertising expenditures in the first quarter of 2009.
- In November 2008, the Newspaper Association of America noted a continuing shift away from print to online media.
- There is a growing movement toward search engine optimization (iProspect).
- A lack of certainty regarding the impact of social networking on continuing education has caused a decline in this type of marketing due to measurement and effectiveness issues (Williamson).

— No longer can the continuing education unit throw more money into
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marketing to yield additional enrollments; the additional enrollments and budget to do so either do not exist or may not come about. Interviews conducted for this article indicate that about half the continuing education units surveyed will see budget decreases, while another third will operate at the same levels. These levels are similar to what business and industry are expected to experience (CMO). Deans expect larger decreases in 2010.

What alternatives does the continuing education unit have? They are few and not necessarily mutually exclusive:

- Units can create stronger programs (and thus value) or improve existing programs to better meet market need.
- Marketing can be more strategic in planning and execution.
- Units can reduce the percentage of lost customers (or increase yield rates) by improving internal efficiencies through changes in enrollment or customer relationship management.

An emphasis on greater creativity and enhanced efficiency can produce comparable or even superior results to simply increasing funds for existing practices, but achieving meaningful, beneficial change begins with internal strength. Deans and their marketing directors need to work better together. Deans should have a greater understanding of marketing while marketers should be able to connect marketing to enrollments and accountability. Prior to the advance of the Internet age, marketing was viewed as tactical, leveraging print and broadcast media and buying media. Marketers primarily promoted programs without necessarily being involved in the initial planning phases. In an environment where resources are scarce and competition plentiful, no unit can afford a disconnect between leadership and the vital strategic function that marketing has become.

However, the reality is that continuing education deans and their marketing directors have very different expectations and understandings of strategic marketing functions and marketing tactics/services, as the following data show. In March 2009, 22 marketers involved in UCEA were surveyed via the Internet, and a number were personally interviewed for greater depth. The following month, a similar approach was used with 24 deans and continuing education program directors. Although the sample sizes are small, we believe the findings accurately identify issues with which deans and marketing directors struggle.

ON STRATEGY

According to Kotler and Keller, a number of marketing activities can be viewed as strategic: market segmentation, market focus or selection, and value measurement (Kottler). Other areas that can be viewed as strategic include customer relationship management or enrollment management, market research, and the use of metrics and measures in the marketing function.

Chart 1 shows a dean or program director’s assessment of the marketing unit’s performance of these functions alongside the marketing director’s self-assessment. The graph shows the average rating on a five-point scale; 5 is “excellent”, 4 “very good,” 3 “average,” 2 “below average,” and 1 “poor.”

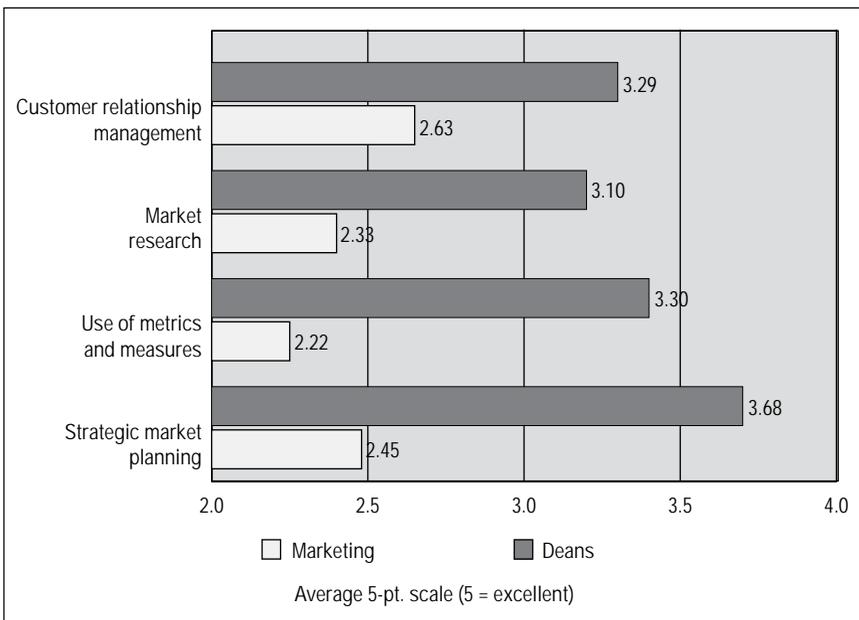


Chart 1. Performance of strategic marketing functions

Results show that deans and their marketing directors differ significantly on marketing unit performance across strategic functions. Not one of the 24 deans gave the marketing unit an “excellent” rating on any of the four attributes, while 18 percent of marketers gave their marketing units an “excellent” on strategic marketing planning, 9 percent on customer relationship management, 9 percent on market research and 5 percent

on the use of metrics and measures. The greatest differences concerned strategic marketing planning (1.23-point difference) and the use of metrics and measures (1.08).

Further confirmation of the gap between deans and their marketing directors was confirmed by responses to a series of agree/disagree statements: 68 percent of marketers strongly agreed that they provided strategic marketing leadership, while another 32 percent somewhat agreed. Deans and directors were less impressed: only 9 percent strongly agreed and 30 percent somewhat agreed. When it came to understanding the competitive marketplace, nine percent of deans and directors strongly agreed and another 30 percent somewhat agreed that their marketers understood it, compared with 36 percent and 41 percent of marketers. Some deans and program directors stated that marketing did not take a leadership role in tracking competition or informing the institution about relevant trends.

Inasmuch as we are dealing with areas where leadership would be expected to be knowledgeable—since these are strategic functions—the discrepancies are striking, and reveal a fundamental breakdown that needs to be addressed. There are a number of ways this can be accomplished:

- If marketers are truly excelling at strategic marketing functions, it is up to them to inform their deans about the performance of their marketing staff with regard to strategic marketing efforts. They must be able to show tangible evidence—for example, metrics and measures that demonstrate improvement of enrollment and customer relationship management.
- If marketers are operating at strategic levels where they are integrating new and traditional media into a strategy and tracking the results through enrollment management processes, they need to educate the dean about marketing basics, terminology, strategies, and tactics. Outside of education, 60 percent of marketing executives stated a need for their CEOs to better understand marketing basics, and 42 percent cited a need for better understanding of topics such as search engine optimization (Anderson). Without a background or context for assessment, deans cannot be expected to appreciate the quality of strategic marketing.
- Marketers who lag on strategic marketing performance must acquire the skills deemed important to the continuing education unit. This includes not only effective design, copywriting, and project management, but also understanding the impact of com-

petition, brand positioning, and repositioning; integration of new and traditional media; and customer relationship and enrollment management.

ON TACTICS

Deans and their marketing directors also disagree in their evaluation of how tactical marketing services are performed. Chart 2 shows that while there is a difference, both groups agree, graphic design is the highest-rated service and sales and corporate relationships are the lowest. While sales and corporate relationship performance scores are the lowest, telephone interviews revealed that this skill is less important and it is not generally expected that marketers excel in it.

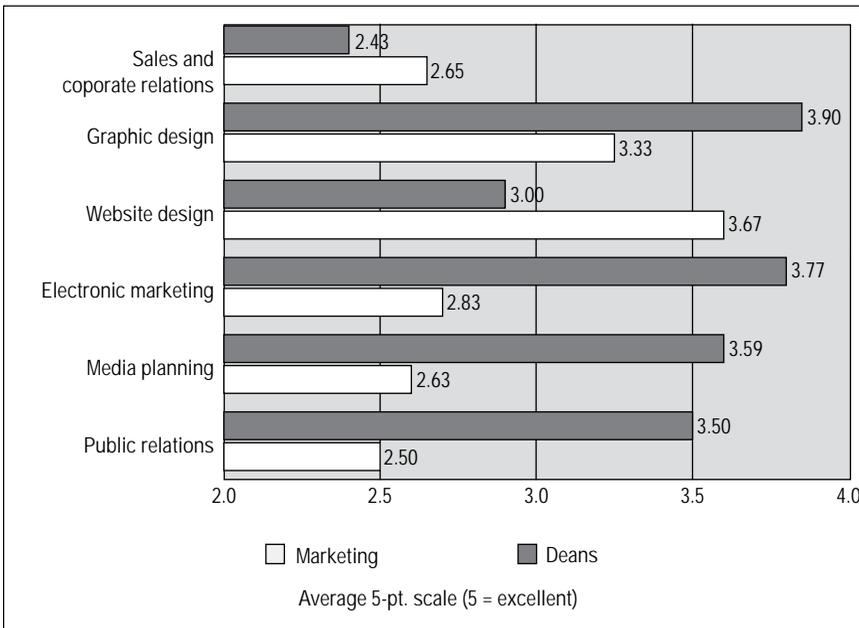


Chart 2. Deans and marketing director ratings on marketing tactics

The largest perceptual gaps occur with public relations (1.00 difference), media planning (0.96), and electronic marketing (0.94). The significant disjunctions in these areas are perhaps owing to the fact that for some deans, evidence is often missing or minimal, so they depend on enrollments or observation. Most marketers in continuing education have a solid back-

ground in media planning; however, marketers admitted that they lacked data or the training to decide when to shift media resources from traditional media to new media, e.g., reducing print catalogue runs or eliminating the print catalogue entirely.

The effectiveness of electronic marketing and website design are two areas that are easily measured. However, very little formal information on marketing effectiveness is shared with leadership or throughout the organization. One dean stated that marketing keeps much of the data internal, characterizing this behavior as the “tendency to hold all their cards close to the vest.” By distributing this data to leadership or throughout the organization, marketers can lessen the perceptual gap.

ON COMMUNICATION AND RELATIONSHIPS

Deans gave moderate ratings to internal communication and relationships with their marketers. Marketers believed that their internal communication and the relationship they have with the dean are strong. Thirty percent of deans strongly believed that marketers perform well with non-marketing staff and faculty as compared with 59 percent of marketers. While a review of responses suggested a collegial and civil relationship, just 22 percent of deans strongly agreed that the relationship between the dean and the marketer is strong as compared to 68 percent of marketers. They were in agreement that reporting and metrics are weaknesses of the continuing education unit and marketing. This finding is similar to what business executives want with their marketing. A recent study of 111 senior executives in the United States rates return on marketing investment analysis as most important (Heidrick).

The continuing education unit and its marketing division need to improve formal and informal communication of marketing efforts. In-depth interviews with deans and program directors suggested that marketing reports were inconsistent and often inaccurate. As a result, marketing was viewed as not being as accountable as other groups. Some deans and program directors also stated that simply having marketing collateral or websites without accompanying performance measures did not constitute acceptable evidence of successful marketing.

Marketers self-report a number of measures (respondents often chose more than one item as a primary) as evidence of marketing performance. Fifty-seven percent of marketers said that enrollments were a primary measure of a marketing unit’s performance and 45 percent said that the

quality of creativity was primary. Only 38 percent of marketers cited metrics such as revenue per student, web clicks, or cost per prospect. Forty-eight percent labeled metrics as a secondary factor.

The fact that 38 percent of marketers also stated that the quality of the relationship between marketers and others (dean, faculty, staff, etc.) was a primary measure shows the importance of better communication between deans and marketers. In order for marketers to be able to communicate well using language or measures that are meaningful to leadership, they should consider doing the following:

- Place greater importance on regular reporting of not only enrollments, but also prospects, inquiries, web traffic, conversion, return on investment, and other cost/performance ratios.
- Use language that non-marketers can understand, or familiarize their colleagues with marketing language and science.
- Install a customer relationship management system that can systematically organize data effectively, as well as report to a larger number of internal stakeholders.
- Make sure staff possess the skill set to provide customer relationship management or strategic marketing leadership.

ON GROWTH

Marketing is an evolving profession, one that changes very quickly. Marketing leaders are expected to have a working knowledge of a wide range of traditional and new techniques that include social networking, search engine optimization, database marketing, customer relationship marketing, market research, media management, and strategy. Only one-third of marketers strongly agree that they are keeping up with changes in the marketing profession. Another 59 percent agree somewhat. Further discussions with marketing leaders suggested that they would like to learn more from a UCEA event, as well as other events and other people, but their units do not have the budget or they may lack the full support from continuing education leadership, who may not be able to assess which marketing programs are more effective and what the return on investment would be.

The situation of small marketing units (as small as one person) is especially difficult because the day-to-day demands of continuing education programs and constant deadlines offset the opportunity for high-level planning and professional development. Understaffing usually means an absence of mentors, so that avenue of professional growth is also denied them.

CONCLUSION

Deans and program directors are quick to acknowledge marketers as hard workers and often committed to making impossible tasks possible. They also appear to enjoy the professionalism and personalities of their marketing co-workers. These evidences of good will on the part of leadership are accompanied by a desire for regular and meaningful information and a desire to learn more about marketing or to better understand the language of marketers, so they can better appreciate the efforts of marketers.

The marketing function will continue to evolve with the potential to become more high-tech and complex or to be more integrated within a sophisticated customer relationship management system. Given that the field of marketing will be a moving target, marketers at all levels must take the initiative in strengthening their relationships with their deans beyond the level of collegiality by devising performance metrics that are meaningful and consistent, and demonstrating the ability to function at the strategic level. 🌐

SUMMARY

What Deans Want	What Marketers Need to Do
Impact/ Assurance	Report consistently
Efficiency	Provide metrics
Measurement/Return on investment	Develop a long-term growth plan; educate organization about marketing
Visually appealing or strategically relevant websites and collateral	Generate websites and print collateral that relate to a clear strategy and marketing plan
What Marketers Want	What Deans Need to Do
Time and resources to learn	Provide professional development funding as part of the unit budget
Early involvement in the process	Create the opportunity while challenging the marketer to contribute strategically
Market without interruption or marketing input from nonmarketing staff (avoid "everyone's-a-marketer" scenario)	Allow the marketer greater freedom but receive progress reports on process and end-product effectiveness
More time and resources to do the job better	Create a more efficient environment and emphasize strategic over tactical functions
Better focus or better programs to market	Build a stronger market research function or an environment that better utilizes information in decision making

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