



College Quarterly

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▲ Home

◀ Contents

Marketing the College Brand in Ontario

By Ronald Holgerson

The College Branding Challenge

Since inception of the Ontario college system in 1967, the quality of a diploma or certificate in comparison to a university degree has been perceived as an inferior rather than alternative academic credential. As public institutions, community colleges are mandated to respond to regional labour force needs, and to provide graduates who will contribute to the social, cultural and economic strength of Ontario. In 2005, the publicly perceived value of college education continues to suffer in comparison to university education, in part due to weak marketing and brand positioning by colleges individually and collectively. Colleges must market themselves as a different rather than inferior postsecondary educational choice, a choice that leads to great jobs and successful careers.

Ontario colleges have been able to distinguish themselves locally and globally. Over the past few years, as the concept of offering programs in every field within a defined catchment area has been replaced by product differentiation identifying niche strengths, colleges have become renowned 'on the street' for unique programs. The advantage of such programs is the 'halo' effect that leverages reputation for one program to a field of endeavour.

On the international level, for example, Sheridan and Seneca have recently become major competitors in the field of animation. Sheridan graduates have won two Academy Awards and several nominations and Sheridan's animation reputation not only can be leveraged to digital media communications generally, but is so famous that in 2002 Queen Elizabeth II visited Sheridan to view its animation and journalism facilities. Seneca students recently collaborated on *Ryan*, a film that won the 2004 Academy Award for best animated short, and positioned Seneca to rival Sheridan. Mohawk is best known for nursing, skilled trades and apprenticeships. George Brown today celebrates its connection to Soulpepper Theatre, and Humber is known for its strengths in music, comedy and writing programs. Each college flirts with fame in some arena or another, locally, provincially, nationally or internationally, which translates into program related rather than college related reputation.

Over the past few years, the Association of Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology of Ontario (ACAATO) developed a representative college marketing committee to undertake research with The Strategic Counsel into public opinions and awareness about colleges; to collaborate on advertising to reposition the college brand

generally; to sell applied degrees as a new credential; and to deliver an advocacy campaign designed to increase provincial funding for the college system. Individual colleges, including Sheridan, Humber and Mohawk have also invested in economic impact and direct market research related to recruitment. Generally, the Ontario public was unaware of the college option, and though advocacy increased awareness, generally the public still indicates preference for university degrees over college diplomas and certificates.

Important steps have been taken, and the media now seems predisposed to state 'universities and colleges' where before they were inclined to mention only universities. In the Government of Canada's November 2005 Economic Statement, Finance Minister Goodale again reinforced the superiority of universities by focusing research investment at the university level in spite of increasing research being undertaken within the college system.

The complete branding of the Ontario college system remains an elusive objective, with distinct individual college positioning only now emerging in print and electronic advertising and publications. Public and community stereotyping of college students as inferior academically remains at the core of the branding challenge. The image of applied learning as somehow involving dirty hands remains a predominant image, whether linked to automotive, aerospace or culinary careers. Students working with machines, blowing glass, preparing menus, or keyboarding accounts payable appear to 'dumb down' the academic knowledge and skills imparted within college curriculum. The challenge is to lift college graduate career opportunities to a new level of understanding and appreciation through visual and linguistic representations designed to persuade and encourage.

The Budget Issue

Colleges have traditionally been perceived as a public good, paid for in part through tax based grants supplemented by tuition fees allocated for the purpose of classroom activity. The concept of an individual college as a department store that offers programs or products to students or consumers is only reluctantly acknowledged, and largely rejected by faculty, administrators and staff. With blinders on, postsecondary education in general perceives itself as a necessity, rather like health care, and therefore has been disinclined to compete in the marketplace.

In the 21st century, truth be told, everything is a commodity, including objects, services and values, and all must be positioned within a cacophony of key messages trumpeted in various media to attract attention and generate consumption resulting in profitable revenues. Whether political points of view, anti-terrorism campaigns, war or peace, the media play a major role in defining the public's perception of good and evil, luxury or necessity. Little economic analysis drives contemporary popular perception, and statistical

evidence enjoys only a few minutes of Warholian fame until overtaken by the next featured fact.

As a result of their self-perception as a public good or necessity, until recent years, colleges and universities have invested only slightly in marketing. Universities have traditionally afforded greater investments in recruitment and brand positioning, with a view to generating quantitatively and qualitatively robust applicant pools from which to strategically manage enrolment. Colleges have also begun to invest more in program calendar and marketing materials for both full-time students and corporate training clients, but materials generally reflect a meager financial investment, with limited potential for brand positioning, product differentiation, and consumer awareness.

Traditionally, fashion marketing has required an investment of up to 10 per cent of potential sales, while cultural marketing has reflected an investment of up to 15 per cent (more in Quebec) of total revenues, including both box office and government grants. Anecdotaly, one atomic energy company budgeted 8 per cent of potential sales. Analysis of college marketing budgets is challenged by a decentralization of recruitment, advertising, publications, other activities and salaries. However, it is safe to say that the total per institution generally hovers around 3 per cent as a percentage of total revenues, and somewhat more as a percentage of tuition revenues.

Contemporary North American society accepts that baby boomers rule public consciousness, which means education was a priority in the 60's, and again in the 80's when their children went to school. Health care is the current priority as boomers confront their aging and retirement years. Canadian statistics, deployed ably by economist David Foot, demonstrate that "boom/bust/echo/echo bust" phenomena will result in fewer children after 2015. In turn, Canada will need fewer schools, and subsequently fewer universities and colleges. The potential counterpoint to this reality will be increased immigration, and/or increased participation by Canadians in postsecondary education. Currently about one half of our adult Canadian population has not participated in postsecondary education, hence there is opportunity for market development and market penetration strategies to entice new and repeat customers.

Over the coming decade, institutions must invest in clear and persuasive positioning, competitive brand identity, street credibility in the marketplace, niche product identification and differentiation, and customer segmentation; indeed, in all the tools of marketing. Aggressive new investment will help ensure stability and offset decline in the quantity and quality of postsecondary institutions. Each and every college must examine its investment in marketing, positioning, and branding, to ensure ongoing growth and expansion, and perhaps existence. An investment of not less than 5 per cent of total revenues, or 10 per cent of total tuition will be required before too long.

Measuring and Marketing Investment

Colleges must also consolidate their marketing efforts into a comprehensive strategic approach that clearly defines responsibilities in measurable segments. For example, recruitment and advertising can be measured by the quantity and quality of applications, while admissions and registration can be measured by the quantity and quality of enrolled students. Each element of the marketing mix must be assessed in terms of consumer response, including print and electronic advertising, websites, calendars and brochures, and public relations. Consumers must be segmented into prospective and current students, and eventually alumni. Colleges must invest in market research that evaluates the success of each segment individually and clusters of segments collectively. The result will be a refined investment with targets for success for each component of an overall marketing strategy.

Market research is available through focus groups and general public, student, parent and employer surveys. The college system benefits from some results through Ontario Key Performance Indicator results, as well as Ontario College Application Services research, and the Freshman Integration Tracking (FIT) System deployed by some institutions. Much more needs to be done. Sheridan and Humber collaborated in recent years on focus groups to define the reputation and brand of their institutions, ACAATO invested in college system research with an emphasis on applied degrees and advocacy, and Mohawk invested in general public and employer surveys to define the reach of their reputation for quality within the Golden Horseshoe region. Such research remains proprietary and competitive in some instances, but more college system research needs to be undertaken until trends towards more positive understanding of college academic options are visibly transformed.

Visual Imagery

What colour is a college? What do college students look like? What distinguishes individual campuses? How can photography differentiate colleges and universities, and one college from another? If all colleges use similar photography, will they achieve individual brand identity or collectively position college as a viable and valued postsecondary opportunity? How can apprenticeship, college preparation, and other access programs be celebrated?

Our 21st century culture, formerly driven by television, is increasingly driven by the internet where graphics are even more essential for effective positioning. If the attention span of a person born into the television era is ten minutes between television commercials, the attention span of a person born into the internet generation has an attention span of two to three 'clicks'. Advertising used to comment on the retention of visual messages among citizens exposed daily to thousands of images from various sources. Most of those images go ignored, and with the internet, many can be avoided altogether.

Sex sells, but colleges and other institutions of higher learning represent an ethical and moral environment that celebrates learning, knowledge and skills first and foremost. In the November 14th issue of Canada's leading Maclean's Magazine, featuring University Rankings 05, a competition ensues between advertisements for various universities fighting their ranking and various colleges trying to position college as an alternative, since Maclean's abandoned efforts to rank colleges. However, the ad that may well trump all others is one for 'axeU', "the best in all categories, percentages and points," and it is actually an ad for men's cologne. The ad seems almost insulting to the integrity of the whole volume, but represents revenue for the magazine, perhaps oddly helping to sell university life.

The visual imagery for colleges remains to be solidly invented. Universities have hallowed halls, ivy and stone gates, and gleaming glass and steel buildings, with students engaged in learning through books. Campus life is frequently athletically focused. To date, college photography has emulated the university approach.

But, what if colleges really do have a street credibility for getting jobs that is superior to universities? The number one factor influencing people choosing to attend college, excluding location, is usually reputation, particularly of the program. That provides colleges with direction: choose photography that accurately and enticingly represents the strength of your niche programs and the resulting jobs that graduates achieve. The college life photographs might well focus on the cultural life of students, with less emphasis on athletics. We expect to see machines, but given today's computer numerical control machines, and the high technology utilized in college classrooms, shops and labs, emphasis can be more readily placed on touching technology. Finally, demonstrating alumni in well paying jobs will focus prospective students and their parents on how well college graduates actually do after they enter the workforce.

The Language of Imperative

Universities describe themselves as 'great' places, and the aforementioned Maclean's qualifies their rankings based on quality, innovation, and creating the leaders of tomorrow.

Quality can be defined in many ways, and is ascertained in part based on the average entering grade of first-year students. The majority of students arriving at Canada's top 47 universities reveals that most have an average of 75% or higher, but de-aggregation of the data reveals that there is still a significant number of first year university students who arrive with an average between 65% and 75%. Analysis of a recent Freshman Integration and Tracking survey undertaken at Mohawk College in Hamilton reveals that 48.8% arrived with an average of 70% to 80%, and another 26.5% arrived with an average of 80% or more. If 19.5% of students arriving at Lakehead University have an entering average of 75% or less, and 17.2% of students arriving at Mohawk College have an entering average of

70% or less, does that mean Mohawk is better than Lakehead? No it does not, however, comparative analysis is useful, and clearly demonstrates that colleges do indeed attract talented and bright students.

Writing copy for advertising postsecondary education is increasingly a challenge. Rather than passively describing institutional opportunities, it may well entice students if one deploys the imperative tense of a host of verbs intended to exemplify learning: discover, explore, grow, gain, generate, benefit, and learn. Colleges are more 'hands on', which may broaden the choices to include: shape, structure, form, deploy, arrange, and organize. Of course, the universities are on to the need to balance knowledge and theory with practical skills and abilities, so they too are redefining the linguistic choices that will position their degrees as meaningful. The increased inclusion of cooperative education models, along with field and clinical placements, will eventually blur the 'hands on' opportunity that colleges currently utilize to position their programs.

Conclusion

The College Quarterly represents a somewhat obscure publication, known to an internal group of converts. Perhaps it is time for The College Quarterly to increase its visibility, and become directly engaged in the ongoing effort to present the college postsecondary option as a different but valuable alternative to university, and certainly a superior alternative to no postsecondary education. Why not publish The College Quarterly on a regular basis to college student unions and associations, to college staff unions and associations, and to Maclean's. We need a stronger voice for parents to understand the college experience, and The College Quarterly in some ways augments the academic reputation of the college choice.

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◀ [Contents](#)

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