

Stamp an identity

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The institutions of higher education that were hitherto completely oblivious to their customers, are beginning to realise what commercial firms have known for a long time. Their customers, ie, students, are critical to their success. As a consequence, more and more institutions are borrowing marketing ideas from the business world and trying to carve a niche for themselves.

Unfortunately, most institutions have been caught in the mass-marketing trap. Students seeking admissions have been bombarded with generalised messages, with institutions investing little effort to discover what they actually need. This strategy made sense when students had fewer alternatives and the higher education landscape was less cluttered.

Today, with the proliferation of higher education institutes, especially in the field of management education, the distinctions between institutions are blurring and there is little to choose between them. The result: students are left confused and find it difficult to evaluate one institution against another.

The need to redefine marketing strategies is clear, but the big question is where to begin. A good starting point can be segmentation of students into clear groups. Traditionally, these institutions have divided their customers into prospects, students and alumni.

The need of the hour is to divide each of these groups into smaller groups; based on their profiles, needs, aptitude and interests. And then, marketing strategies can be tailored to each of these smaller segments.

Institutions can decide which courses would be more suitable for which segment and market those courses accordingly.

Another problem plaguing institutes of higher education is the lack of concerted effort to build strong brands. Except for premier institutes like the IITs and IIMs, higher education is notoriously lacking strong brands. Branding has become an even harder exercise as many institutions have not been able to find their niche.

A few years back, it was easy to draw clear and distinct lines between various academies based on type of education, curricula, cost etc. But today, with so many institutes offering similar courses and targeting the same set of students, it is difficult to ascribe a unique position to any institute. There is a pressing need for these institutes to identify what it is that distinguishes them from other institutes and makes them truly unique. The institutes that are able to identify their USP and communicate it effectively to their target audience will emerge winners in the long term.

There is another dimension to branding in the higher education landscape. The strong brands in higher education are inextricably linked to the quality of education imparted, which in turn depends upon the intellectual capital an institute has — both in terms of faculty and students.

If the IITs and IIMs are well-respected names today, it is because their faculty and stringent admission process ensures that only the best students are selected. Intellectual capital is the most strategic asset that any educational institution can have. But, it is not enough to have the best intellectual capital. It is also

important to direct the communication efforts at leveraging this strategic asset to build trust and equity.

Apart from the quality of education, philosophy and values have also become an important factor while choosing an institute. Customers want more than just an educational product or service from these institutes. A clearly defined and deeply ingrained set of values can not only attract these customers but also be a source of competitive differentiation.

The marketing efforts discussed till now primarily target prospective students. But there are constituencies that are as important: existing students and alumni. These segments have tremendous word-of-mouth power and can affect the image and reputation of the institute.

Traditionally, the relationship between higher education institutes and these users has been transactional. Once a student graduates from the institute, the relationship with the institute is driven solely by sporadic attempts from the alumni association.

Most institutes do not make any effort to build and maintain sustainable long-term relationships with their students. There is a strong need to build personal relationships which translate into positive perceptions about the institute.

The first step of a relationship-building exercise is to identify a core group of students and alumni, who can act as opinion leaders and share their positive perceptions with their friends, relatives and neighbours. Newsletters, meetings and invitations to special events provide an excellent platform for the institutes to build relationships with their alumni. In this intensely competitive scenario, the message for the educational institutes is clear . Success will ensue, if you get your marketing act together.

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