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The More Things Change: Reflections on the State of Marketing in Continuing Higher Education

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The More Things Change
Reflections on the State of Marketing
in Continuing Higher Education



James D. Campbell and James L. Narduzzi

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.

—ALPHONSE KARR

All of us can readily identify the major changes that have occurred in society over the past several decades and, more important, the manner in which these changes have affected the way we conduct the business of continuing higher education. For example, the telephone has been replaced by e-mail, which is now the most prevalent way we communicate with each other in the workplace. Social media and the web now dominate how we market our programs and communicate with our various constituencies. Instruction, once delivered primarily face-to-face in a classroom setting, is now routinely delivered utilizing various digitally mediated formats, with online and blended learning models now accounting for a significant share of delivery. This list could go on indefinitely, and these few examples only scratch the surface of the changes that have occurred.

What's interesting to us, however, is what has remained constant. The demand for continuous learning, the profile of our students, the way we credential, the indicators of quality in terms of instruction, and the role continuing education plays on most campuses still emphasizes the same core values. These constants persist in spite of the fact that the pace of

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change continues to escalate dramatically, particularly so when it comes to technology. One simple example makes the point: we all carry around in our pockets greater computing power than all of NASA had access to in 1969 (Kaku 2011). Reflecting on the above led us to a simple yet profound truth: while change is ever-present and occurring at breakneck speed, what matters in how we conduct business has remained relatively constant and is likely to do so into the foreseeable future.

Throughout our careers, we have seen a great temptation to focus on what's new. Our fear is that this can distract us from focusing on what's important. We believe that this is particularly relevant when it comes to marketing, where technology has perhaps exerted its greatest influence. The purpose of this essay, then, will be to explore the changes and the constants that exist as they relate to marketing in continuing higher education. Particular attention will be paid to best practices and identifying useful data points, with the ultimate goal of encouraging the long view in making daily business decisions.

What's Changed?

Communication and marketing to current and prospective students has undergone transformative change. The web was in its infancy not too long ago and has become the dominant way we communicate with our various constituencies. Somewhere in the neighborhood of one billion smartphones were shipped worldwide last year, more than double the number sold two years earlier ("Global smartphone shipments" 2014). Leveraging social media on these mobile devices has become the preferred vehicle for driving traffic to the web. And yet, the fundamental goal has never wavered: creating relationships.

Today, marketers and administrators will be hard-pressed to attend a conference that doesn't include a few sessions about customer relationship management (CRM) systems. But CRM is a fairly new trend in continuing and professional education although the concept has been around in the corporate sales world for many years.

CRM grew out of the database marketing movement in the 1980s. The concept was pioneered by Robert and Kate Kestnbaum, statisticians who used statistical modeling to analyze customer data and develop customized communication to other potential customers. Next came ACT!, contact management software (CMS) that revolutionized the organization and storage of customer data.

Goldmine and others also released contact management software throughout the late 1980s. As personal computer and server growth exploded in the 1990s, huge strides were made in CRM software development, led by Brock Control Systems, an innovator of early sales force au-

tomation (SFA) tools, which combined elements of database marketing and CMS to create an automated task management solution (“A Brief History of Customer Relationship Management” 2013).

As the concepts of CMS, SFA, and CRM were evolving over the last forty years, they all became synonymous with technology. But the idea of building and maintaining a relationship with a prospective customer involves more than just new technology. For many of us, our system may have included file folders, Excel spreadsheets, tickler files, written to-do lists, and a day planner or desk calendar. Not terribly long ago, when prospective students inquired about a program (on the phone in most cases), we entered their names onto a list. We mailed them a packet of information and followed up on the phone to make sure they received the information and to ask if they had any questions. We usually followed up with them periodically by phone and mail to remind them of approaching deadlines to assess their interest.

Today, with a CRM system, we do many of the same things, but most are automated, allowing us to be more productive and efficient. Productivity and efficiency aside, our CRM system also helps build stronger prospect relationships by allowing greater engagement; enhances internal communication by allowing marketing, recruiting, academic departments, and enrollment management departments access to the same data; facilitates better decision making by providing real-time data and reporting on our prospect pool; helps analyze the effectiveness of marketing campaigns by tracking lead sourcing; and paints a clearer picture of the decision-making process and patterns of our prospects by helping track conversion rates at all stages of the enrollment funnel.

A CRM system only works if we generate leads, and the strategies and tactics we use to generate leads has changed drastically and continues to change, particularly with the increased use of online advertising and digital marketing tools. Search engine marketing, including paid and organic searching, search engine optimization (SEO), social media advertising—including Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter—and digital display advertising weren’t part of most marketers’ vocabularies ten years ago.

Today, these are all considered integral components of an integrated marketing communications plan, regardless of the demographics of your target audiences. And for good reason: digital marketing provides tremendous reach, especially on a global scale, is extremely cost effective, and is highly measurable and trackable.

As we discuss updated statistics on web usage, social media, and digital marketing, it’s always a bit alarming to think about how dramatically things have changed in such a short period of time. Although we think about the technology revolution spanning more than thirty years, technology usage and its impact on continuing and professional education has really exploded in the last five years.

The growth of the personal computer can be credited with starting the digital marketing revolution. In 1984, it is estimated that 10 percent of US adults used a personal computer and just 1.4 percent used the Internet. With the birth of the World Wide Web in 1989, usage began to grow. By 1990, personal computer use increased to 42 percent. By 1995, Internet access had grown to 14 percent of US adults, although 42 percent had never heard of the Internet and 21 percent were vague on the concept. Today 81 percent say they use a computer in some part of their daily lives (Fox and Rainie 2014).

Equally important has been the growth of the cell phone market and mobile connectivity. Today, 90 percent of US adults have cell phones; two-thirds use them to access the Internet; and one-third say their cell phone is their primary connection to the Internet. That's impressive growth from 2000, when just 54 percent of US adults had a cell phone. In 2007, Apple introduced the iPhone, and smartphone usage has grown dramatically since. Today, 58 percent of US adults own a smartphone, compared to 35 percent in 2011 (Fox and Rainie 2014).

Personal computers, smartphones, and tablets continue to drive consumers' online habits. On average, Americans spend more than sixty hours online each month, with more than half accessing the Internet each day (eMarketer 2013). In addition to checking e-mail, users spend their time researching products and services, accessing social media sites, shopping, streaming media, and playing video games.

Social media has become a true global phenomenon. Consider these recent statistics when you hear some colleagues referring to it as a "trend" or think it is limited by the age of the user:

- 73 percent of all Internet users are active on social media.
 - 90 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds are active.
 - 78 percent of 30- to 49-year-olds are active.
 - 65 percent of 50- to 60-year-olds are active.
 - In the 65-plus bracket, 46 percent are using social media.
 - US users spend more time on Facebook than on any other website.
 - 40 percent of users access social media from a mobile device.
- (Pew Research Center 2014)

Facebook, Twitter, and Google+ are the top three sites in terms of average monthly active users. But other sites like Instagram, Pinterest, and Reddit continue to add active users. Plus social media continues to become more integrated into our daily lives. More than one million web

pages are now automatically connected to Facebook, and 47 percent of Americans say Facebook is their number one influencer of purchases, up from 21 percent in 2011 (Jones 2013).

Social media continues to create a complicated and ever-changing challenge for continuing education marketers. When you see these staggering usage numbers, it's easy to be tempted to jump on the "shiny object" bandwagon and have a presence on every social media platform. In the past, that approach was very common—think of the "all people, everywhere" strategy. Today, we better understand the communication preferences of adult learners and how people use and value social media, the web, and e-mail, particularly when researching products and services. This increased understanding allows us to craft better communication strategies instead of solely focusing on the delivery channels (Copeland and Routhier 2012).

As we've been reflecting on what's changed in continuing education marketing, we feel it's just as important to look forward and prepare for what's next and how that may affect our strategies and budgets. There's a growing focus on dynamic content, inbound marketing, and visually driven content, all of which will allow marketers to create and deliver more personalized experiences to the right audiences at the right time. In addition, consider these interesting marketing statistics and projections:

- It's projected that marketers will have spent \$135 billion on digital marketing collateral in 2014.
- 78 percent of chief marketing officers think custom content will drive marketing in the future.
- By 2015, online advertising will make up almost 24 percent of the entire advertising market.
- Social media marketing budgets will double in the next five years.
- 60 percent of the population are visual learners.
- Inbound marketing generates 54 percent more leads than outbound marketing.
- 55 percent of marketers increased their digital marketing budgets in 2013. (WebDAM 2014)

It's clear to us that the next generation of marketing tactics will therefore look different than the last. But we are equally certain that the focus will remain on building and maintaining relationships. That emphasis will never change.

What's Remained Constant?

Although marketing tactics and tools have changed dramatically, marketing planning and strategies have remained very consistent. That became very apparent to us recently while planning the launch of several new degree programs.

Our planning process started the same as many others: asking questions and establishing goals with our internal clients.

What are we trying to accomplish?

What are our enrollment goals?

How many inquiries do we have to generate to meet our enrollment goals?

What are our key dates?

Next, the conversation turned to defining our target audiences.

Are they primarily men or women?

How old are they?

What's their education level?

How many year's work experience do they have?

What's their income level?

Where do they live and work?

After defining our target audiences, we developed a detailed communication plan to reach them. Although the tactics have changed dramatically, we still use an integrated communication strategy that includes traditional advertising vehicles, print materials, direct mail, and in-person recruiting events.

It is interesting to note that traditional advertising has remained a constant in most of our media and marketing plans. We continue to use a combination of radio, television, and outdoor advertising. We primarily utilize television and outdoor advertising to build brand awareness. Radio helps build brand awareness but also drives event registration, particularly for offsite programs in smaller markets. Although traditional advertising has changed much since the black-and-white television sets of the 1950s, statistics continue to show that it remains an important marketing strategy. According to "TV Basics," a publication of the Television Bureau of Advertising, statistics show that consumers value traditional media outlets, despite the incredible growth of DVRs, satellite and streaming radio,

the iPod and iPhone, and online media streaming. Included among the most important findings are the following:

- Adults still watch four to five hours of television programming per day, including DVR and on demand viewing.
- The higher education sector remains a top-ten spot television advertiser.
- On average, television reaches almost 90 percent of adults each average day.
- Radio reaches approximately 60 percent of adults each average day.
- More people learn about products they'd like to try or buy from TV commercials than from any other medium.
- Although more media are competing for people's time, television and radio are still the top two categories in consumer media usage. (Television Bureau of Advertising 2012)

Because we only offer seat-based degree programs, on-campus events remain an important part of our recruiting strategy. We typically host eight information sessions each year. Attendance has waned in recent years, but the impact of attending an information session on a prospective student's decision to apply and enroll remains high. We attribute much of this to the consistent role that relationship building and high-touch personal interactions have played in the recruiting, retention, and referral process over the years.

When asked how students hear about us, "from a friend or colleague" has consistently topped our list since we began collecting statistics many years ago. Regardless of where someone is in the enrollment funnel, there is nothing quite like a phenomenal experience to help ensure positive word-of-mouth marketing, and the importance of word-of-mouth has been consistently strong. National data supports the significance of word-of-mouth advertising. When asked what sources "influence your decision to use or not use a particular company, brand, or product," 72 percent claim reviews from family members or friends exert a "great deal" or "fair amount" of influence. Additionally, 92 percent of consumers worldwide trust recommendations from friends and family more than any other form of advertising ("Everything You Need to Know about Word of Mouth Advertising" n.d.).

Another marketing constant is the importance of print collateral. Don't misunderstand us. We no longer print tens of thousands of class

schedules or catalogs. In fact, we don't print a class schedule or catalog at all for our degree programs. Instead, we have transitioned these online, which was a long process (and painful for some). We do still print program brochures. And we still mail (yes, US Post Office "snail mail") packets to prospects who request them. The print brochures and packets create an important engagement point for us. In particular, they allow us to provide information for prospects to share with those they consult in the decision-making process and help shape our brand.

Conclusion

There is perhaps no other facet of continuing higher education that has undergone a more dramatic transformation than marketing. Almost all of the tools currently available to us did not exist when each of us entered the profession. Our constituencies continue to broaden and diversify, adding a layer of complexity to our decision making as we are tasked with reaching audiences in a very crowded marketplace across the enrollment lifecycle and therefore regularly requiring us to utilize the full gamut of communication tools available. While sometimes daunting and always a complicated challenge, we believe that the most important constant in developing a successful marketing program is to focus on building relationships. That simple fact has never changed.

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