
PERCEPTION MANAGEMENT: AN ACTIVE STRATEGY FOR MARKETING AND DELIVERING ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE, BUSINESS SOPHISTICATION, AND COMMUNICATION SUCCESSES

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Abstract

Too many liberal arts colleges continue to spend too much time looking inward, planning too much from memory rather than from imagination, suffer from faculty hubris and indifference, and do not demonstrate the market sophistication needed to be viable and visible, let alone excellent, in the changed economic world of the past decade. Therefore, in order to accentuate the contextual anchors, communication techniques, practical realities, benchmark comparabilities, sophisticated interdependence, marketing concepts, and mutual accountability required to move beyond mere survival, this article will describe, develop, and delineate “perception management” as a strategic design and action agenda for turning passive reactions into proactive realities at liberal arts colleges in particular and the public sector in general.

Introduction

“What in context beguiles, out of context mortifies.” David Wayne

During the past several years, whenever I have been involved with small, liberal arts colleges, I have heard the same vacuous refrains from faculty, administrators, and members of Boards of Trustees over and over

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again: "We're America's best kept secret." "Our faculty is absolutely the best." "We're the (Harvard, Princeton, Smith...) of Southern Pennsylvania." "Our traditions are what make us attractive to parents and students." "If it isn't broke, why fix it." ...ad nauseam. At the same time, these very same colleges are hurting financially, as they struggle for quality students, financial grants, alumni contributions, and resources generally.

Clearly, many small colleges are too self-satisfied, spend too much time looking inward, plan too much from memory rather than from imagination, suffer from faculty hubris, and do not demonstrate the economic/market sophistication needed to be viable (let alone excellent) in the changed world of the past decade (Willimon, 2000:pp.21-24).

Therefore, in order to accentuate the contextual anchors, communication techniques, benchmark comparabilities, differentiation themes, and sophisticated interdependence required to move beyond mere survival, I would like to recommend "perception management" as a strategic design for turning passive dreams into proactive realities (Stupak, Greisler, and Stupak, 1997:pp.12-14).

A Comparative Perception Milieu

"The problem is never how to get new, innovative thoughts into your mind, but how to get the old ones out." Dee Hock

It is clear to me that major confusion exists in the perceptual lenses used by mediocre colleges, as well as in the minds of their reactive faculty, administrators, and Board of Trustee members. Here are the confusing perception barriers of reactive colleges: rigidity with rigor; analysis with decisiveness; managing with leading; crisis with performance; activity with productivity; intent with behavior; insularity with independence; hindsight with foresight; credentials with credibility; and lecturing with teaching.

On the other hand, high performing colleges exhibit a dynamic, proactive, integrated set of perception determinants no matter their size, context, culture, or location. Here are the perception lenses that distinguish high performing colleges from mediocre institutions: opportunity actors rather than crisis reactors; change creators rather than stability protectors; emphasis on interactive relationships rather than individual turfs; feedback learning systems rather than hierarchical protectorates; use education

centered technology rather than high tech gimmicks; strategic positioners based on imagination rather than strategic planners mired in memory; sophisticatedly interdependent rather than dogmatically independent; measurement performers rather than rhetorical cheerleaders; market sensitive rather than economically indifferent; and, finally, emphasize student needs rather than faculty convenience (Stupak, 2000:p.4; Brown, 1990: passim).

Surely, not everything that is faced can or must be changed, but just as surely nothing can be changed until it is faced. In addition, as Abraham Kaplan has said: “That choices are limited does not imply that there are no choices at all” (Kaplan, 1964). Consequently, since language has the interesting property to increase or decrease our perceptions of control, as well as allowing us different word choices to direct our thoughts and actions about situations in either effective or ineffective ways, let’s look at perception management as an action framework for making colleges creative, dynamic, and relevant to today...and tomorrow.

Perception Management

“We’re not just talking about theory; we’re doing it.” Bob Palmer

The Issue: “Maximizing value” is a popular and demanding phrase in the academic arena of today. It is defined as increasing the quality/cost ratio. Simply stated, parents and students want to get their money’s worth! Given the increasing competitiveness in recruiting and retaining students generally – and in small liberal arts colleges specifically – our customers are no longer willing or able to spend money as they have in the past. For the academic leader, however, deftly maximizing value means more than focusing on the quality/cost dyad (Clark, 2000: pp.2-15). In this world of the academic marketplace where terms such as collaboration, sustainability, re-engineering, and outcomes management reflect various aspects of educational delivery instituted to help improve the development of the student, permit me to suggest one more operational phrase – related to the communications function – that too few academic professionals understand and practice: perception management. It is a very simple description of what I think more college presidents, faculty, trustees, and alumni groups must actively pursue through marketing plans, center-of-excellence programs, advertising campaigns, and financial planning – using

communication tools to speak to clearly defined audiences for the purpose of motivating them to embrace one's academic programs and college mission.

Perceptions are real (Willimon, 2000: p.22). They color what we see, how we interpret, what we believe, and how we behave. They create or diminish value. They generate or solve problems. They are an essential component to academic operations and whether a college is successful. So powerful are our perceptions that many psychologists believe that "perception is reality" (Cialdini, 1984; Strauch, 1989).

Perceptions come in two forms: experiential and intellectual. "Experiential perception" is kinesthetic in origin – we develop these perceptions through our senses of sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste. Our proverbial sixth sense – knowing about something – defines the realm of "intellectual perception."

One must remember that everything we communicate about our college must be grounded in the ultimate measurable (quantifiable) realities of product and price. The experiential perception of parents and students must be one of great value. We cannot sustain false perceptions (at least not for long), nor should we attempt to communicate them. In the academic arena, doing so would be at least unethical, perhaps illegal, and certainly unprofessional. There must always be a positive reinforcing interaction between experiential perception management, quality, and cost—especially in the minds of parents, students and faculty.

Intellectual perception is more elusive. Every audience has its own perceptual framework. At the most fundamental level, science tells us that the process of bringing about perceptual change has both rational and emotional components and is as dependent on cues and symbols as it is on actual content (Cialdini, 1984). If we want to change your mind, there are facts we must give you: specific attributes of the college; arguments for attending our college; results of a study or focus group; and even testimonials from current and former students. However, since people process and store information, receiving it in a complex web of beliefs, emotions, experiences, and contexts, it doesn't really matter what we say if we have not considered how it will be received.

The Process: As communicators and perception managers, we must always consider both the rational content of our messages and the perceived meaning. We must ask ourselves: what will the listener actually hear, given who they are, what they care about, and how they feel about the context and message sender? And, we must never forget that emotion has much more to do with behavior than reason does. Science and practice tell us that “reason persuades” but “emotion motivates.” Effective college leaders must be in the business of motivating (Kouzes and Posner, 1995: passim).

Right now, you are reading this article with an ‘attitude.’ What you will see, what you will remember, what you will care about, what you already believe, and what you will do are subsequently far more dependent on how you feel now and how you will feel at the end of this article than anything that is logically happening at your ‘home base.’ Remember, unlearning is infinitely harder than learning. The critical issue is emotional relevance: will any of this tap into meaningful values and motivations for you and your institution?

Not only do we have to pay attention to the rational and emotional cues and responses of our audiences and ourselves, but we also must consider how various trends impact our messages and our ability to manage perceptions effectively. The advent of technology is probably the single biggest influence in communications today. Audiences, especially students, are bombarded electronically with a multitude of options that are increasingly personalized, individualized, interactive, impactful, and immediate. Around the corner is an amalgamation of television, telephone, video, and Internet intimacy – interactivity and impact all in one. This will further change how students get information and how they choose – much as television has fundamentally changed how people get news. It also will change the style, tone, options, and even the substance of what students want.

Persuading parents and students today – managing their intellectual perceptions – requires an understanding of and an operational strategy for using technology. There are two major reasons for this: First, technologies are altering the media one needs to use to reach key, especially young, audiences. There is a constantly shifting environment of information gathering, and academic leaders must keep up with it. Second, you must recognize that traditional media brochures, newspapers, and magazines are

changing how they operate technologically, and so is the general public. How news travels, the speed at which it moves, who influences whom in the world, and how they do it is an ever changing and critically important topic – especially if one wants to reach and change the perceptions of a target audience...namely, prospective students and their parents.

The Benefits: The liberal arts colleges that can crisply communicate that they provide a high value, integrated curriculum and college experience, while, at the same time, developing the channels for accessing, assimilating, and energizing it for potential students are the ones that will thrive. To this end, perception management is an essential tool for academic leaders. Influencing the intellectual perceptions of both internal and external audiences significantly impacts your ability to advance the viability, vitality, and visibility of your college. Internal audiences consist of faculty, peers, senior managers, students, and board members. In the battle for resources (operating budget, capital budget, staffing), these groups are critical. External audiences are comprised of referring high schools, professional colleagues, media experts, parents, and potential students. The point is – and I don't think this is an overstatement – managing perceptions can be just as important as beautiful buildings, first class faculty, and glossy brochures, if a small, liberal arts college is to succeed in today's academic marketplace.

During my consulting outside of academia, I have seen businesses shape perceptions to achieve desired business results with the financial community, consumers, and policy makers. Some used debates, others discussions, others the power of the written word, and still others television, visual presentations, and the Internet, but all used simple communication techniques to get into the heads and hearts of their audiences, identify current perceptions, target key groups, refocus reality, and bring about desired market behaviors and results (Gragnotati and Stupak, 1999: pp.5-7). Mostly, the facts remain the same, only the perceptions changed. Clearly understand that it doesn't really matter what we say if we have not considered how it will be received.

There must always be a positive reinforcing interaction between experiential perceptions of students and faculty and the academic leaders' intellectual perception management of referrers, parents, markets, and even competitors.

The Roles: In today's academic world, we must create motivating communications that break through the sound barrier and have emotional relevance to the individual student. The communication strategies and tools you wield are the means to manage the perceptions that create the behaviors, which, in turn, lead to success in your marketing endeavors. Everyone at the college is a perception manager; as such, faculty, administrators, students, and alumni should be involved in the strategic planning process of your college...and ideally involved in the relationship building process with your major stakeholders. This may not always be possible, but it is the president's responsibility to reach out to senior executives, faculty, middle managers, and alumni leaders to clearly communicate strategic initiatives and operational priorities (Muller, 2000: pp.275-288).

To determine how, through the use of systematic tools, symbolic cues, personal styles, and interactive approaches, you can assure that the intellectual perceptions of critical stakeholders are impacted in precise and powerful ways, consider using the following nine steps for ensuring effective perception management:

1. Determine the stakeholders who critically impact your academic efforts in achieving desired market results – faculty, employees, alumni, etc.
2. Clearly identify the two or three (the fewer, the better) educational themes, cultural anchors, or location factors that differentiate your college from all the others...the uniqueness factor.
3. Based on these differentiated themes, relate what needs to be accomplished on both a business and educational level and develop targeted, focused messages that will have an emotional appeal to each internal and external stakeholder; that is, sophisticatedly blend mission with margin.
4. Use basic communication techniques to get into the heads and hearts of your stakeholders – identify current perceptions, target key groups, refocus reality, and bring about desired behaviors and measurable results.
5. Always consider the rational content of a message and the perceived meaning. What will the listener actually hear given

- who they are, what they care about, and how they feel about the institutional context and the message sender?
6. Consider how various trends in communication impact messages and the ability to manage perceptions effectively.
 7. Actively listen to your students, stakeholders, parents, and professional colleagues: dialogue is essential for increasing communication efficiency and understanding.
 8. Reach out to senior faculty, deans and managers, and other internal audiences to crystallize and anchor the fundamental objectives of the college and to determine how marketing activities can support and help to bring about a mutual accountability for achieving those objectives.
 9. Perceptions and style can never be a substitute for lack of academic substance or faculty quality: there must always be a reinforcing interaction between perception management and educational performance (Stupak and Stupak, 1997: pp.1-4).

A Case Example From “Down Home”

The following experience I had focuses the previous points: Back in the early 1950's, in Allentown, Pennsylvania, the vice president of marketing of a then-small dog food company was making a speech about the impact of the division's current activities. At the end of the presentation, in an effort to stir the sales force to a fever pitch of energy and commitment, he raised his voice:

“Who has the best marketing campaign in the dog food industry? He asked. A few voices responded, “We do.” “Who has the best sales force in the dog food industry?” he continued. A few more voices answered, “We do.” The energy mounted: the volume increased, “Who has the best marketing division in the industry?” he boomed. “WE DO!” shouted the audience. He paused, “Then why are sales down?”

In the silence that followed, as I stood in the back of the room, one person was overhead saying to another, “The dogs don't like it.” Perceptions and style can never be a substitute for a lack of educational and academic value. The dog food manufacturer did a great job of intellectual perception management – dog owners were impressed. But the experiential perception of the dogs was a disaster.

Conclusion

“Small is not better, focused is better.” Chuck Ames

To properly sequence perceptions in the academic, small liberal arts college arena, parents and students must immediately recognize (intellectually and emotionally) that they can and are receiving quality outcomes at reasonable costs in a caring environment. This can only be accomplished with a well thought-out, systematic, gripping, real-team-oriented approach to perception management (Katzenbach and Smith, 1994: pp.87-108). Each college must be its own expert (The Commission on the Future of Moravian College...1991; Stupak, 1998: pp.1-6. In addition, please see the numerous articles on colleges, universities and faculty by R.J. Stupak published during the past couple of decades in *Worldview*, *The Christian Century*, *Kappan*, *Journal of Human Relations*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Intellect*, *Current*, *The American Psychologist*, *The Bureaucrat*, and others). The academic leaders must be the driving force. Each member of the campus becomes at one time both a player in the academic marketplace and a referee responsible for helping to direct institutional resources. Not only are they determining and driving the strategy and outcomes, but they are also making sure that all promotion and marketing activities contribute directly to both the educational and business success of delivering a liberal arts education, environment, and commitment that is “second to none.” In essence, your college must develop a perception management approach that compliments its culture, size, mission, vision, and authority structure, as well as its educational goals, academic objectives, and intellectual dreams.

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