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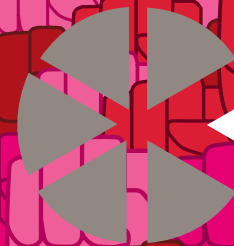
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The essential magazine for all Professionals in International Education

THE PIE



REVIEW

autumn 2013, no. 03

Soft power

How business and cultural influence is leveraged through international education

► Students on agents ► The marketing of education ► Business builders

A MAGAZINE FROM THE TEAM BEHIND THE PIE NEWS

Autumn 2013, issue no 03

SOFT POWER

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Marketing of education

Lucy Fisher talks to education marketing specialists about the most effective media to recruit international students in an increasingly globalised world.



THE MARKETING OF EDUCATION

appears to be playing a game of catch up with many other industries. Dr Stephen Holmes, managing partner and founder of The Knowledge Partnership, points out that, outside the most elite universities, "financial pragmatism and market reality now largely prevail over purely academic ideology". He should know. Based in Australia, but working within a marketing consultancy which has offices around the world, he's got a PhD in the field of education marketing.

Holmes believes that the UK and Australia are particularly innovative in marketing terms, because they have been the most active, historically, within the international education market. Indeed, according to Robert Lawrence, principal of Prospect Research and Marketing which is also based in Australia, in Australia roughly one-fifth of the total student numbers studying in the higher education system are international.

Of course demographic or domestic issues in many countries have contributed to something of a go-slow in the education sector – the impact on the UK domestic market of tuition fees being charged is just one example. But with globalisation encouraging many young people to consider and to be able to afford an education overseas, schools are turning to marketing agencies to pursue an aggressive international enrolment agenda – often in the face of declining domestic enrolments.

"Over the next five years we will experience more change than we have in the past hundred," predicts Educate's Richard Badley, who points out that there is a lot of work to be done around accountability and tracking, as well as the use of mobile marketing techniques, which he says have seen triple-figure growth in his business in the last quarter. He says that international students bring huge direct and indirect financial, cultural and academic benefits and that – although the US market is already relatively mature in ►



Marcel Dalziel set up his own agency that has now become part of US agency Plattform. He says universities are spending more on marketing now; understanding it is about more than branding

► relation to lead generation and conversion – such marketing approaches are becoming increasingly evident in other countries, too.

The recruitment process, however, tends to be a long and complicated one. The pursuit of education is no spur of the moment decision, and this means that the marketing ‘funnel’ can be tricky to track accurately.

“Universities are still struggling with the best marketing solutions,” says Amanda Gregory of Education Marketing Solutions in the UK. She believes that institutions in Asia, for example, have a lot to offer but remain about 20 years behind in terms of marketing techniques. “Marketing is changing within universities,” she says. “Like it or not they have to become more commercial. It’s not just about straightforward promotion techniques but conversion and retention marketing practices, too.”

“Over the next five years we will experience more change than we have in the past hundred

Adrian Mitchell, Head of Research and Reporting at Hobsons, agrees that conversion of leads will be a hotter topic of conversation. “The next evolution we see on the horizon is greater emphasis on conversion,” he says. “Seventy-two per cent of students told us they decided where to go to university after they applied, so as competition increases, for many universities simply making an offer will no longer be enough.”

Gregory says that the average attrition (or drop-out) rate at a university stands at around 20 to 25 per cent – which means that an important consideration in marketing terms is to focus on quality rather than quantity of leads. As such, she recommends that institutions do more propensity modelling. Her suggestion is also to examine the current student cohort and identify what works. “Identify the low-hanging fruit,” is her advice.

Students today are increasingly savvy, often with very specific requirements around type of course and their subsequent employability. For this reason, marketing experts recommend assessing the product offering rather than focusing solely on brand, and they note an increase in popularity for shorter, accelerated courses and online learning, particularly within Europe. That said, reputation and league tables are still critical – and nowhere more so than in Asia.

Mike Elms, CEO of Hotcourses, points out that applicants search primarily by course. According to research he presented at the annual NAFSA conference in May, 43.5 per cent of all students search by course or programme, compared to university (27.1 per cent) and location (22.5 per cent). His colleague Simon Emmett points out that video is an increasingly important element of the marketing mix, too, and especially so for international students who may not be able to visit a campus particularly easily.

Andrew Crisp of Carrington Crisp says that another area which is often overlooked is in making use of alumni. “These people represent a powerful network, with an authentic message,” he says. “Not enough has been made of alumni in recent years.”

Social networks are growing in importance, too, and, like alumni, these channels can help to generate a feeling of trust given the human element and potential authenticity of message. As with any media, however, there will be a ►



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London consortium LUIP achieved significant marketing impact by inviting Chinese social media celebs to London for a week-long visit (left); Hotcourses signals that video is increasingly important and launched its own video to promote its site in Thailand (right)

► need to decide which platform or network is most relevant to your target market. This may necessitate employing people in the target market, and almost certainly those who speak the relevant language. “Everyone is on Facebook - with the exception of China,” points out Crisp. “Then there are growing amounts on LinkedIn and the many localised versions of social networking such as Hyves in the Netherlands and Tuenti in Spain.”

It is hard to make generalisations about what marketing mix works best, especially when talking about business which is inherently international. “Completely different media work best for different things. Some in New York or California perhaps don’t need to sell the destination, for instance,” points out Marcel Dalziel of PlattForm.

He notes, too, that a “very general” rule of thumb in terms of cost per acquisition is about £1000 per international student. But he says that if institutions choose to work with agents that could rise to around £1200 or £1400 per student once commissions have been taken into account. “But you can’t really put a number on it,” he warns, noting that many universities have started to hire people from the commercial sector to tackle marketing and enrolment: “Every penny has to be justified, whereas ten years ago people were just talking about branding, and nothing was really tracked or monitored.”

“Anything that’s search-based converts well: paid search; Google pay-per-click, and also re-marketing

Media fragmentation can make it challenging to identify where your budget is going to work hardest. After all there are so many choices. But the best starting point is always to locate your target market. “It’s also important to get your brand in early,” says Dalziel. “The average lead time is about 18 months. If you leave it too long, other brands will have already been in contact numerous times.”

Given that studies have become more expensive in many parts of the world, the choice of course or institution has become more of a commercial decision for parents, too – and therefore one that may take a little longer. “It’s very difficult to track lead to enrolment, although there are systems in place now,” adds Dalziel, although he admits that it will “never” be a perfect science.

“Anything that’s search-based converts well: paid search; Google pay-per-click, and also re-marketing – as in when ►



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► someone has visited your site, you follow them around the Google network,” adds 11ten Group’s Peter Cunningham. “But generating enquiries is the easy part. There are lots of student portals, and many generate large volumes of enquiries, but many are from low-converting countries, such as Pakistan and Nigeria.”

He advocates an integrated approach and points out that what works best varies widely not only by country, but by institution too. Any advice, therefore, can only be on a case-by-case basis, but the one thing that all can agree on is that the marketing of international education has become a whole lot more sophisticated. ◀

Potentially underused elements of the marketing mix include:

ALUMNI: Alumni are an underused resource, according to many in the field of education marketing services. According to Simon Emmett of Hotcourses, “The example everyone is jealous of is the US domestic market where this is done particularly well.”

ANALYTICS: “More people are embracing CRM (customer relationship management) techniques now,” says 11ten Group’s Peter Cunningham. “I’d say market by programme and try things like dynamic landing pages, too - pointing someone to one particular programme as opposed to a generic landing place, and then having tracking in place... over a period of time work out what it costs to generate an enquiry.”

FAIRS: Fairs have historically been a good source of bookings for a lot of institutions around the world. They are perhaps not as effective as they were before – because of the rise of the internet – but there is still a need for human contact, points out Andrew Crisp of Carrington Crisp.

SOCIAL NETWORKS: International students are “prolific” social network users and communicators, points out Prospect Research and Marketing’s Robert Lawrence. Plattform’s Marcel Dalziel agrees: He says that almost “every single one” of his clients is active on social media, given that it can add a sense of authenticity to what companies say. “But it takes hard work. The best way to work on Facebook is to have someone on it every day,” he says.

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