

Advancing Institutional Strategy: Transforming Strategic Communications in Higher Ed

University and college presidents and CEOs face an array of disruptive forces today as technologies, markets and customer expectations rapidly change. The institutions that are poised to thrive in uncertain times are shaking up administrative and educational models to be more relevant, differentiated and competitive. Declines in numbers of traditional students, growing numbers of prospective adult learners, competing priorities and stakeholder groups, globalization and growing dependence on private support are among the challenges of leading complex higher education institutions today. They demand enterprise-wide, market-responsive strategic solutions, reimagined academic and co-curricular programs and often organizational redesign of systems and structures.

Surprisingly, the one resource that is absent from the strategic planning table in many institutions, or is consulted after the fact to produce collateral, is the communications and marketing function. Too often the old-style “public relations” program is a cost center confined to boosting awareness, reputation management and on-demand production of various communications tools like websites, magazines and social media. As such, it is frequently undervalued, underresourced or both; or it resides in one area, such as enrollment management, fundraising or media relations, thus pitched to one audience and leaving the others underserved. Expectations around outcomes require distinctive PR and strong communication and messaging earlier rather than later from leaders, especially new leaders. While higher ed’s mission is education, the institutions more likely to thrive have learned to operate like businesses. So communications and marketing offices, like their corporate counterparts, would logically be expected to drive business results and measurable value. Today’s reimagined communications office can and should be an essential partner in institutional success. Beyond positioning and visibility, the “new way” is an enterprise approach advancing the institution’s strategic priorities and customer value.

The Changing Function of Marketing Communications

The demand for personalization has upended many industries. Data over the last few years shows shifts of market share from global or large companies to local and regional brands or small or midsize firms. Industries such as Amazon, Nike and Apple have become leaders in personalization through audience segmentation, understanding that today there is no single mass market for their products and services.

Using “platform strategies,” they facilitate a continuum of interactions with their customers, continuously gather and analyze feedback and improve what they offer. They think like enterprises but act like niche businesses, offering targeted products and messages under a unified brand to one customer at a time. They apply data to

While higher ed’s mission is education, the institutions more likely to thrive have learned to operate like businesses.

54%

of companies have no or low cross-functional coordination for personalization efforts

Boston Consulting Group, 2017

In the corporate world, strategies link marketing communications directly to product lines. In mission-focused colleges and universities, the product is education, but strategies often fail to align with the product. As a constellation of relationships, most higher education organizations are not rigorous in practicing integrated, market-focused communications, and they persist in interacting with customers in silos. In some cases, these are driven by certain “power units” – often strong academic or athletic organizations with loyal but narrowly focused constituencies – that are content to exist more independently, but need to be brought under the enterprise tent. An athletic director or a business school dean may be extremely effective in relating to prospects, parents or alumni, but the impact on behalf of the entire institution is often diluted or absent. Under effective integrated marketing communications, all units must subscribe to the institutional value proposition.

anticipate customer preferences, deliver through both scale and customer intimacy – and experience high rates of market share and growth.

Colleges and universities are also constellations of relationships across a continuum – parents, students, faculty, staff, alumni, donors, community partners and others. Some of the more innovative institutions are beginning to understand the value of a platform strategy, but dismantling vertical “silos” (departments, schools or other units stacked side by side) is a complex and daunting task. As a result, institutional marketing and communications programs serving these audiences have remained relatively siloed, too, with practitioners functionally specialized (i.e., media relations, social media, graphic design, content development and publications management). Bundles of talent, they do a great job at the tactical level – dozens of brochures, websites, marketing campaigns each year in a never-ending project list prioritized by first-come, first-served. But with little incentive or opportunity to be strategic or influential beyond the immediate job at hand, they function as service organizations rather than strategic partners, and their potential contributions to institutional impact are diluted, if not wasted.

New Competencies and Structures Needed

Communicators in higher ed frequently complain about not being at the strategy table. It’s a predictable topic at conferences, yet when communicators go back to their campuses with renewed motivation for doing things differently, nothing changes. Why? In large part, this is not their fault but the way their leaders view their roles – in other words, implementing “stuff.” All it takes is one alumnus or community partner to express in exasperation – “I get all this material from you but it doesn’t appear to come from the same institution. Don’t you all talk to each other internally?” The institution loses traction when there is no single view or appreciation of the customer and a perception that the institution’s operations are not well coordinated.

Who should determine the *value-added role* of communicators? We believe acknowledging the importance of “strategic communications” comes from the top. When leadership takes this position, higher ed organizations can advance their

59%

of corporate CEOs don’t fully understand the role and capabilities of PR

PRSA, 2014

goals through a partnership with a skilled subset of their existing organizational talent. How? **By elevating the status of the communications office, holding it accountable for value creation and hiring professionals who are strategic advisers and can help solve complicated business challenges.**

As a result, marketing communications teams become more strategic and proactive. They learn that by operating as a high-functioning strategic organization, they also operate as an effective service organization. They spend creative energy on problem-solving, whether on communications strategy itself or the way it is executed in design, content and method. Change becomes a way of thinking, encouraging professionals not only to be engaged in problem solving but be rewarded with more job satisfaction because they are contributing to the core business, not simply the scores of unrelated items on their to-do list.

What's vital is the right job descriptions and professional expectations for the right organizational model that will work for your institution.

Employers in the private sector today want communicators who are problem-solvers and, increasingly, have business acumen. When communicators report to the president or CEO, leadership skills and strategic mindset are also important. Lacking that, the communications department becomes a collection of specialists relegated to producing content and materials but without input to strategy.

A “New Way” Forward for Higher Ed Strategic Communications

Shaking up entrenched communications silos and practices in higher education, The Napa Group has developed an innovative methodology that assists colleges and universities in redesigning communications structures to align with organizational strategies and stakeholder value. Our approach is based on what we've learned from years of strategic planning – the value of a “platform strategy” that maps planning to realistic market forces and views constituent relationships as a continuum of interconnected, yet personalized, interactions, with various parts of the university. Our approach:

- Aligns and integrates strategic and marketing communications
- Recognizes the latest best practice in organizational communications effectiveness
- Applies design thinking concepts to reimagine the best structure for these connections
- Leverages new technologies for customer insights and relationship management
- Through research and data analytics, creates an approach through which planning is a routine market-driven process

The “business of education” is its academic mission. Yet the challenges to making higher education relevant in a time of accelerating, dizzying change are complex. Strategic communications that drive business results are an essential partner with academic, administrative and board leaders in this transformation. Let's talk about how your institution can realize a new vision for strategic communications and apply a revitalized organizational approach to integrated communications practices that reach, inform and strengthen your relationships with all key stakeholders.

Janis Johnson
Senior Partner, The Napa Group
jjohnson@napagroup.com

Bill Walker
Consultant, The Napa Group
bwalker@napagroup.com