
Marketing Distance Learning with an Ad Agency

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Marketing is increasingly essential to distance learning programs as we endeavor to survive and compete in a crowded marketplace, where new providers with large budgets are constantly entering the scene. Skillful marketing strategies can help maintain and increase market share, change or improve a program's image, and create public awareness. However, the personnel of distance learning programs and their parent institutions are often too busy to give marketing the time and attention it deserves, and frequently lack the necessary expertise to market effectively alone. Working with an outside agency can be the answer. We will discuss why we decided to choose an advertising agency, how we selected one, how we work with them, the effects of the campaign, and the lessons we have learned as we have tried to keep our marketing efforts focused, timely, and within our budget.

Our program is the Center for Independent and Distance Learning (CIDL), which is part of the College of Continuing Education (CCE) at the University of Oklahoma. In one form or another, our department has existed since 1910 when the University initiated correspondence courses. In 1913 high school courses were added, and in the 1940's the department offered Japanese to soldiers in the Pacific. Currently we offer about 250 self-paced distance learning courses to college and high school students through print and online media. CIDL also offers an accredited high school distance-learning diploma through our University of Oklahoma Independent Learning High School. In addition, CIDL has telecourses and manages four interactive video classrooms on campus that use H.323 to facilitate two-way synchronous communication.

Warning Signs

By the late 1990's, our operation was suffering from declining enrollments and increased competition. We had no marketing identity. Even internally within the College of Continuing Education, our department was thought of as an old, revenue-producing "cash cow" that did not get (or require) much attention. The staff wondered if we were even going to exist in the next few years.

At this time a marketing survey was conducted which revealed we had been marketing to the

wrong individuals. Enrollments came from advisors, instructors and parents, yet we were still concentrating on sending materials directly to students.

Meanwhile new competitors were entering the distance-learning field. Many of them saw rapidly increasing enrollments even while charging more than three times our tuition price. Their marketing was pervasive and evidently more effective than ours.

The marketing department in the College of Continuing Education consisted of only four individuals serving over 70 unique units. Their staff had been very stable in the past, which can be helpful, but there was no influx of new ideas. Creativity was decreasing, and all marketing material started to have a sameness that nevertheless lacked true consistency. Although we expressed a need for a campaign-oriented marketing strategy, incorporating several types of media that would reach our audience more effectively, they remained single-publication oriented. Working with an advertising agency was the only way we felt we could address the threats we faced while adding to the capacity of our internal marketing department.

Choosing an Agency

Since no other unit in the college had successfully used an outside advertising agency, we faced the challenge of selling the idea to the head of our division. After talking about increased competition and lack of identity, we informed our Associate Vice President that we needed to hire an agency. Of course, there was concern about the cost. Marketing, however, does not cost much—if it works. We were already spending tens of thousands on an ineffective strategy; a correctly targeted one could save money over our current marketing budget. In addition, we felt that if we let the agency know our budget we would find ways to economize, such as asking for graphics and template we could reuse as needed. Fortunately, he agreed and our plans to hire an agency went forward.

At this time, the CCE marketing unit graciously assisted by sending out a request for proposals to several advertising agencies. Three agencies responded to the RFP and set up initial meetings. During those meetings, our main purpose was to inform the agencies of the nature of our programs and the audience we were trying to reach.

After the initial meeting, the agencies made proposals to us that included graphics and a marketing strategy. From this point, we selected the agency that offered the best-looking and most complete campaign, including a great deal of graphics work done on spec (many of which we are using today). In addition, the account executive was a University of Oklahoma graduate and was eager to work with our unit. Even though financially we are a relatively small account, we pointed out to them that we anticipated a long relationship that would evolve over the years rather than a simple one-shot campaign.

Working with an Advertising Agency

Once we had an agency selected, our first step was to meet with their personnel to make certain that they understood our program and its audience. Each distance-learning program is somewhat different in its objectives, courses, and technologies, so it was essential to ensure that they were going to be advertising what we actually offer. After that, we determined the needs of our campaign by looking at our current state and defining goals. A theme was developed for each program, along with a consistent look that was carried out through photographs, graphics, fonts, and colors. Although each theme was different, several common visual elements tied them together. The agency then developed logos, web sites, newsletters, advertisements, and

giveaways for each campaign, carrying out the theme. They were able to suggest new ideas for media that we had not previously used, such as postcards and posters. Each piece was then edited and modified according to our needs until we were ready for it to be produced.

Although the agency's fees were a marketing expense we had not faced before, they were able to help us save money in other ways. The visual themes they developed use two-color printing rather than four, which saved printing costs while establishing a consistent, contemporary look. Instead of printing an expensive catalog on heavy paper to send to the university's residence halls and apartments, only to have it end up in the trash cans, we worked with the school newspaper to develop an insert that would appear in the school paper four times a year. Since many university personnel besides students read the paper, we reached a wider audience while at the same time saving \$50,000.

Although they are willing to handle the entire design and development process—for a price of course—together we have developed a more economical alternative. After they create a number of items for a new campaign, we obtain digital copies of the graphics and templates used. Then our own staff can use the design elements to put together ads, flyers, newsletters, and web sites as needed. This process saves time and money, and also allows us to target materials specifically to certain markets. If we are going to a homeschool convention or a military conference, for example, we can quickly make a flyer specifically tailored for that event using our themed graphics.

The CCE marketing department is not left out of the design and development process now that we are using an advertising agency. They are growing into the role of liaison, and will be coordinating our work (and in the future the work of other CCE programs) with them. We all anticipate that this will save us time while providing them with extra help, and will eventually lead to a more unified look for marketing materials across the College.

Effect of Marketing Campaign

The immediate effects of our work with the advertising agency were that our materials were developed more quickly and have a consistency that other programs in the college have not yet been able to achieve. We expanded our marketing materials beyond the single catalog and now have several brochures, catalogs, newspaper inserts, web sites, giveaways, signs, and postcards that correspond to two campaigns: "Redefine Your Education" for Independent Study and "Move Forward" for the high school diploma program. Meanwhile, we have saved money on printing and online development.

Unfortunately, we have not yet developed an accurate means of tracking results of individual marketing pieces, nor even of the campaign as a whole. However, our revenues have been increasing since the campaigns began, and January 2002 was the best month in the history of our program.

Lessons Learned

Our relationship with the agency has been a learning experience for both of us. We had to get used to having an outside partner, and they had to gain an understanding of what our program does and does not do and how we fit into the organization of the college and the university. As a university program existing in a bureaucracy, we also had to be careful to communicate with the agency regarding the policies that apply to us, such as displaying the college logo in all materials and working with our requisitions process.

Whatever frustrations we have experienced in working with the agency seem to be related to being a small account or to a lack of communication. When our original account executive moved, for a time we were not assigned to another, as they were all busy with larger projects. Fortunately, the developer of the online materials became a creative director and picked up our account. We have also experienced occasional delays in receiving our materials when agency personnel were working on large projects for other clients. At times aspects of our projects, such as layout, have been assigned to interns or less experienced staff and we have lost time making corrections. We have also discovered that agency personnel would contact different members of our staff depending on the issue, so we had to strengthen our own internal communications to avoid losing track of our projects.

Overall, our partnership with the advertising agency has been a success. We and our administration are pleased with the marketing materials they developed with us. Expenses have been relatively moderate considering the number of pieces and web sites developed and the size of the audience we are trying to reach. At first we were concerned that the agency would be too controlling in the marketing process, but we have found that they are very willing to listen to our needs and have welcomed our input. After all, although they know marketing and advertising, we know our own program.

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