

Masters marketing: routes to success?

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Abstract

In today's increasingly competitive environment, attracting the quality and quantity of students you require for your Masters portfolio is no longer a given: a pro-active approach to what is often a very diverse market is now needed to produce the desired results. And because of the diversity of the market and the available channels through which the market can be reached, it can be difficult to determine where to start, and what will work.

There are many routes to success when recruiting students to Masters courses. Here, we outline briefly three key elements that are crucial to the process:

- Understanding your market
- Effective marketing – communicating value
- Sustained, excellent customer service

This paper is a brief overview of the presentation delivered at the GEES Subject Centre national conference in July 2007.

Understanding the market: market segmentation

The easiest place to start when identifying your markets is with your existing student body. Often, assumptions are made about students based on who the course was originally intended for, that may not be correct: As a result, markets may be missed and marketing information may be inappropriately targeted. This approach works particularly well for a group of related courses, and, to be really useful, should include enquiry, applications and admissions data for up to three years.

This type of market analysis will provide a breakdown of key information on the current markets served by the course, including, for example, age and career stage; country of origin; previous institution; and how and when students accessed information and applied. From this information, existing core markets can be identified, as well as unexpected market opportunities, which can then be explored.

In the same way, analysing career or study areas that course alumni have progressed into can be usefully compared to the stated purpose of the course. What the course is selling may not be the same as what potential students were buying, and new markets may be identified as a result.

Students who declined an offer are another important group. The results of a decliner survey can provide a range of information from attractiveness of course content, to information needs, customer service and pricing. This may result in modification of courses, and/or identification of course elements that are present, but need to be emphasised.

Effective Marketing: the communication of value

A thorough understanding of your markets from the market analysis then allows you to identify which markets to concentrate on, and what those markets need from you to understand the



benefits of your courses. Communicating value is essential. Many course descriptions concentrate on the content of the course, and leave potential students to identify the implied benefit. Making benefits explicit, preferably with examples, such as student and alumni profiles, ensures the value of your course is immediately identifiable to potential students. For example, for a newly identified market of mid-career professionals, course descriptions can be amended to make benefits explicit: 'This course provides mid-career professionals with specialist information that is much in demand in the X profession. Course alumni now occupy senior management positions in a range of companies including X and Y'.

And your market analysis will provide you with information on how and when your potential students will access information, so marketing channels can be chosen to maximise effectiveness.

The Importance of Customer Service

Increasingly, individual courses and institutions are differentiating themselves not only through content and markets, but also through customer service. In a diverse, competitive marketplace, students are likely to apply to a range of courses and accept

a number of offers. Really effective customer service goes beyond the mechanics of enquiry and response, many of which can be handled through efficient systems and use of FAQs. Potential students also need the opportunity to engage with a department, and to feel that the department is willing to engage with them. This requires regular communication, opportunities to visit, or contact at external events. Creating a community of offer holders before enrolment, either electronically or via an offer holders' event, or both, can then create a powerful sense of engagement and belonging, and help ensure that the students you want will choose your course.

These are just some of the core elements of successful marketing at Masters level. More information is available at www.PostgraduateDirections.org.uk or you can contact me directly.

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GEES Resource Briefing on BS 8848: a specification for visits, fieldwork, expeditions and adventurous activities outside the UK

The new BSI British Standards BS8848 was published in April 2007. It specifies operational requirements for organisers of fieldwork activities and student placements abroad.

To help you make the most of this new standard, the GEES Subject Centre is publishing in late February 2008 a Resource Briefing available at www.gees.ac.uk.

BS8848 is open for feedback during its first year, with the last **date for suggestion being 23 April 2008**. To comment on BS 8848 email sarah.horsfield@bsigroup.com.

Copies of the new standards can be ordered from the BSI web site at www.bsigroup.com/shop. Please note that charities are eligible for a discount. To order at the reduced rate, email orders@bsi-global.com with your registered charity number.