

Wondering what works? The changing marketing mix in higher education

A REPORT ON
MARKETING SPENDING AT COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES
LIPMAN HEARNE KEY INSIGHTS JULY 2010

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LipmanHearne

Social media are all the rage. The distinguished president of one liberal arts college makes a whimsical video about his role on President's Day and generates YouTube furor and more dollars to the annual fund. A supposedly spontaneous flashmob video by a major research university bursts into a scene from *Glee* and gets nearly a million views in a week. Student blogs and tweets—as many as ten per day—help a private comprehensive university toward its best enrollment year ever (or was it the university's thrilling run to the Final Four?).

But where do these activities fit in the broader context of effective, return-on-investment-based marketing? Can a direct line be drawn from these activities to the results they were planned to generate? Such stories are great to illustrate key points, but marketing programs can't be built on the basis of anecdote. One organization's effective social media strategy is another's sinkhole of unread and irrelevant blogs. Especially in times like these, you need data, benchmarks, and reliable comparables so you can fine tune your program, argue for an effective budget, and monitor your results.

That's why, for the last ten years, Lipman Hearne has partnered with the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) to conduct a series of surveys about

marketing practices in higher education. We've asked questions about marketing tactics and spending as well as outcomes, and we've asked them of institutions ranging from small colleges to large research universities.

And because we've been asking these questions for ten years, we can make observations

about longer-term trends without being distracted by year-to-year blips. And what have we learned?

By far, the most outstanding trend shows up when comparing overall marketing spend-

ing across a decade: In 2001, the median marketing spending for a midsized college or university (2,000–5,999 students) was \$259,400 (or \$321,900, adjusted for inflation). A decade later, that figure balloons to \$800,000—an increase of more than 100 percent. A similar gain is seen in smaller colleges and large research universities (see Table 1). Clearly, marketing is being increasingly regarded as a “mission critical” process in higher education, worthy of significant investment.

By far, the most outstanding trend shows up when comparing overall marketing spending across a decade: In the year 2001, the median marketing spending for a midsized college or university (2,000–5,999 students) was \$259,400 (or \$321,900, adjusted for inflation). A decade later, that figure balloons to \$800,000, an increase of 100 percent.

TABLE 1
Marketing Spending in FY 01 and FY 09

	Full-Time Equivalent					
	Under 2,000 students		2,000–5,999 students		6,000 students or more	
	FY 01 (N=60)	FY 09 (N=29)*	FY 01 (N=60)	FY 09 (N=35)*	FY 01 (N=41)	FY 09 (N=29)*
Median marketing spending	\$252,500	\$501,450	\$259,400	\$800,000	\$500,000	\$1,400,000
Median marketing spending (2010 dollars)	\$313,375	\$501,450	\$321,900	\$800,000	\$620,540	\$1,400,000

* Small base size; interpret with caution.

“Higher ed institutions today are facing a conflation of challenges that can be overcome through more effective marketing,” says Rob Moore, CEO of Lipman Hearne. “Increased competition for students, deep tuition discounting, demographic pressures that put many traditional markets at risk, a highly charged and incredibly nervous philanthropic environment—all have a huge impact on the institution’s bottom line. Across the board, institutions have realized the truth of an old aphorism: Smart marketing doesn’t cost money, it *makes* money.”

But this increased investment raises new questions for higher ed institutions. How can you know what’s best practice and what’s just a passing fancy? How do you find the right mix of communications strategies to reach different audiences? How do *other* institutions reach *their* audiences? What’s working *today*?

What follows are five key insights we’ve gleaned from our latest round of research. And, because different types and sizes of institutions handle marketing in different ways, we also present our findings separated out by *institution type* (research/

doctoral, master’s/comprehensive, liberal arts, two-year college) providing benchmarks useful for institutions of all sizes and types.

“Investments in communications and marketing are directly related to success in fundraising, alumni relations, student recruitment, and other areas,” says CASE president John Lippincott. “At a time when schools, colleges, and universities are facing tighter budgets, it’s especially important to benchmark marketing spending and make sure that every dollar is used wisely and strategically in support of institutional goals.”

In the corporate world, marketing budgets typically represent 4–12 percent of sales, and in the for-profit education sector, marketing budgets can approach a whopping 40 percent of tuition revenue. “In previous findings of this survey,” says Tom Abrahamson, Lipman Hearne’s chairman and recent member of the board of directors of the American Marketing Association, “nonprofit colleges and universities spent 0.5 percent of their revenues on marketing, on average. So, while some within institutions may feel as though they are spending a lot of money on marketing, in fact, they are probably under-spending the level necessary to be seen and heard by their intended audiences.”

About Lipman Hearne

Lipman Hearne is the nation's leading marketing and communications firm serving nonprofit organizations. The firm's clients include many of the nation's most respected universities, foundations, associations, and health care and cultural institutions.

With offices in Chicago and Washington, D.C., Lipman Hearne is led by marketing specialists whose backgrounds include tenures in nonprofit management, advertising and branding, market research, fundraising, and public affairs. For further information about Lipman Hearne, visit www.lipmanhearne.com or call (312) 356-8000. For media inquiries, please contact Pete Boyle at pboyle@lipmanhearne.com.

About CASE

The Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) is the professional organization for advancement professionals at all levels who work in alumni relations, communications and marketing, and development and advancement services.

CASE's membership includes more than 3,400 colleges, universities and independent elementary and secondary schools in 61 countries. This makes CASE one of the

largest nonprofit education associations in the world in terms of institutional membership. CASE also serves more than 60,000 advancement professionals on the staffs of member institutions and has more than 22,500 individual "professional members" and more than 230 Educational Partner corporate members.

CASE has offices in Washington, D.C., London, Mexico City, and Singapore. The association produces high-quality and timely content, publications, conferences, institutes, and workshops that assist advancement professionals as they work to perform more effectively and serve their institutions.

For information, visit www.case.org or call (202) 328-2273.

About the Survey

From February 1 to March 19, 2010, Lipman Hearne and CASE collected data in a detailed, nationwide email survey of 212 CASE member institutions. The sample included liberal arts colleges, master's-level universities, research institutions, and two-year institutions, as well as a number of independent primary and secondary schools. The schools and universities were both domestic and international but predominantly domestic.

“Deep Marketing” Gets Results

Finding #1: Investors in research and planning were more likely to deploy more—and more varied—marketing efforts.

We asked survey participants if, and how deeply, they invested in research and strategy. We found that those who were moderate-to-heavy investors in research and planning—those who devoted at least 6 percent of their marketing budget to these activities—were more likely to deploy social media tactics, use admissions viewbooks, and convene institution-wide marketing committees (see Table 2).

And the extra effort seems to be paying off: Of those moderate-to-heavy investors, 71 percent reported that marketing efforts had a positive impact on the quality of their applicants. Other positive outcomes were seen in brand management and positioning (see Table 3). By comparison, only 52 percent of those less invested in strategy and research reported positive impacts in these areas. So planning appears to improve not only an institution’s control of its brand but also its student quality.

TABLE 2

Marketing and Communications Activities

SOURCE: Please select all of the marketing and communications activities that your institution invested in FY 08–09.

Please estimate, as best you can, the percentage of your total institution marketing/communications FY 08–09 spending devoted to the following.

NOTES: Light/Non-Investors = 5% or less; Moderate/Heavy Investors = more than 5%

	Percentage Invested in Research/Strategy		
	Total (N=138)	Light/Non-Investors (N=93)	Moderate/Heavy Investors (N=36)
Planning and hosting open houses/student recruitment events	93%	94%	94%
Print/magazine/newspaper advertising	91%	91%	86%
Admissions print collateral	86%	85%	89%
Alumni or institution magazine	86%	85%	86%
E-communications with alumni	83%	82%	86%
Developing/administering institutional Facebook site	83%	78%	89%
Media relations	80%	81%	78%
Admissions viewbook	79%	74%	89%
Digital advertising/online banner advertising	73%	77%	64%
Developing/maintaining Twitter account	71%	69%	72%
Radio advertising	70%	70%	75%
Monitoring social media websites	68%	67%	72%
Developing/maintaining institutional YouTube channel	66%	58%	83%
Flash/streaming video	65%	43%	69%
Community relations	63%	66%	58%
Crisis communications	62%	59%	72%
Conducting market research focused on enrollment	59%	52%	72%
Annual report	57%	55%	64%
Major refresh of institution's website	56%	53%	67%
Government relations	54%	56%	42%
Alumni portals	52%	47%	61%
Word-of-mouth marketing	52%	46%	61%
Out-of-home/billboard advertising	51%	49%	50%
Developing integrated marketing plan	48%	35%	75%
Direct-to-online publications	47%	44%	58%
Continuing education brochure	47%	48%	36%
Pay-per-click advertising	46%	44%	42%
Search engine optimization	46%	45%	47%
Campaign/fundraising sites and/or microsites	44%	45%	42%
Television advertising	43%	43%	42%
Student blogs	43%	35%	56%
Corporate relations	37%	37%	36%
Blogging on the institutional website or other institutional forum	36%	32%	42%
Virtual tour	34%	30%	47%
Online chat with admissions officers and/or current students	33%	30%	42%
Conducting market research focused on alumni	32%	24%	47%
Third-party agents/recruiters	28%	24%	39%
Commenting/blogging on outside or institutional sites	20%	16%	25%
Conducting market research focused on community relations	13%	13%	17%
Third-party "virtual" college fairs	7%	8%	8%

TABLE 3

Positive Impacts of Institutional Marketing Efforts (Based on Investment in Research Strategy)

SOURCE: Have overall institutional marketing efforts had a positive impact on any of the following?

Please estimate, as best you can, the percentage of your total institution marketing/communications FY 08–09 spending devoted to the following.

NOTES: Light/Non-Investors = 5% or less; Moderate/Heavy Investors = more than 5%

Bold font signifies a statistically significant difference at 95% confidence between segments.

	Percentage Invested in Research/Strategy		
	Total (N=138)	Light/Non-Investors (N=93)	Moderate/Heavy Investors (N=36)
Visibility	86%	84%	91%
Inquiries from student prospects	84%	83%	86%
Website hits	83%	82%	89%
Brand management	82%	78%	91%
Number of applications	82%	80%	86%
Academic reputation	69%	69%	74%
On-campus collaboration	68%	64%	77%
Enrollment yield	68%	68%	63%
Positioning	62%	57%	80%
Quality of applicants	58%	52%	71%
Total philanthropic giving	56%	58%	54%
Percentage of alumni who give	39%	38%	43%
Attendance at athletic/ cultural events	34%	33%	40%
Percentage of parents indicating institution is first choice	29%	32%	17%
Average gift per alum	23%	27%	17%

Print Publications Aren't Dead

Finding #2: Nearly all of the institutions surveyed engaged in print publications (96 percent).

And while some institutions did cut publication budgets, this finding shows that the majority have not: 55 percent spent the same portion of their budget on print publications in FY 09 as they did in the previous year. In fact, more than one-quarter of marketing budgets went toward print publications, more than any other category.

It's interesting to note that an increase in spending on interactive media (such as web microsites, online tours, student blogs, etc.) does not appear to be coming at the expense of print publications (see Table 7). In fact, across all types of institutions, publications are largely seeing the same share of wallet (see Table 6). So print is stable—and these results show it's not even in a decline.

TABLE 4
Print Publication Tactics Used in FY 09

SOURCE: Please select all of the marketing and communications activities that your institution invested in FY 08–09.

	Type					Full-Time Equivalent		
	Total (N=138)	Research/ Doctoral (N=34)	Master's/ Comp (N=40)	Liberal Arts (N=33)	Two-year College (N=18)*	Under 2,000 (N=35)	2,000– 5,999 (N=41)	6,000 or more (N=39)
Any print publications	96%	91%	100%	97%	94%	100%	98%	92%
Admissions collateral	86%	71%	98%	91%	78%	91%	93%	85%
Alumni/university magazine	86%	85%	92%	85%	67%	91%	88%	85%
Admissions viewbook	79%	59%	92%	88%	67%	91%	78%	77%
Annual report	57%	50%	70%	52%	56%	60%	63%	49%
Continuing ed. brochure	47%	56%	50%	33%	67%	31%	56%	51%

*Small base size; interpret with caution.

TABLE 5

Comparison of Print Publications Budget Allocations in FY 08

SOURCE: You previously indicated how your FY 08–09 marketing/communications spending is allocated across several categories. How do these percentages reflect allocations from FY 07–08?

More	Same	Less
11%	55%	34%

TABLE 6

Average Marketing Budget Allocations by Institution Type and Size

SOURCE: Please estimate, as best you can, the percentage of your total institution marketing/communications FY 08–09 spending devoted to the following. NOTE: Data shown as mean.

	Type					Full-Time Equivalent		
	Total (N=138)	Research/ Doctoral (N=34)*	Master's/ Comp (N=40)	Liberal Arts (N=33)	Two-year College (N=18)*	Under 2,000 (N=35)	2,000–5,999 (N=41)	6,000 or more (N=39)
Print publications	26%	24%	25%	34%	22%	31%	25%	25%
Advertising	21%	24%	20%	18%	22%	20%	21%	21%
Direct mail activities	12%	11%	13%	12%	11%	13%	12%	11%
In-person student recruitment	12%	9%	15%	11%	9%	13%	11%	10%
Interactive/web	11%	14%	9%	7%	16%	7%	13%	12%
Public relations	8%	9%	9%	9%	9%	7%	9%	9%
Strategy development/ marketing research	6%	5%	5%	6%	5%	6%	5%	6%
Social media	4%	5%	4%	3%	4%	2%	3%	5%
Other	1%	2%	1%	1%	3%	1%	1%	2%

*Small base size; interpret with caution.

TABLE 7

Average Marketing Budget Allocations by Tactic

SOURCE: Please estimate, as best you can, the percentage of your total institution marketing/communications FY 08–09 spending devoted to the following. NOTE: Data shown as mean.

	Heavy Investors In...							
	Total (N=138)	Publications (N=27)*	Advertising (N=24)	Interactive (N=31)	In-Person Recruitment (N=36)*	Public Relations (N=28)	Research/ Strategy (N=16)	Social Media (N=18)
Print publications	26%	48%	20%	20%	25%	23%	18%	19%
Advertising	21%	11%	49%	16%	13%	10%	19%	12%
Direct mail activities	12%	11%	8%	8%	14%	10%	6%	8%
In-person student recruitment	12%	9%	5%	9%	24%	13%	11%	11%
Interactive/web	11%	7%	7%	28%	7%	10%	11%	16%
Public relations	8%	7%	5%	8%	8%	20%	11%	11%
Strategy development/ marketing research	6%	4%	4%	6%	5%	8%	19%	9%
Social media	4%	2%	1%	6%	3%	5%	4%	12%
Other	1%	2%	1%	1%	1%	1%	2%	3%

*Small base size; interpret with caution.

The Marketing Mix is Morphing

Finding #3: Interactive is growing, and so is social media. Between FY 08 and FY 09, 55 percent of institutions surveyed allocated more to interactive; and 52 percent allocated more to social media.

The increase is even more remarkable because it's coming during a phase when marketing budgets have decreased for some organizations, due to the economy.

So if interactive and social media are on the rise when some budgets are on the wane, where is the money coming from? Possibly from advertising budgets. Our study showed that more than one-third of the institutions allocated less on advertising in FY 09 than they did in FY 08 (35 percent). And 42 percent of moderate-to-heavy social media users were spending less on advertising compared to the prior year.

It appears to be an effective choice, at least in terms of stirring up interest: Moderate-to-heavy investors in interactive were more likely than average to report a positive impact on website hits, enrollment yield, the quality of applicants, total philanthropic giving, and the percentage of alumni who give (see Table 9).

TABLE 8

Comparison of Budget Allocations to Last Year

SOURCE: You previously indicated how your FY 08–09 marketing/communications spending is allocated across several categories. How do these percentages reflect allocations from FY 07–08?

	More	Same	Less
Print publications	11%	55%	34%
Advertising	20%	45%	35%
In-person student recruitment	13%	76%	11%
Interactive/web	55%	37%	8%
Public relations	13%	72%	15%
Strategy development/marketing research	27%	56%	17%
Social media	52%	45%	2%

TABLE 9

Positive Impacts of Institutional Marketing Efforts (Based on Investment in Interactive)

SOURCE: Have overall institutional marketing efforts had a positive impact on any of the following?

Please estimate, as best you can, the percentage of your total institution marketing/communications FY 08–09 spending devoted to the following.

NOTES: Light/Non-Investors = 5% or less, Moderate/Heavy Investors = more than 5%

Bold font signifies a statistically significant difference at 95% confidence between segments.

	Percentage Invested in Interactive		
	Total (N=138)	Light/Non-Investors (N=68)	Moderate/Heavy Investors (N=61)
Visibility	86%	80%	93%
Inquiries from student prospects	84%	80%	88%
Website hits	83%	74%	95%
Brand management	82%	75%	88%
Number of applications	82%	77%	87%
Academic reputation	69%	71%	70%
On-campus collaboration	68%	68%	68%
Enrollment yield	68%	55%	78%
Positioning	62%	55%	72%
Quality of applicants	58%	49%	67%
Total philanthropic giving	56%	45%	70%
Percentage of alumni who give	39%	26%	53%
Attendance at athletic/cultural events	34%	32%	38%
Percentage of parents indicating institution is first choice	29%	29%	27%
Average gift per alum	23%	22%	27%

The Payoffs of Social Media

Finding #4: We learned that those who were putting social-media eggs in their basket were not only keeping that basket diversified—they were also bolstering their interactive marketing spending.

Among moderate-to-heavy investors in social media, 56 percent spent more on interactive than they did the previous year. These institutions were also more likely (60 percent) to use direct-to-online publications than were those less invested in social media (38 percent).

But is the social-media investment paying off? The answer appears to be yes. Moderate-to-heavy investors were more likely to report positive impacts in three important areas: website hits, positioning, and alumni-giving rates (see Table 10).

One final point of interest regarding social media use: The moderate-to-heavy users of social media were actually *spending less overall* per student on marketing activities. The moderate-to-heavies spent \$83 per student, and the light-to-non-users spent \$121 per student (see Table 11).

TABLE 10

Positive Impacts of Institutional Marketing Efforts (Based on Investment in Social Media)

SOURCE: Have overall institutional marketing efforts had a positive impact on any of the following?

Please estimate, as best you can, the percentage of your total institution marketing/communications FY 08–09 spending devoted to the following.

NOTES: Light/Non-Investors = 3% or less, Moderate/Heavy Investors = more than 3%

Bold font signifies a statistically significant difference at 95% confidence between segments.

	Investment in Social Media		
	Total (N=138)	Light/Non-Investors (N=69)	Moderate/Heavy Investors (N=56)
Visibility	86%	80%	95%
Inquiries from student prospects	84%	84%	84%
Website hits	83%	75%	95%
Brand management	82%	78%	86%
Number of applications	82%	81%	82%
Academic reputation	69%	67%	75%
On-campus collaboration	68%	68%	68%
Enrollment yield	68%	61%	73%
Positioning	62%	52%	77%
Quality of applicants	58%	52%	62%
Total philanthropic giving	56%	52%	64%
Percentage of alumni who give	39%	30%	50%
Attendance at athletic/cultural events	34%	29%	43%
Percentage of parents indicating institution is first choice	29%	28%	29%
Average gift per alum	23%	20%	29%

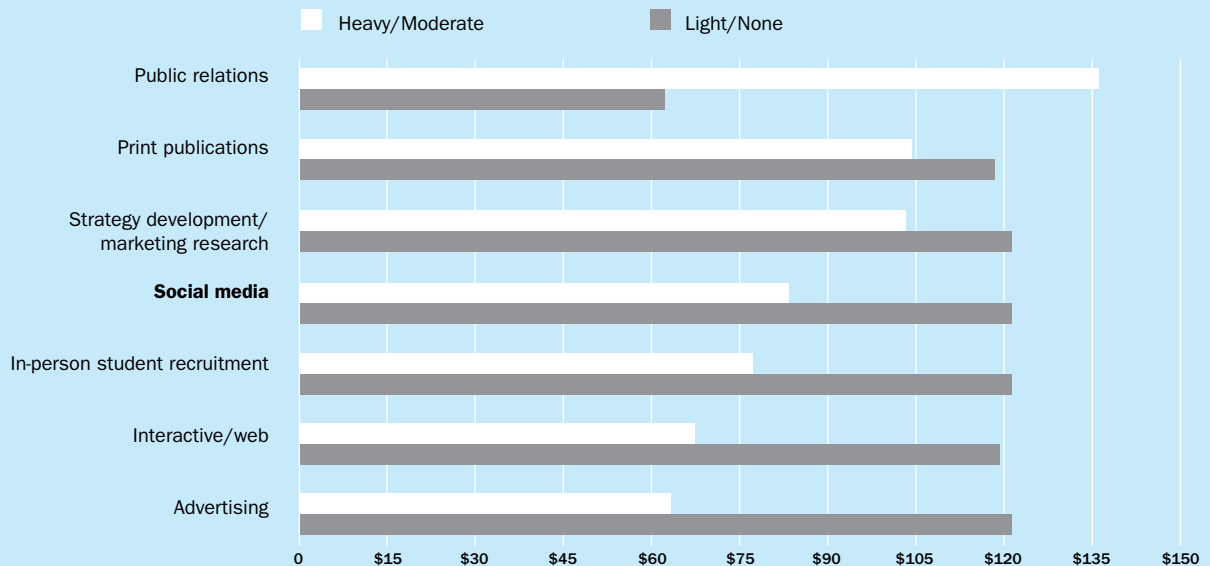
TABLE 11

Per-Student Centralized Marketing Spending (Based on Usage of Various Marketing Tactics)

Source: What is your institution's total approximate centralized marketing/communications spending for FY 08–09, not including staff, salaries, and benefits?

Please estimate, as best you can, the percentage of your total institution marketing/communications FY 08–09 spending devoted to the following.

NOTE: Data shown as mean. Base size may vary by tactic.



The Value of Marketing Partnerships

Finding #5: When comparing institutions who worked with outside firms on specific activities with institutions who went solo, we found that having that outside partner made a difference.

We looked at the data from another perspective—asking not only what institutions are doing but who is doing it, and what the results were. We learned that institutions that partnered with outside firms for digital advertising saw more positive results on their enrollment yield (88 percent compared to 67 percent). Institutions who partnered with outside firms for print advertising saw improvements on their number of applicants (96 percent compared to 82 percent) and on their total giving (76 percent compared to 49 percent). In a third instance, institutions who partnered with outside firms on their admissions viewbooks saw positive impacts on visibility (95 percent compared to 83 percent). And finally, institutions partnering with outside firms for admissions print collateral saw positive impacts on the quality of applicants (75 percent compared to 53 percent).

The clear conclusion: Getting help helps.

Appendix

TABLE A

Positive Impacts of Marketing Efforts

SOURCE: Have overall institutional marketing efforts had a positive impact on any of the following?

Please estimate, as best you can, the percentage of your total institution marketing/communications FY 08–09 spending devoted to the following.

	Under 2,000 students			2,000–5,999 students			6,000 students or more		
	FY 02 (N=76)	FY 06 (N=17)*	FY 09 (N=29)*	FY 02 (N=55)	FY 06 (N=28)*	FY 09 (N=35)	FY 02 (N=62)	FY 06 (N=24)*	FY 09 (N=29*)
Visibility	88%	88%	77%	83%	86%	88%	82%	72%	88%
Website hits	79%	76%	87%	62%	69%	85%	71%	66%	79%
Number of applications	80%	76%	81%	76%	78%	78%	82%	66%	85%
Inquiries from student prospects	82%	68%	87%	81%	78%	82%	77%	66%	79%
On-campus collaboration	76%	64%	58%	67%	53%	75%	77%	45%	71%
Positioning	68%	64%	55%	76%	56%	60%	79%	52%	71%
Academic reputation	61%	56%	68%	49%	53%	70%	65%	48%	74%
Enrollment yield	66%	52%	61%	62%	56%	62%	67%	41%	71%
Quality of applicants	58%	48%	55%	49%	67%	55%	62%	52%	65%
Total philanthropic giving (all sources)	53%	40%	58%	52%	58%	62%	54%	55%	59%
Percent of alumni who give	45%	32%	35%	39%	36%	42%	38%	31%	44%
Average gift per alum	35%	28%	19%	32%	25%	25%	33%	17%	21%
Attendance at athletic/ cultural events	34%	24%	32%	47%	36%	42%	24%	34%	32%

*Small base size; interpret with caution.

TABLE B

Impact of Economic Downturn

SOURCE: How much impact did the economic downturn have on your marketing and communications activities in FY 08–09?

How much impact do you anticipate it having on your activities in FY 09–10?

	Type					Full-Time Equivalent		
	Total (N=138)	Research/ Doctoral (N=34)	Master's/ Comp (N=40)	Liberal Arts (N=33)	Two-year College (N=18)	Under 2,000 (N=35)	2,000– 5,999 (N=41)	6,000 or more (N=39)
FY 09 (actual)								
Significant	22%	26%	18%	30%	22%	23%	20%	31%
Some	37%	32%	45%	30%	39%	29%	37%	38%
Very little	26%	21%	28%	27%	22%	29%	29%	23%
None	14%	21%	10%	12%	17%	20%	15%	8%
FY 10 (anticipated)								
Significant	35%	35%	38%	24%	56%	17%	49%	33%
Some	32%	29%	35%	39%	17%	34%	22%	46%
Very little	23%	24%	20%	30%	11%	37%	20%	18%
None	7%	12%	5%	3%	11%	9%	7%	3%
Don't know	1%	-	-	3%	6%	3%	-	-

Observations of an Expert Witness

As Lipman Hearne's COO and director of the firm's research practice, Donna Van De Water has conducted hundreds of quantitative and qualitative research studies with our higher education clients—personally moderating more than 1,500 online and in-person focus groups. She holds a Ph.D. in psychology from Loyola University, Chicago, where she taught for 10 years, and an M.B.A. from Northwestern's Kellogg School of Management, where she taught research methods in marketing. Given her vast experience, we asked her to weigh in on higher education marketing, trends in research, and the general state of the art.

Q: You spend time on a lot of different college campuses—what are the hot-button issues you're hearing about in marketing communications departments?

A: I'm hearing more and more questions about what other institutions are spending, and what are the best practices, which is why we're doing this study again.

People also really want to know what kids are reading and how they spend their free time—what is capturing their attention. They're trying to figure out what kinds of communications should move from print to the web. And they're wondering what kind of language to use.

They're asking, "Should we use a student voice or our own voice?"

Q: What is the answer to that?

A: Students tend to say that they want to hear the university's voice. Students know if they're being talked down to, or if their own voices are being mimicked. That said, they still do want to hear a student's perspective. So an institution

needs to know what its own voice is, yet also allow students to represent the authentic student voice. Alumni want to hear a range of voices: faculty, students, other alumni, and the university's. They understand and appreciate the complexity of the institution and welcome the various perspectives.

Q: Do students take social-media communications seriously?

A: I'm not sure that we have a handle on that yet. We're seeing that alumni appreciate the way social media helps keep their affinity groups connected, but we still don't know if prospective students are taking it seriously. They use it to connect with people, but will they



use it to connect with an institution? We know there are opportunities to use social media effectively—for example, it's a great way to connect with incoming freshmen and send out emergency messages to the campus community. But for communication of general, everyday information? We don't know yet.

Q: How do you think higher-ed marketing has changed in the last five years? The last ten years?

A: In the last five years there's been a much greater interest in proof, in validation, and in testing: Marketers need to be able to show that their investments are going to have a payoff—whether it's in increasing enrollments, a higher profile, more alumni engagement, better positioning, etc.

I would say the biggest change over ten years is in the way we do research. More research is conducted online, which is a passive approach, meaning that we have to work much harder to ensure our samples are representative of the underlying population we are studying. But a positive change is that online groups and surveys can be more engaging and more flexible—though not necessarily less expensive.

Interestingly, in the research world, there's been a lot of conversation recently about the resurrection of mail surveys, which have almost entirely gone away. Over the years, we've watched the practice move to telephone, and then to online. But now there's some discussion that mail surveys might be a way to break through and get attention.

Q: Do institutions believe their marketing is working?

A: Marketing is very complex. It's not just what's on a website, in an ad, or what your campus looks like. It's all the interactions you have with people, at every touchpoint along the way throughout the constituent lifecycle. It's hard to determine exactly what brought in that student or that donor. That's where research comes in: You have to find out when and how people learned about an institution, what softened them up, and what motivated them to take action. There needs to be tracking and follow up. Sometimes institutions are afraid to ask these questions because they don't want to get bad news. But having the metrics helps an institution understand where it sits relative to competitors, how to better manage reputation, how to shape messages, and how to get those messages out.

Q: What's the biggest thing you've learned after ten years and five waves conducting this survey?

A: I'm struck by the fact that what works for one institution doesn't necessarily work for another. Of course there are variabilities between types and sizes of institutions, but there are also significant differences within groups. Every institution has to calibrate its marketing and communications to their market's needs, the relative strength of their brand, and the bottom-line needs of the institution. So while it's important to compare yourself to other institutions, you still have to know your own institution and audiences very well. This is why we do rigorous intake in our work—we need to help institutions understand what their drivers are, what they stand for, and how their communications reflect that in the world.



KEY INSIGHTS

A research white paper

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