Marketing Graduate Programs at Marietta College

Master of Corporate Media

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Marietta College has been offering graduate programs for nearly three decades, and has experienced minimal growth. Helping in the advancement and the development of a quality image for Marietta College's new graduate programs and its more established programs is important to the College financially and strategically as the officials hope to attract high-level faculty and students. Marietta has added three graduate-level programs since 2002, an increase of 60 percent. This project does not include one of the newer disciplines — the highly successful Physician Assistant Studies Program — because it does not need any advancement from a marketing/promotional campaign. In fact, the program uses a national recruiting service that screens 200 to 250 prospective students vying for 20 openings each fall. In this study, I discovered more information on better and more efficient ways to market two newer programs — Master of Arts in Psychology and Master of Corporate Media — and the two established programs — Master of Arts in Liberal Learning and Master of Arts in Education.

To understand these programs better, it is important to know some history of the graduate programs at Marietta College. In the fall of 1995, Marietta College had 59 graduate students (42 in MA Education and 17 in MA Liberal Learning).
The highest number of graduate students peaked at 85 in the fall of 2002 (61 MA Education and 24 MA Liberal Learning). However, in the first year of the MA Psychology and Corporate Media programs, the number of graduate students at Marietta College grew by one student, a 1.17 percent increase, in the fall of 2003. The newer programs accounted for four students in Psychology and three in Corporate Media), or 12 percent of the entire graduate school enrollment in the fall. While the initial growth was less than expected, the small increase can be directly attributed to a late start in marketing the new programs as Marietta College officials awaited for accreditation from the Higher Learning Commission and the Ohio Board of Regents. The approval did not come until early May 2003, so the only marketing effort that occurred was a direct mail campaign for the Corporate Media program. The Office of Graduate Programs contacted Marietta College alums in Ohio who had graduated in the past five years and 2003 journalism graduates from Ohio University, located about 45 minutes from Marietta in Athens.

Both of these efforts happened late in the summer of 2003 after an organizational meeting between the program’s co-chairs, the provost, the director of graduate programs and director of college relations (which is me). The mailing to Marietta College graduates netted two students in the fall, while the third student to enroll is a College employee who is receiving tuition remission (which is also me). Only two of the original three students remained after the first semester and both are on track to graduate in May 2005.
The marketing effort improved for Corporate Media during the 2003-04 school year, including an advertisement in *Ohio Magazine*, additional open houses and a poster promoting the program to colleges and universities around Ohio. The promotional effort helped attract seven new students, while five others were recruited by Marietta College’s admission counselor in China – whose main priority is to recruit undergraduates. There was a growth of 10 students, or 333 percent increase in the fall (a total of 13 new students), but four of the new students either dropped the program or transferred to a different program. Only one student joined the program in the spring of 2005 — another college employee receiving tuition remission. Some college officials would like to see the program grow through a stronger marketing effort to three target groups: Marietta College undergraduates, local professionals seeking a graduate degree and regional undergraduates who are acquiring their bachelor’s degree at another institution. Some efforts are being made to increase the application pool, especially with Marietta’s current undergraduate students.

Marietta’s psychology graduate program grew from four students in 2003 to nine new students in 2004 — a growth of 125 percent. Part of its growth is a direct correlation with the program’s 4+1 component, which allows current Marietta undergraduates to apply during their junior year and start working toward their master’s degree during their senior year. Therefore, it takes some students five years to complete both their bachelor’s and master’s degrees. This can be appealing to a prospective student, as many other programs require six or more years to complete both degrees. Three of the new fall 2004 admits were
part of the 4+1 program; however, one student did not return for the spring 2005 semester. The psychology program, with the help of the Director of Graduate Programs and Continuing Education and Marietta’s College Relations office, has started to increase marketing of the program through paid advertisements in *The Marietta Times, Parkersburg News & Sentinel* and *The Post*, Ohio University’s student newspaper.

Marietta’s Master of Arts in Education program is a success story. This graduate degree program has been the most popular at the college since 1995 with an average of 48 students each fall semester. The highest enrollment was 61 in the fall of 2002. According to Cathy Brown, Director of Graduate Programs and Continuing Education at Marietta College, enrollment in this program remains consistent because area elementary, middle and high school teachers have to meet certain academic requirements to retain their teaching licenses. Therefore, Marietta College benefits from a market that must continue its education. However, one serious threat to the program’s success has been identified by College officials — cheaper, but what many consider less prestigious, opportunities to earn a Master of Arts in Education from Muskingum College in New Concord and through Washington State Community College in Marietta. The College has implemented a small-scale marketing effort that has included newspaper advertising promoting Marietta’s quality and tradition of offering the education degree. The fall 2004 class remained strong with 51 students.
The MALL program’s numbers have fluctuated during the same nine-year period with an average of 19 students each fall and the highest enrollment at 25 in the fall of 2004 (there were also 24 in both 2002 and 2003); however, that number dropped to 20 in the spring. According to Brown, increasing the enrollment in the MALL program could be difficult because of the addition of Corporate Media and Psychology. While there are only two years of data for the two newer programs, Brown is optimistic that the fall 2005 enrollments have the potential to grow like they did after the first year of MA Psychology and Corporate Media. As of early March 2005, the psychology program has four completed applications for full-time students. That number will grow after current Marietta College juniors apply for the 4+1 program. The corporate media program has six completed applications, and Brown expects that to grow as 2005 graduates begin to apply in early summer. Still, it is vital for the College to build a brand and reputation for these programs to both increase enrollment and the possibility of adding additional graduate programs.

**Review of Literature**

There is a limited amount of research on the topic of marketing graduate programs in scholarly journals; therefore, my research will also include new product promotions to help offer more insight into the possibilities of marketing Marietta College’s new graduate programs. Some researchers have investigated the implications of different marketing programs aimed at attracting graduate students, the impact of using Internet enhancements on graduate school Web pages and building relationships with businesses to develop a student base. To
simplify this, a key to developing and maintaining a strong graduate program means knowing your market (Nelson 99). Since many organizations are trying to reach potential students — including the Marietta College market — with their message and the organizations have developed different ways to deliver the message, there is an incoherence taking place among those receiving the messages (Schultz, Tannenbaum & Lauterborn 29). Another problem is marketers are distributing their message through numerous media, so many of the communication efforts do not reach the intended audience or get lost in the system (Schultz, Tannenbaum & Lauterborn 29). It is also important for colleges to reshape their theories and ideas about their programs to create value and maintain a spirited edge over competitors (Jongbloed 413). These ideas can be intimidating and challenging for those in academia. Viewing a potential student as a customer can be considered “negative,” but it is important to find ways to reach “customers” and persuade them of the personal and professional value associated with continuing their education (Sefl and Snell 102).

Within the next few years marketing managers must accept that they will face circumstances characterized by bigger threats and ambiguity in making decisions (Lazer & Shaw 71). However, a potential obstacle may be the marketing expert, or Director of College Relations, on campus. This person may consider himself or herself innovative, but after further examination they are usually stuck in a pattern (Schultz, Tannenbaum & Lauterborn 158). Resistance to change is common, but it is a problem, so there are three issues that must be determined before a marketing concept will be useful — 1. Marketing planning
systems and basic marketing thinking, 2. Organizational structures, 3. Capabilities and control (Schultz, Tannenbaum & Lauterborn 158). It is important to stay ahead of trends, especially the current development in places like business schools that are experiencing a second consecutive year of lower applications for graduate school, according to the Graduate Management Admission Council (Angelo 22).

Planning a marketing campaign begins with understanding an organization's place in the marketplace and ends with details such as the wording for a brochure or pamphlet. Businesses are usually excited to increase the number of clients they have and disseminate information about their products and services, but many realize this can be a costly venture. Successful marketing campaigns can take many forms, but one with a proven track record in higher education involves five strategies — 1. Focus on the product; 2. Focus on strategic goals that are well defined and long-term in scope; 3. Make critical decisions on a sound, empirical basis; 4. Integrate everything; 5. Commit for the long haul (Hesel B9). However, there are cost-effective ways to obtain high-impact marketing, such as talking to clients, creatively packaging the campaign, developing the public relations, leveraging existing relationships, and positioning e-mail marketing (LaPlante-Dube). Each of these can be done on a limited budget, especially by using the College’s in-house public relations department. For example, the College currently does e-mail marketing to undergraduate students by targeting prospective students' wants (e.g.: potential major, clubs, organizations). E-mail allows an organization to funnel traffic to a Web site, reach
a broad population and stay in frequent contact (LaPlante-Dube). It takes more
time and creativity to develop an economical marketing plan, but some
successful techniques involve the use of Web sites, public relations, contests,
publishing, and networking (Davis).

While these suggestions are valuable, it is important to avoid falling into
typical marketing pitfalls. Three ordinary marketing mistakes are 1) selecting a
pinch of this, a pinch of that, 2) tossing out the rule book, and 3) focusing only on
what’s happening inside your business (Gordon). The pinch rule happens when a
business or entrepreneur has big aspirations, but a small budget. Trying to do a
little of everything yields advertising in multiple magazines, newspapers and Web
sites with a minimal presence in all areas because of costs (Gordon). This is a
waste, so to maximize the results, narrow the media choices and consistently run
bigger ads (Gordon). The rulebook theory means proven marketing techniques
should not be thrown away for some “outside the box” idea.

Existing literature demonstrates that the Internet has had an impact on
marketing almost every product and service in the world, including graduate
programs. The demographics of the Internet user are interesting to say the least.
According to research completed in 1998, here is a snapshot of the Internet user
(Bishop 89):

• About 60 million people in the U.S., age 16 or older (30 percent of
  the population), have access to the Internet;

• 70 percent of those using the Internet in the U.S. log on mainly
  from home;
• Around 45 percent of Internet users access the Web from their workplace at some time;
• 40 percent of Internet users are female;
• Close to 35 percent of online users in the U.S. have incomes between $50,000 and $60,000;
• Almost 60 percent of Internet users are between the ages of 35 and 54.

Digital marketing is a different arena and allows public relations departments to think more creatively because it is different from traditional marketing in four ways — (1) digital marketing is spatial, not linear; (2) digital promotions are generally non-intrusive; (3) digital promotions appeal more to reason than emotion; (4) a hard sell does not work in digital marketing (Bishop 16-17). While statistics are not available, according to Elizabeth Scarborough, Vice President of Strategic Marketing at Carnegie Communication LLC, who specializes in higher-education marketing, the single largest increase in terms of the overall investment an institution has made in marketing is on the Internet (Parmar 13). Why has this happened? Because the number of young, Internet-savvy prospective graduate students using the World Wide Web to search for graduate programs increases every year (Parmar 13). A key to growing a college or university’s graduate programs is to know the market, and that market is turning more and more to the Internet (Nelson 99). This is happening because an organization that is using the Web is making a bigger global reach without the barriers of location (Bandyopadhyay 17). It is also important to note that using
online promotion tools are cheaper than conventional marketing techniques (Bishop 14).

According to Carnegie Communications, which carried out an online survey on electronic communication trends in 2001, colleges and universities allocate close to 32 percent of their recruiting budget to their Web site because they consider the Internet the most vital device in the college search process (Klein 29). Currently, Marietta College uses the Internet to market to potential undergraduate students. Marietta’s new Web site, unveiled in August of 2004, was modeled on existing undergraduate brochures, and enhances the content by including more information about majors and campus organizations that did not fit into the printed materials. Because the Internet’s credibility as a source of information continues to improve (Bandyopadhyay 18), Marietta College’s Department of Graduate Programs must consider alternative ways to promote its programs online. While brochures and college fairs are important, enhancing the online options should receive higher priority because the Internet is a student’s first impression of a specific college or university (Klein 29).

Since marketing through the Internet is generally not intrusive, an organization must attract clients by offering superior content that cannot be found anywhere else (Bishop 23). A major step in achieving this goal was accomplished through the redesigned Web site with changes that included more detailed program descriptions, possible career enhancements from the degrees, and potential courses. Another addition made by Marietta College in November of 2004 was an online form that allows potential students to request more
information about a specific master’s program from the Office of Graduate Programs. The success of this change will not be known for at least a year, but on the first day it went live, the College received three requests, and as of March 7, 2005, a total of 96 online requests were submitted (51 physician assistant, 13 education, 12 psychology, nine liberal learning, nine corporate media and two for all five programs). This new function did not cost Marietta College any extra money, which is normal for the Internet as its costs are lower than other marketing efforts and allows more businesses to participate in electronic commerce (Bandyopadhyay 19). The information gathered from this online form can help the College market the programs and also build a relationship with the potential students (Strauss 267).

There are three marketing functions that can be performed with the Internet — provide business and product-related information, conduct transactions and allow customers to reserve products with delivery by traditional mail or courier service, and conduct transactions and provide physical delivery of products (Van den Poel and Leunis 251). Another way of looking at it is to make sure you offer something useful: to think of digital marketing as public relations (not advertising), make the content comprehensive, make life easier, faster or less expensive, and improve customer service (Bishop 24-25).

Marietta College joined the World Wide Web in the mid-1990s and it was not until the late 1990s that the College fully embraced its potential. The College is still developing a digital marketing program, but it is crucial to continually change and improve the information Marietta is providing potential graduate
students through regular updates to the Web site or with relevant e-mail communication (Bishop 28). Besides making a long-term commitment, it is also important to develop a vision and have patience (Bishop 29).

Making a marketing transition to the Internet has obstacles. For example, there are multiple target audiences with widely divergent needs (Parmar 13). While using the Internet is important, it is also vital to incorporate traditional mediums to promote their program. Consistent advertising in newspapers, magazines, radio, and television helps establish customer awareness of Internet-based marketing programs (Bishop 192). These traditional marketing outlets still reach the target populations better, so advertising with them further reduces the search efforts of prospects (Bandyopadhyay 20).

While it is important to have a clear message, it is also vital to remember that good communication — and good selling — is personal (Schultz, Tannenbaum & Lauterborn 65). Marietta College officials have developed a concise message for prospective students on the Web site, through recruiting brochures and a DVD. However, those are simply starting points to attracting the student. Once a follow-up contact is made by the prospect it is important for those in charge to learn as much about each customer as possible and tailor future marketing efforts to their personal needs (Schultz, Tannenbaum & Lauterborn 65). Another challenge is that graduate students’ needs are constantly changing as the economy and world both change. Keeping track of these interests in different fields can be challenging, but there are services available. Marietta College officials must note that it is marketing their graduate
programs to a group that is known as the visual generation. They were reared on television, movies, speeches, MTV and the spoken word, so the education priority is on jingles, icons and photographs (Schultz, Tannenbaum & Lauterborn 19).

Today’s marketing experts retain a good level of control over what their prospects hear or learn about their product through paid and non-paid media placements (Schultz, Tannenbaum & Lauterborn 38). In recent studies, psychology has become the biggest interest, topping even business and M.B.A. programs (Goral 55). This is good news for Marietta College’s new psychology program, and presents marketing opportunities. However, it is important to note that students are becoming more demanding consumers — they want good content and good delivery, and their expectations of a graduate education continues to rise (Goral 55). Probably the biggest challenge in this battle is the competition from for-profit institutions. While non-profit institutions usually look down on these for-profit institutions, consumers see them as an affordable and accommodating option (Goral 56). Therefore, non-profit institutions must consider scaling their programs nationally to compete if it can keep the quality of its education intact (Goral 56). Maintaining an edge with this population is not easy. They are consumers who are either too busy or too bored to listen to the message or marketing effort purporting the quality of something like a new master’s program (Schultz, Tannenbaum & Lauterborn 96).

Another place that colleges and universities are bulking up their graduate programs is through corporate partnerships. The days when companies freely
funded tuition-assistance programs are quickly ending; however, corporations are aligning themselves with colleges that can meet their needs for high-quality management education (Meister 52). There are five dimensions to a successful partnership: shared vision, flexibility, account management, marketing and communication, and management buy-in for metrics (Meister 53). So an institution such as Marietta College must rebuild and reconnect with local industries, and also investigate the potential with large companies within a 90-mile radius of campus. However, more research is needed in the area of marketing and promoting graduate programs, especially when it comes to successful campaigns for new programs.

The Research

There is not a lot of academic research on marketing graduate programs, especially when compared to marketing undergraduate degrees. However, Marietta College has a number of people with opinions on the topic. I met with Provost Sue DeWine, the directors of each program (excluding physician assistant) and Cathy Brown, Director of Graduate Programs and Continuing Education. These individual meetings helped develop the strategy that was needed to improve the marketing effort.

While many areas were identified as needing help, there were three areas that became abundantly clear required immediate attention: develop a consistent look for the graduate program brochures, produce a DVD that prospective students could watch at graduate fairs and open houses, and improve the content for graduate programs on Marietta College’s Web site.
I concentrated on the brochures first so I could spend time researching and developing a tone and appearance. It was important that they have a consistent look, but also have the flexibility to be independent of each other. I began the research by requesting graduate pamphlets from more than 50 other colleges and universities. These ranged in size, shape and number of pages, and also included an array of disciplines from MBA programs and law schools to liberal arts programs and journalism schools. By compiling these brochures, I was able to formulate an opinion on what I thought would work for Marietta College. It was also important to seek out other opinions, so I met with the College’s Art Director, Ryan Zundell, and Cathy Brown, and conducted a focus group with a Communications class that was made up of juniors and seniors at Marietta.

Both meetings and the focus group were integral in the overall development of the brochures. The size and tone of the brochures were upgraded from the existing materials. Many factors were considered, but none was more important than cost. Each graduate program had limited funding for the project so it was important to keep the price tag for the job as reasonable as possible. Therefore, the final decision was to go with a four-page, four-color brochure for each graduate program. The final cost was approximately $400 per program.

While I had begun reading the current brochures and had some preliminary discussions with each of the program directors, I wanted to include some student opinions before I worked out too many of the details for the
brochures. That is when I decided to do a focus group in the fall of 2004. I learned a number of techniques for conducting focus groups during the MCM 503 course, Internal Organizational Consultation with Dr. Liane Gray-Starner, in the spring of 2004. The class was a diverse mix of gender, race and age, and more than 75 percent of those in attendance that night said they were considering attending graduate school or had begun researching graduate programs. Not all of the discussion focused solely on graduate brochures, but a majority of the session was spent on this topic. I started the evening by breaking the class into two groups, and gave each group 20 different graduate brochures to peruse from small colleges and large universities. Their directions were to simply look over each brochure and identify what they liked and did not like about each. They had 25 minutes to look over brochures, and then the groups swapped and looked at the other 20 brochures.

The groups’ responses were varied, and provided valuable information for my research, but it was also important to use this data for informational purposes only, and not as scientific data. So I evaluated the information to see how it impacted the development of the brochures. One important factor that was repeated by almost every student in the group was that a brochure is not going to be the deciding factor in choosing a program; however, it could help someone narrow down a list of choices. Most potential graduate students start their search with the Internet, so many in the focus group said Marietta College should concentrate on developing the graduate program area of the Web site.
However, the groups’ charge was to provide feedback on brochures so they spent a majority of time providing information on how Marietta could change the image of their graduate programs through these new printed materials. Several important themes came to the forefront during the two-hour focus group:

- Brochures must prove to a student why spending so much money is going to be a benefit to them in the future.
- Quality is important. Brochures must be color, easy to read and easy to open. If it looks cheap or is difficult to read it will be discarded. When referring to easy to read, a couple of students noted that the choice of font and the point size of the text are important to consider since it could be an older audience who are reading the brochures.
- Photos must connect with a more “adult” audience, so the subjects should be mature-looking people. Many students agreed that “pretty” people help sell, so it is acceptable to use models if you do not want to use real students.
- The brochure cannot provide too many details for a prospective student. Students agreed that they want course listings, what their average day would be like, difference between being a full-time and part-time student, and it must include an application (which Marietta does include in the mailing, but not as part of the brochure).

Since some key Marietta College officials believed it was significant to develop new and more innovative brochures — and spend a considerable amount of money — it was also important to learn how valuable a brochure was to the focus group. Age was a factor as the oldest student was 22 years old, but
there was an obvious opinion that brochures and view books still have a place when recruiting a student to campus. One student noted, “a brochure shows that the college or university has an interest in having you as a student and that (the institution) feels its program has real value.” Another student said he/she felt the brochures would be more effective for more mature students, but that a letter from the program’s director would give a personal touch that would appeal to a younger student who is looking to go to graduate school straight from an undergraduate program. Another group of students felt someone who has never been to Marietta College before would appreciate the brochures more, and it could serve as a snapshot of the College.

The focus group was just a small amount of research, so I followed up by sharing my findings with Cathy Brown. We used some of the information in conjunction with elements that we found appealing in the brochures from other institutions. We combined all of the information, with a limited budget, to develop a concept for a four-page, full-color brochure. We informed each of the program directors of our intent and everyone agreed with the concept, except the Physician Assistant Program. While they were concerned with cost at first, they have since agreed to print a new brochure that matches the other four programs. Next, I met with Ryan Zundell and we wrote and designed the brochure for all five programs. There were some minor revisions made by each department chair and Brown, but the original concept was a popular choice.

Before I conducted a focus group and before I had any idea of how I wanted to approach the brochures, I decided to investigate what other colleges
and universities had done recently. So I went online to see if I could request a 
brochure or more information. To my surprise it was not always easy to find a 
“Request Information” link and many sites did not have a request form. Out of the 
85 Web sites that I visited, only 43 had a form that I could find. This led me to 
add our own link, which has been successful. I received brochures, applications, 
letters and much more from the 43 colleges and universities that I requested 
information from. While all of them were more elaborate than what we could 
produce at Marietta College — mainly because of the expense — the information 
was valuable. It was interesting to see how many of the institutions continued to 
follow up with letters and e-mails after the initial contact. As of March 14, 2005, 
only four colleges continue to contact me through the mail or e-mail. The most 
recent e-mail I received was from the University of Colorado’s Leeds School of 
Business. In an HTML e-mail, the Director of MBA Admission and Marketing sent 
a letter about some current students who recently won a national business 
competition.

It was also clear that the program directors and the provost wanted a 
classy and professional DVD produced on the graduate programs, so I made this 
my class project in MCM 502 with Prof. Marilee Morrow. With her assistance, and 
classmate Debra Goins, I produced a 10-minute video promoting all five of 
Marietta’s graduate programs. This was gratifying because neither Debra nor I 
had ever used a digital video camera or the computer software, Final Cut Pro, 
before entering this class. We had to learn how to use the equipment before
tackling the challenge of producing the video. Then we researched similar videos and brainstormed after class to establish a storyline for the video.

We decided to mix interviews with students, professors, the provost and the director of the graduate programs with video from actual classes and study groups on campus. We spent more than four weeks conducting interviews and setting up shots from classes and around campus. Next we transferred our video to the computer where we began editing it and producing our first video. This took about four more weeks to fine tune and track down more video to fill in some gaps. At this point we had a solid video, but Debra and I believed something was missing — music to tie it all together. Dr. Daniel Monek of the Marietta College Music Department agreed to digitally tape the concert choir singing the alma mater. This was the perfect final touch to the video. We unveiled the DVD at a special showing in the Mass Media Department at the end of the semester, and those in attendance praised our work.

Conclusion

The research, meetings, and the development of new brochures and a DVD for Marietta College's graduate programs is a step in the right direction. This project has created a consistent look and tone for the programs that did not exist before. The Graduate Program officials are already using the new materials to attract students through mailings, open houses, and job fairs. Nevertheless, it is important to maintain the quality and timeliness of the materials that have been created this year, and to continue enhancing other products and creating new ways to attract students to the five graduate programs. For example, the
professors who teach in these programs have a wide array of knowledge and skills and could be sought as guest speakers at local civic organizations, or they could assist Cathy Brown at open houses. Utilizing the power of the Internet is also going to remain an important marketing function of the graduate programs. It would be advantageous to consider modeling some of the online recruiting techniques that are used by undergraduate admission offices around the nation, or even those at larger graduate programs (e.g.: admission officer just for graduate school).

As online courses continue to grow in popularity, Marietta College officials must also consider making this an option for its graduate programs, or adding a graduate degree that can be obtained through the Internet only. This type of degree has been discussed before through the Leadership program, and it is a conversation that should be reopened to continue the growth and evolution of graduate programs at Marietta College. If these changes are made, this will lead to another round of marketing enhancements that are not included in this project.
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