

# Bringing marketing to the **school boardroom**



# A seat at the table

For most Australian schools and colleges, their brand is one of their most significant assets. This means that marketing decisions are almost always at odds with a multitude of other, more obvious demands on the organisation's meagre cash resources. Decisions become harder when the cash invested in marketing would otherwise be used to further the organisation's primary objectives.

How often – and how effectively – do strategic marketing decisions get examined rigorously in the boardroom?

If your brand truly is your most valuable asset, then decisions about marketing and brand investments do indeed belong in the boardroom.

The burning question is how to do it. How is it possible to discuss and decide branding and marketing issues without 'crossing the line' and becoming involved in tactical and operational decisions that are the domain of staff? Is it possible to have a fact-based marketing discussion with all the rigour usually applied to financial decisions?

I believe so. The key is being able to ask the right questions. The right questions are almost always not operational questions ... they are strategic questions.

# What is this thing called marketing?

For the purposes of this paper let me make a few definitions. You may be used to different terminology for similar concepts or audiences, but just for the next few pages, let's be sure we are talking a common language. The labels are not as important as the groupings or concepts they represent.

## **Stakeholders**

**Owners** are the moral or legal owners of the organisation. You can think of this group as the shareholders in a company because in the end they want to receive a dividend ... except that your dividend is not expressed as cents per share but rather in successful progress toward fulfilment of the organisation's mission.

**Customers** are the parents who pay fees for their child's education and help to achieve your mission. They are customers in the sense that they want something in return for their investment. You can think of this group as a shopper in a retail mall ... so many choices ... which choice will best satisfy their needs? All customers have needs.

**Beneficiaries** are the people who will benefit from the mission of the school or college. Beneficiaries are most probably students, but could also be churches and the wider community.

To deliver value to your beneficiaries and owners, first you must deliver value to your customers. To deliver value to customers you must engage in the process of attracting new customers and then keeping them.

## **Marketing**

The role of marketing is to bring knowledge and discipline to the task of developing and delivering products of value to clients in a profitable manner.

To achieve this goal, marketing can be broken down into four key roles:

Getting close to the customer to understand their needs and how you can deliver value to them.

Creating products or services that fulfil the needs expressed by the customers while at the same time being profitable (i.e. delivering your mission).

Communicating the offer to clients in a cost effective manner.

Attracting new customers, retaining existing customers, growing the share of the market and the size of the total market.

To succeed in these four key roles requires that your organisational strategy, marketing strategy, culture, staff and messaging are in alignment. If they are not, ensuring alignment should be the first priority of the board.

Marketing is not a department, team or specialised function. It should be viewed by the board as a 'whole of business' discipline.

## Brands

The concept of an organisation's brand is probably the most misunderstood of all marketing terms.

Quite simply, your brand is everything.

By brand, I don't mean your name, your logo or your advertising. That's not your brand. That's how you try and tell the story of your brand.

Your brand is, in essence, the school's story. It is who you are, what you promise, and your ability to deliver on that promise.

An organisation does not own its brand. Your brand is owned by your customers and anyone else who has an impression of your school or college. Your brand resides in the minds of your customers.

When an organisation knows its story and what's really important it develops an organisation-wide sense of purpose and identity. Decision-making becomes easier and endlessly more efficient. A well-established and articulated brand is a wonderful compass that always points true north.

Customers believe that they can get pretty much the same thing, just as good, for a similar or lower price, from your competition. And they are exactly right.

All schools are commodities until they do something to change the customer's perception of their organisation.

Organisations must transcend commodity and, if they are really good, defy comparison.

Your brand is the means to transcend commodity and become a category of one – the only credible alternative – in the eyes of your customer.

Transcending commodity is achieved by creating a difference with customers through their experience of what it's like to 'do business' with you. This is rarely achieved with a product or technology alone. It's almost always most effectively done with people.

The price of entry into the education sector today is that you must have a quality product and offer good service at a competitive price. That's just the beginning. Then the real competition starts for the support of your customers.

The first step in transcending commodity is to recognise that the marketplace sees you as a commodity. That is your board's starting point. Don't fight that idea.

To avoid the commodity trap means finding points of genuine differentiation. It will mean going beyond the expected factors of price, quality and service because education customers are looking for value. They are looking for a way to solve problems or create opportunities. No matter what the customer says, price is never the only consideration. The value always has and always will be the primary buying factor.

Your brand is whoever your customers think you are, whatever they think is your promise to them, and whether or not they believe that you keep that promise.

Your brand is everything.

What 'brand power' does is get your organisation on their short list.

It's not the job of marketing, advertising or public relations to create your brand. They have a hand in it, but their job is to tell the story of your brand.

It is the job of everyone in the organisation to create the brand with the quality of how they do their work every day. Brand is created by every single employee, student and volunteer in the organisation.

It follows then that inconsistency is the great brand killer.

The role and influence of a brand reaches across your entire organisation – from the first contact through to delivery to the beneficiary – and an impression of the brand is built in the marketplace.

At the point of a purchase decision, all the values and equity in a brand come into play. It is the moment of truth for brand planning and investment, and why boards must create an environment where their brand is understood, protected and nurtured.

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# The responsibilities of board members

The role of the board can be considered in many ways, but essentially it exists to carry on the business of the organisation.

According to Sir Adrian Cadbury in his report on the Financial Aspects of Corporate Governance, the board performs the following functions.

- **Strategic direction:** participate with management in setting policies, goals, strategies and performance targets. This includes marketing.
- **Resources:** make available to management the resources (money, management, manpower and materials) to achieve the strategic plan. This includes marketing.
- **Performance:** monitor the organisation's performance against its strategies and targets. This includes marketing.
- **Compliance:** ensure there are adequate processes in place to comply with legal requirements. This includes marketing.
- **Risk:** set the organisation's risk appetite and ensure that the exposure to risks are clearly identified and processes are in place to manage those risks. This includes marketing.
- **Accountability to shareholders:** report progress to shareholders as their appointed representatives. This includes marketing.

## Strategic marketing questions

The strategic questions outlined in this paper are suggested with two simple intentions. First, they focus on how to execute your marketing communications strategy, not how to formulate it. Secondly they are designed to test strategies and expose deficiencies and force sharper thinking.















# Useful reading

- *Selling the Invisible*, Harry Beckwith
- *Becoming a Category of One*, Joe Calloway
- *Lead Generation for the Complex Sale*, Brian J Carroll
- *Influence*, Robert Cialdini
- *Purple Cow*, Seth Godin
- *Made to Stick*, Chip and Dan Heath
- *My Life in Advertising*, Claude C Hopkins
- *Scientific Advertising*, Claude C Hopkins
- *Blue Ocean Strategy*, Chan Kim & Renee Mauborgne
- *In Search of Excellence*, Tom Peters & Robert Waterman
- *Why Don't People Listen*, Hugh Mackay
- *Neuromarketing*, Patrick Renvoise & Christophe Morin
- *22 Immutable Laws of Branding*, Al Ries & Laura Ries
- *Positioning for Professionals*, Tim Williams





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