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HOW TO PERFORM A COMPETITIVE MARKETING ANALYSIS FOR YOUR SCHOOL

Competitive Marketing Analysis for Education Brands:
A Hearst Bay Area Primer

Being in business means that you want to win against your competitors in the minds of your audience. But you can't win if your offering is not differentiated.

A family with two school-aged children has recently moved to the Bay Area with the hopes of giving their kids the best education they can afford. There happens to be two great private schools nearby, both equidistant from their new home.

Which one should they choose?

If both schools appeared identical and had no differentiating brand factors, they would have no basis for how to make their decision.

As a brand in the education space, you must make decisions about positioning and value propositions that set you apart from your competitors. Doing this effectively means performing ongoing analysis of the nearby institutions that are targeting the same market segments as you are.

Competitive Analysis

Put simply, competitive analysis is just researching what your competitors are doing so that you can understand the threat they pose to your profitability. A thorough competitive marketing analysis should influence your strategy.

You may decide to go head-to-head with a competitor after discovering that they are targeting the same consumer segment with a similar program

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offering. Or if they are larger and have more advertising dollars to spend, you may decide to pivot and place your school in a market space other campuses have overlooked.

The goal of a competitive marketing analysis is to be able to position your organization distinctly in the minds of current and potential students (and parents). At the end of a competitive analysis, once you have made a decision about how to position your brand, you can check how successful you were by running a substitution test: if you dropped your organization's name into an ad for a competitor's brand, would the ad still make sense?

If so, try again.

But that's getting ahead of ourselves. Let's unwrap how to do a competitive analysis first.

Step 1: Identify Your Competitors

When identifying competitors, it is often helpful to start with the category. If you're UC Berkeley, you probably don't need to analyze Cheerios as a competitor, they are in an unrelated category and you are not competing for the same consumer dollars and probably never will be.

You should, however, be concerned about UCLA, Stanford, and General Assembly. The first two are direct competitors because they play directly in the university category.

The third is an indirect competitor because even though the classes they offer are not exactly the same (General Assembly offering online courses and skill-building workshops), they still compete for student attention and there is definite overlap with concern to fulfilling certain student needs, in this case, affordable and convenient adult education.

Another type of competition to keep in mind are your tertiary competitors. These are organizations that are not currently in direct competition with

you, but offer products or services you are considering moving your brand into, or vice versa.[1] For instance, Adobe Systems, who is already well-known for their design software, has been expanding into the e-Learning space, which some might see as an alternative to shelling out the big bucks for a University education.[2]

To make sure you aren't missing any direct or indirect competitors, try this: walk through the entire process a student makes on the enrollment journey.

Ask yourself: What do they physically see on the street when they see your institution? What comes up in their Internet searches? Where do they go to look for more information? What mood or mindset are they in? Are they alone, or with others?

Step 2: Analyze Your Competitors

SWOT ANALYSIS

	Helpful to achieving the objective	Harmful to achieving the objective
Internal origin (attributes of the organization)	Strengths	Weaknesses
External origin (attributes of the environment)	Opportunities	Threats

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A SWOT is a good place to start. This classic analysis allows you to list your own company's Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats as a benchmark. Then, you can run a similar analysis on your competitors.

While a SWOT provides a framework by which to organize your analysis, you still have to identify which categories to compare. For example, program quality, program availability, technical assistance, marketing staff, and student success resources. Pick the categories that are most relevant to your business.

Your SWOT analyses will allow you to identify points of difference and points of parity between you and your competitors. Points of difference are attributes consumers can only find in one of your competitors and do not believe they will find in your services.

For example, if a school in your region is ranked as "best in the world" by multiple high authority organizations, that ranking will be a point of difference. Many organizations will have multiple points of difference.

Points of parity include things that must be true (if you're a continuing education facility, logically, you have to offer classes for adult learners), aspects that may come across as harmful for your brand (if you have low demand for your courses, students may assume that they aren't very good), and even aspects that make your brand competitive against someone else's intended point of difference.

For instance, a community college looking to increase enrollment of undergraduate students can play off of the success of a nearby 4-year University by emphasizing the high number of students who transfer to the University after just a few years in their brochure. The student sees the opportunity to attend the University and earn that coveted degree, and also realizes that their students loans would be a lot less if opting to go to community college prior to University. This may lead them to believe that the outcome is the same (parity) while the monetary investment is far less (difference).

As you run SWOT analyses on your education organization and your competitors, you will identify parities and differences. Your goal is to differentiate your company as much as possible from other brands while maintaining points of parity that are essential to your target segments. A robust analysis will likely lead to you to different sets of parity and differences for each category you compete in.

Competitive Advantage

When you have identified your points of difference against other institutions, it's time to articulate your competitive advantage. Your competitive advantage is the sum of your points of difference and should be articulated to your potential students by your marketers.

Perceptual maps may be helpful here. A perceptual map is a chart that visually illustrates brand and product positioning from a consumer perspective.
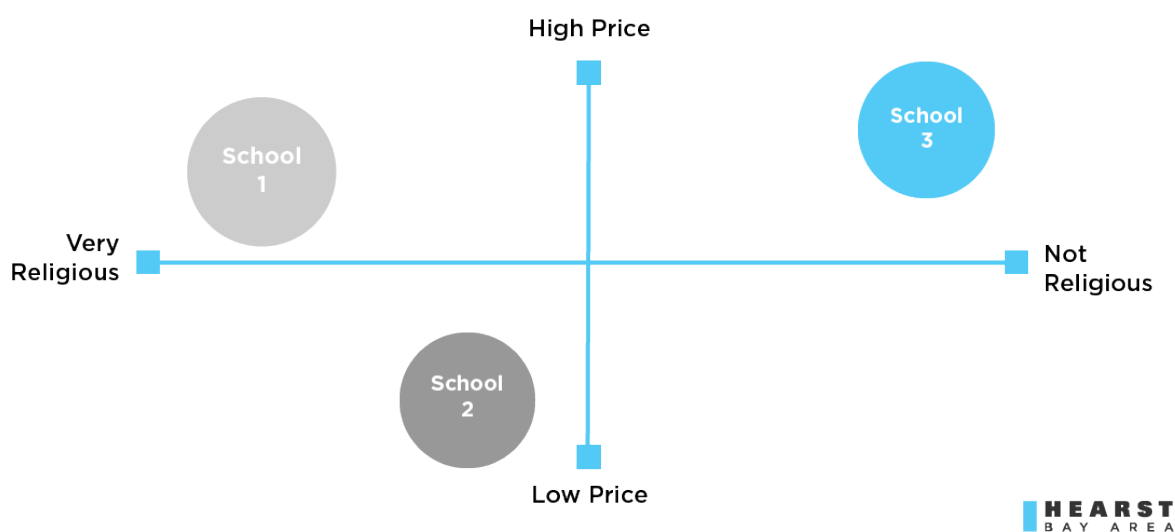
Perceptual maps are useful for the way they reveal holes in the market. In the example below, there is ample space in both the top middle and

bottom right quarters for new competitors. Or, if you have the marketing dollars and product strength, you may have a reason to believe that going head to head against one of the other brands may lead you to better results. Regardless, the perceptual map allows you to think through your choices and create a brand position that is effective in your competitive market.

Marketing Analysis Tactics

Now that we have a framework and some strategic tools for identifying and analyzing competitors, let's get into some specific tactics you'll want to use to flesh out your SWOT and perceptual maps.

One way to begin is with some basic Google work. If your competitors are remotely effective, a lot of the information you're looking for is available online with just a quick search and a few minutes on their websites. Think about it— in the case of making a decision about a private school, parents would be asking many of the same questions you would if you were in their position. Same goes for students looking for continuing education or adult learning programs. As a result, the most competitive companies are often the most transparent.

Things to look for:

• Programs / Student Services list (what are they selling)

• Pricing (how much does it cost?)

• Positioning (how are offerings represented? What is the messaging? Are they traditional, edgy, technical, religious, etc?)

• Location (where are these programs available?)

• Student journey (walk through the decision-making experience as if you are a real student or student family and note what works, and what

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doesn't work)

- Newsletters (subscribe to gain key insights about your competitors)

- Customer service (pretend like you have a question/problem. Is it easy to find an answer? Were you able to talk to a real person right away?)

- Reviews (watch out for consistent complaints, as it might be an opportunity to emphasize your strengths, as well as any other consumer insights)

- Employee satisfaction - check their Glassdoor reviews to see how happy their teachers and other faculty are. Is there an opportunity to win over some of their workers when you need to expand your work force? These insights are good to keep in your back pocket.

Take note of what your competitors are doing well, what they are doing that's different than you, and what they are doing poorly. These are strengths that could threaten you, and weaknesses you can take advantage of. But remember—just like you are at your school, your competitors are always changing and always analyzing you as well, so be as agile as you can be, and be ready to change.

## Diving Deep Via the Internet: Keywords and Long Tails

Most of the tactics mentioned above can be performed on the Internet. But that doesn't mean you've exhausted the ways the Internet can be of value to you in your competitive analysis. To take your research to the next level tactically you'll have to get into SEO.

If you're running an online school or have a significant volume of website traffic, you should already have a good sense of what keywords are valuable to you. If you don't, you can use tools like Keywords Everywhere, a free Chrome and Firefox add-on that automatically shows the search

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volume for everything you search on your sidebar. Your topics can be both your points of difference and points of parity, but as you build your online brand you will want to set a clear strategy in which you own certain keywords (when possible) and long-tail keywords.

What does that mean? If you're a community college targeting undergraduate students in the San Francisco Bay area, it's unlikely that you will be the top Google result for the search term "College." The word is too generic, and there is competition from a slew of media companies talking about sports, national college rankings, and of course, Wikipedia.
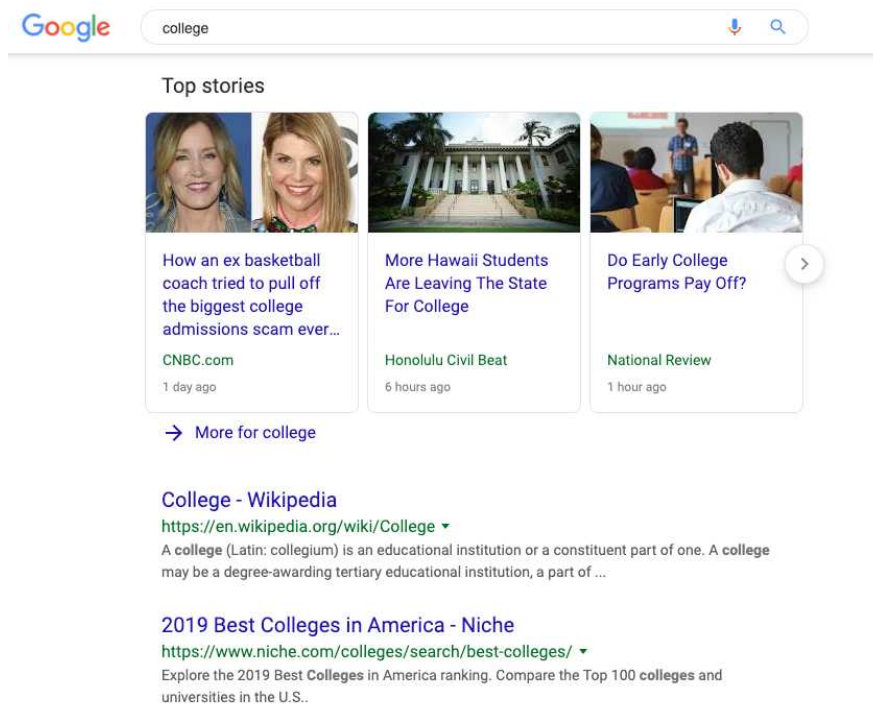

That list changes completely when you start to do long tail searches. Let's say your strategy is to build a brand that is known for their beautiful campus and on-site amenities. The long tail search phrase "best campus amenities community college San Francisco" results in a completely different list, and one that is more actionable.

Based on the long tail results, your marketing strategy might include, checking out the websites of the schools who rank for the above search

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term, and running a marketing analysis on them.

The trick to making keyword searches work for you is to be as specific as possible and to try to rank for terms and phrases that people actually search for with some volume (if nobody is searching the phrases you are ranking for, what's the point?).
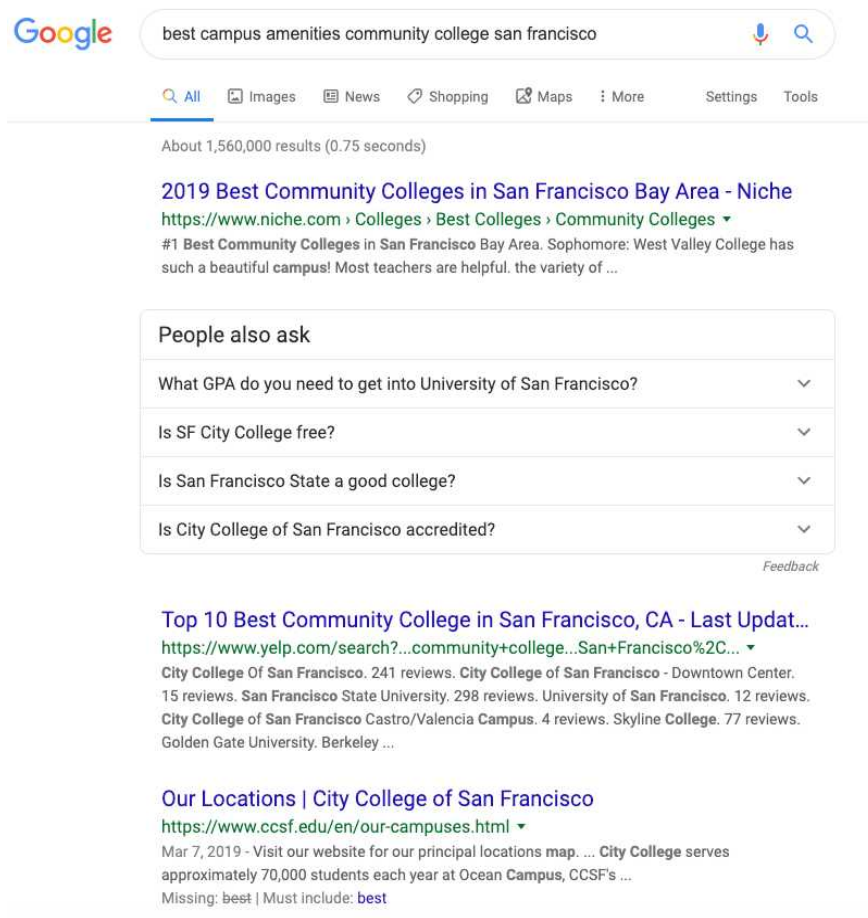
Again, keep in mind both points of difference and points of parity. You should be ranking for points of parity, but also for points of difference. For example, there are likely to be multiple facilities trying to rank for "best campus amenities community college San Francisco," but you may still want to compete there.

On the other hand, if a point of difference is that you recently hired a 5-star

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chef for your campus cafeteria, you want to be *sure* to rank for that fact.

Wrapping It All Up

Children play a game called "Marco Polo" in which the person who is "it" puts a blindfold on and stumbles around trying to find their friends by shouting "Marco," to which the rules stipulate that other players must respond "Polo!"

You can't run a successful school like a game of Marco Polo, stumbling around with your eyes closed, not sure what your competitors are doing.

This eBook laid a strategic foundation for running a competitive marketing analysis on your competitors that will allow you to rip your blindfold off and find out what they are doing.

Why? So that you can succeed in the market and win.

READY TO GIVE IT A GO?

We've created a competitive marketing analysis template for you to use to track your competitors. Click the button below to download the file.

Download Now

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SOURCES

[1]https://www.bigcommerce.com/blog/how-perform-competitive-analysis/#undefined

[2] https://blog.technavio.com/blog/top-14-companies-in-the-smart-education-and-elearning-industry

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