



Misplaced marketing

When marketing misplaces the benefits of education

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Abstract Comments on the frequent inappropriateness of marketing education. Also addresses some of the inappropriate methods of marketing schools. Considers that certain schools that are unable to attract top students are tempted to misplace marketing by focusing the attention on a school's "values" other than education, for instance after-school activities, discipline, or teachers' concerns for children's self-esteem. In college education, these benefits might include a sports team's winning record, fraternity or sorority parties and local drinking establishments. Finally, expresses dissatisfaction that many students now view graduation as job certification, not as a mark of education.

In many countries, allowing parents to choose which school their children can attend is seen as a solution to perceived problems with the quality of public education. In theory, the competition would encourage all schools to improve: the now-competing improved or innovative schools would attract more students while the poorer quality schools would lose them. Since this competition requires designing programs and selling them to parents or students to increase enrollments, educators around the world now attend special seminars and conferences to give them guidance in the marketing of education.

Attractive programs

This theory is being put into practice where school choice already exists in limited forms in the USA with "magnet" schools, in which public schools with special attractive programs can draw enrollments from across a school district. There are also some local experiments with publicly funded vouchers which could be used toward tuition at private schools. School systems in various parts of the world are testing other forms of school choice and in most developed countries inter-school "competition" for students already exists throughout higher education.

When New Zealand removed requirements for students to attend their neighborhood public schools, news stories reported general surprise that the major short-run effect was not a drive for improvement of "weaker" schools, but instead, an increase in the selectivity of those schools that were already graduating students with top test scores. But they should not have been surprised. At universities around the world, schools claim the top graduates in part because they were able to attract the top quality students for incoming freshmen. The better a school's reputation, the more selective it can be in accepting new students.

Irrelevant benefits

Those schools unable to attract top students from the outset must still seek ways to draw students from what is left. The temptation is strong to misplace marketing by focusing the attention on a school's "values" other than education, such as availability of after-school activities, the teachers' abilities to control unruly children, or teachers' concerns for children's "self-esteem". And in the fierce competition for college students, all sorts of education-irrelevant "benefits" come to the fore with various marketing plans: a sports team's winning record (Rotfeld, 1997), fraternity and sorority parties or the popularity of local drinking establishments sometimes are

presented as if they were more important than providing a high-quality education (Sowell, 1989).

This not-uncommon loss of focus on the real product of education is easy to understand. Parents hear that education increases a person's future earning potential, but they are told this without also receiving an understanding of just what it is that makes education valuable.

Buried in the dirt

In Goldstein's novel *Mazel* (1995), a brief story within the story tells of a traveling peasant who encounters a windstorm. As the peasant walked along the path afterwards, he discovered that he had gained an understanding of all mysteries of life. When he later took off his sandals to rest, the knowledge left him, only to return when he put the sandals back on. The peasant realized that his footwear was the source of his wisdom, but he did not know that the windstorm had blown a leaf from the Tree of Knowledge out of the Garden of Eden and it had become stuck to the bottom of one sandal. As happens in such stories, the King's daughter was ill and the peasant used his new wisdom to provide a cure which saved the princess's life. Discovering that a pair of sandals enabled a peasant to possess such abilities, the King exchanged half the kingdom for the footwear. But no King wants to wear dirty sandals and when cleaning the sandals, the King's servants scraped off the leaf from the Tree of Knowledge with the rest of the dirt. As a result, the footwear failed to make him a wiser or more insightful King.

He wanted the sandals, not realizing it was the dirt that carried the real value, for the leaf was buried in the dirt. In the marketing of education, faculty and administrators often are selling only the clean sandals. Admittedly, it is hard for schools to sell something as abstract as "learning", but schools often are too quick to take the easy solution and present the "benefits" of a school as things totally irrelevant to education. And as a result, many students or their parents, like the King, only want the sandals and go to great lengths to avoid all dirt, never even taking a chance on acquiring the important leaf.

Service with a smile

Once students are told to see themselves as customers for education degrees, they expect customer service with a smile (e.g. Edmondson, 1997; Trout, 1996). In the USA, a demanding math teacher in Georgia has had eggs thrown at her house after final grades are released. In Delaware, a high school teacher who failed too many students and refused to change grades as directed by the administration was fired for insubordination.

Seeing graduation as job certification, not a mark of education, students want the degree but not the education. They want to earn, not learn. Teachers are no longer seen by students as resources to tap or mentors who can provide guidance, but rather, as obstacles to overcome (e.g. Sacks, 1996). When called upon to think through a problem, some students might just reply, "I don't know. Tell me the answer". Faculty tell answers while students memorize, pass exams, get credit, and move on. To them, the learning is a distraction. Education is by contagion, if it occurs at all. Students proudly show their high grades – which in the USA are often from multiple-choice exams – as if their future careers will depend on knowing which choice to make instead of discerning which choices exist.

It was not that long ago that universities were primarily concerned with the organization and dissemination of knowledge, not the accumulation and bestowing of credit. But the course credits provide value for either students or their future employers only if it represents a developed ability to think. The marketing of education needs to keep focused on the real "product" of

an education. If it does not, the marketing effort gets misplaced and everyone loses: the schools, employers and the students, too.

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