BRANDING BSC FOR BEYOND

PUBLIC PERCEPTION: A KEY ISSUE NOW AND IN THE PAST

During Phase II: Data Gathering and Engagement, the BSC strategic planning team gathered information from stakeholders that included traditional age students, adults and alumni, among others. In many of the groups, the issue of the public perception of BSC surfaced. Some indicated they still hear people refer to BSC as the high school on the hill, or various versions on that general theme. Others expressed belief that, while people thought highly of BSC overall, they did not see BSC as a first-choice education option for themselves or for potential students in their sphere of influence. Some referred to BSC as “Plan B” -- a college of last resort if their preferred college didn’t pan out.

Research conducted in 2006 reflected more awareness issues than it did perception issues. Both qualitative and quantitative data was collected at that time and key quantitative findings indicated that familiarity with BSC was relatively low. In addition, fewer than two of every 10 respondents said BSC was their first choice among colleges. The findings did not indicate an overriding low opinion of the education BSC offers. In fact they indicated just the opposite.

Based on those quantitative findings, BSC marketing efforts were designed to enhance general awareness of and familiarity with BSC. The goals of these efforts have been to increase BSC visibility, positively influence external perceptions of BSC, and build a foundation of affinity, choice and support among key audiences. However we have not done the necessary follow-up research to determine the degree to which our efforts have succeeded. We are able to draw some conclusions from a 2009 study funded by the North Dakota University System Community College Awareness Initiative (NDUS CCAI). That research found that perceptions of community colleges in general were much more positive than anticipated. The key finding was that the biggest issue facing community colleges across the state was awareness, not perception. This finding seemingly conflicts with the qualitative findings of our strategic planning team.

In the surveys noted, as well as anecdotally and in focus groups conducted by the NDUS CCAI, respondents indicate that they believe BSC offers a quality education. However, there seems to be a lingering belief that, while good, a degree from BSC is not the first choice for themselves or for their children. The need for formal, quantitative research to verify the qualitative and anecdotal findings uncovered by the strategic planning process is apparent. It would direct future marketing and communications strategies.
A RECENT HISTORY OF MARKETING AT BSC

Between 2000 and 2005, Bismarck State College enrollment increased each year. In fall 2005, however, there was a decrease in enrollment. And while BSC had long maintained an area market share of approximately 30%, enrollment in several key areas, most notably in transfer students, was declining. While there were many possible reasons for these changes, the 2005 drop in enrollment along with concerns about maintaining BSC market share created increased recognition that a more focused approach to marketing was in order.

In 2006, to help determine next steps, a higher education marketing consulting firm was hired. Research was conducted regarding student, parent and community attitudes toward BSC. Based on the research findings, the need for a comprehensive marketing plan was identified, with the objective of increasing visibility and awareness of BSC’s offerings and enhancing public recognition of, and confidence in, the high caliber education available at BSC. Recommendations included the introduction of a traditional, targeted marketing mix to allow BSC to more completely tell its story. Newer social media options (digital and web) also were recommended.

- In 2007 marketing expanded from one half-time position to one full-time position.
- In 2008 BSC contracted with an advertising agency and established a cross-campus brand development team to coordinate development of a new logo and BSC’s brand direction. The marketing strategy was developed based on the research findings from 2006 and discovery meetings with key campus leaders as well as community and industry stakeholders.
- In 2009 the BSC “Beyond” brand was launched with the first recruitment campaign implementing the new logo and brand messaging. At the same time, as part of a NDUS initiative, BSC also implemented a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system allowing BSC to connect marketing efforts with this formalized, electronic communications plan.
- In 2010 the BSC website was converted to a content management system (CMS) and rebranded with the revised BSC brand. The BSC energy and BSC military websites also were converted to a CMS and rebranded with the revised BSC brand. Use of social media for energy, military and limited use for BSC in general was implemented.
- In 2011 the marketing/communications department was restructured to form the College Relations department, fully integrating PR/communications strategies with the marketing plan.

STRATEGIC THEMES

Based on the 2006 research findings, we have progressively laid a foundation to address the issues of awareness rather than perception through our marketing and communications efforts. However, the data recently gathered by the Strategic Planning Committee seems to contradict the 2006 findings. Moving forward we need to quantifyably determine how best to position BSC, based on accurate data. In exploring that need throughout the strategic planning process, the following themes arose:

1. **The need for regular market research:** The most current market research regarding BSC’s marketing efforts is five years old. Five years ago Facebook was in its infancy and Twitter was
newly launched. New up-to-date data is vitally needed to focus marketing efforts and dollars as effectively as possible.

2. **Public perception of BSC:** If follow-up quantitative research confirms public perception that an education from BSC is sub-par, we must try to shift that perception to one in which BSC is considered an equally relevant and valuable post-secondary option.

3. **Strategic internal communication:** Our current methods are not adequate. By making our internal audiences a priority, employees will be both well-prepared to spread the word, and more engaged in the process. Their increased understanding and engagement will enhance our external efforts.

4. **Staffing and budgeting levels:** The number of staff and budget allotted drive our ability to tell the BSC story.

**During Phase III: Making Sense of the Issues we determined as a team that the following are relevant to the themes noted above.**

1. **Extend BSC’s marketing reach.** The BSC message needs to spread farther geographically. Eastern North Dakota is an untapped resource for BSC, but the cost of advertising in that market is high. The cost of media production and purchasing also is rising, and it is essential that production quality be maintained. While the cost of marketing to that segment of the state will be high, the potential audience is huge. Markets as close as Jamestown are untapped.

2. **Leverage all media platforms including digital/web-based.** To truly move the needle of public awareness and/or perception, we need to use all the media available as part of a larger plan with clear objectives. All outlets need to deliver the same information, look and feel as the television commercials, the website and etc.
   a. **Digital media:** Digital media is at the forefront of marketing due to its rapid evolution, effectiveness and versatility. Today digital media encompasses social media (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc.), mobile device apps, banner ads, blogging, email marketing and more. We need to ensure our presence within social media channels and our mastery as its influence evolves.
   b. **Website:** When it comes to digital marketing, the hub is a dynamic website. Websites are dramatically different than they were even a few years ago. No longer static pages, they are fluid tools and containers for a variety of media. College websites fill dual roles as marketing tools and portals for students to access important information. Colleges and universities that market well continually modify website content. Recent news is added and images are frequently updated to give prospective students, alumni and current students reason to visit the site. Successful college websites showcase the campus environment and student life as much as academics. Students visiting a college website should gain a “wow factor” as well as a feel for the academics of the institution. The look and feel of campus spaces and communities can be showcased through photos and virtual tours. Videos featuring programs of study and courses give students insight into the academic
side of campus. At BSC we need to ramp up the current website to include more information to prospective students – a virtual tour, direct chat with someone able to answer their basic questions, videos of the campus and insight into campus life.

3. **Address College Relations staff and budget.** One person can do the work of one person; two can do that much more. A budget of $200,000 can purchase more media time than a budget of $100,000. Marketing efforts are always limited, in part, by staffing and budget considerations. Within that reality, several excellent marketing and communication initiatives have been proposed but have not been accomplished. BSC is the third largest educational institution in North Dakota, and while we are consistently moving forward with existing staff and budgets, we could do more, faster, with additional staff and dollars.

4. **Admissions follow up can close the deal.** The new CRM system can be an effective tool to track and manage prospects through the recruitment and enrollment processes, but we are not maximizing its effectiveness. BSC gets student data through our CRM software. The software allows students to request information using a form on the BSC website that generates an email to the student followed by mailed information. The software helps generate great student leads, but there is much more we can do to yield better results by tracking and better-utilizing the “enrollment funnel” data. Training staff to use the tracking and reporting information is the next step and will allow BSC to leverage the data and increase enrollment. By using our CRM system to connect our marketing efforts to the leads generated and enrollments achieved, we can determine the value of our marketing investment. This tracking ability is currently available, but is not being used primarily because of staffing considerations.

**SUMMARY**

The heart of the current marketing situation is the need to clarify the basis of our marketing strategy. We must come to agreement over our primary strategic marketing goal. Research from 2006 tells us awareness is lacking and so we have based the initial *Beyond* marketing efforts on that proof. But, our stakeholders, including many of our internal stakeholders, believe that we are battling a quality perception issue instead. We may find that both are true, but we must clarify our position in order to gain the organizational buy-in that will ensure our success. In the past five years we have made great strides in establishing a comprehensive strategic marketing effort. Now we need to bring it home in order to ensure our success.