"I Love It When a [Marketing] Plan Comes Together"

Three-Stage Marketing for Promoting Campus Events
So, what is a marketing plan, anyway? Simply put, it is a list of
what you plan to do to promote an event, a timeline for getting it
done, a sense of what you want to accomplish with each stage,
and an idea of the money it will take to make it all happen.

When I was a kid, I was hooked
on The A-Team (a show most of
the college students with whom
I work have never seen, a fact
that makes me feel very old). One of my
favorite parts was when grizzled Hanni-
bal Smith would smile, look at the cam-
eras, and, chomping on his cigar, say his
famous line, "I love it when a plan comes
together." I get a similar satisfaction
when, at the end of a successful event, I
know the marketing plan has been a part
of that success. I may even mutter Han-
nibal's line out loud, despite the fact my
students probably don't understand the
reference, and my plans seldom require
anything as elaborate as welding sheet
metal onto the side of my van or knock-
ing out Mr. T to trick him onto an air-
plane. Sometimes they do, but most
times...not.

Over the course of my career, I have
worked with many creative and intel-
gent students. I've seen dozens of ener-
gizing educational sessions about innova-
tive promotional ideas and have wit-
essed many of these ideas being put
into action. But, it occurs to me that one
of the most difficult things to do is to pull
all of the great ideas into one marketing
plan. Of course, I have also seen (and
sometimes been a part of) marketing that
has been rushed, poorly timed, feebly
constructed, and—not surprisingly—
unsuccessful. In this article, I hope to
help you make the most of what I have
learned from success and failure so that
you can successfully get the word out
about your events.

What is a Marketing Plan?

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Simply put, it is a list of what you plan to
do to promote an event, a timeline for
getting it done, a sense of what you want
to accomplish with each stage, and an
idea of the money it will take to make it
all happen. Your plan should include a
list of advertising opportunities you can
pay for (marketing), a list of free ways to
promote your event (publicity), a budget,
a plan for whom to target with your mar-
keting, and a timeline for implementa-
tion.

The good news is if you put work into
creating your marketing plan, your
efforts won't be wasted. You can use the
same template over and over again. In
fact, many word processing programs
include a marketing plan template if you
need ideas. Of course, you'll want to
review your plan as you begin any new
event to make sure it is still up-to-date
and doesn't overlook any good promo-
tional opportunities. Use the marketing
toolkit (see Illustration 1) to brainstorm
promotional opportunities on your cam-
pus.

Illustration 1

Marketing Plan Toolkit

Marketing Ideas
- A-frames
- Banners
- Bookmark
- Bus shelters
- Buttons
- Campus newspaper ads
- Campus TV station
- Closed-circuit TV
- Door hangers
- Giveaways
- Handbills
- Local newspaper ads
- Point-of-purchase displays
- Posters/flipers
- Postcards
- Radio/TV spots
- Special events to promote events
- Table tents
- Tchotchkes
- Transparency for classrooms
- T-shirts

Publicity
- Announcements at other events
- Campus-wide e-mail
- Campus-wide voicemail
- Chalkboard messages
- Community calendars
- Contests/prizes
- Feature stories
- Interviews
- Press releases
- Promotion on school's Web site
- Promotion on your Web site
- Rallies
- Reviews
- Ticket swaps
- Window displays

Whew! Now that I write that all down,
it sounds like a lot. Putting together a
careful plan to let others know about
what you are working so hard to pro-
duce takes more planning than just
putting a poster on a bulletin board, but
it pays off in the end. Next, you'll need
to figure out what all of this is going to
cost.

Marketing Budget

There are no hard and fast rules for
setting a budget to promote your event.
This assumes, of course, that you have a
marketing budget. It can be a real tem-
perament to skimp on it because no one
makes you spend the money. An artist
tells you what they expect to be paid;
there are sometimes fixed costs for using
a particular venue; and sometimes there
are charges for lights and sound. Howev-
er, the marketing budget is something
that members of the sponsoring group
ought to put together themselves. By the
time you spend other necessary funds on
your event, the marketing budget can often
become whatever money you have left
(which is usually not much).

What your group must keep in mind is
that it is better to spend a little more and
have larger attendance numbers than to
spend less and have lower numbers. If
you are selling tickets, you will see your
marketing success add up in your com-
mittee's bank account afterwards. Even if
you only break even, successful events
have a way of increasing next year's bud-
gets, so it is possible to profit even from
a show that takes in no money.

When considering how to spend your
money, think in terms of return on invest-
ment (ROI). You want to find opportuni-
ties to maximize your ROI by finding
ways to reach the largest numbers
of people for the least amount of
money. You may think of ROI in terms of
money coming in if you are selling tick-
et, or in terms of the number of people
who attend your event if you aren't.

Once you have set a budget and con-
sidered what marketing and publicity
ideas are best suited for your event,
makes a plan for unleashing your market-
ing efforts on campus. It is hard to know
how to time the different elements of
your campaign. However, using a three-
stage marketing approach can make it
easier.

Timing of Marketing

The timing of marketing can be a very
complicated matter. How you choose to
do it varies greatly, depending on the
size of your campus, the level of involve-
ment (do people normally come to your
events?) at your school and the size of
your event. It is unlikely you would put
as much effort and expense into marketing a karaoke night as you might for a major concert. Each of these factors should influence your marketing plan. They will help determine how far in advance to start planning, when to kick off marketing, what kind of marketing to do and when it will happen.

While there are quite a few variables, there are some constants as well. In my opinion, every event you produce should benefit from three stages of marketing: creating awareness, interest and commitment. (See Illustration 2.)

Three-Stage Marketing

When we tell people about our events, there are three things we need from people in response to the information we give them. Our job is never over until we get them to do it. We need them to become aware that our event exists, we need them to commit to doing what we need them to do—buy a product, pick up a ticket or attend an event. Sometimes this job is easier than other times. It is much easier to get people to attend a concert by a popular artist than it is to attract them to a lecture by someone with whom they are unfamiliar. In either case, three-stage marketing can be very helpful.

Even if a concert features the top act in the country, tickets will sell pretty slowly if no one is aware the event is occurring, or if they know it is happening but don’t know where. In the second case, people might attend a lecture by someone they’ve never heard of if you can communicate to them why they might be interested in it. For instance, some people might not know the name of the Prime Minister of Canada, but some of those same people might very well have a strong interest in hearing what he has to say (by the way, his name is Paul Mar-
tin). Additionally, as plenty of program-
ners (and their advisors) have learned time and again, all of the awareness and interest in the world doesn’t mean a thing if people don’t show up on the day of the event.

When faced with so much to do, it is easy to get discouraged. You may be strongly tempted to grab your hair and scream, “Why can’t I just slap a poster on the bulletin board and have this over with?” The answer is, sometimes you can. For events or services that are easily explained or don’t rise to the level of importance that requires an extended campaign to advertise them, you can be successful with one medium of advertising (posters alone, handbills alone, campus wide e-mails alone, etc.) as long as you do two things:

1. Make sure you use a medium with the ability to reach people (people often ignore posters or delete e-mails unread), and
2. Include all three stages of marketing in the medium.

Applying Three-Stage Marketing

So, what do the three stages of marketing look like? First of all, they are called stages because they are dependent on each other. Before you can create interest, you have to have awareness. In addition, people would be pretty unlike-
ly to commit to attending an event in which they had no interest. In applying these stages to your marketing campaign, you’ll want to keep this fact in mind and roll your campaign out in that order.

Creating Awareness

If I was standing in a crowd and I wanted you to see me, I might make sure I was wearing a brightly colored shirt (unless everyone else was wearing a brightly colored shirt—in that case, a white shirt might stand out more). I might wave my arms or send out a signal flare. If I did all of those things, I’d probably get noticed. (Of course, I might also get into pretty big trouble for setting off a signal flare in a crowd of people). From the largest school to the smallest, there is a great deal of competition to get people’s attention. Be wary of using gimmicky ways of getting noticed. They may help in attracting attention, but diminish interest in the program if they backfire.

Creativity can be a strong tool in getting attention. One of my favorite definitions of creativity comes from Roger Van Oech in his book _A Whack on the Side of the Head_, in which he quotes Nobel Prize laureate and physicist Albert Szent-Gyorgi. Speaking of his own process of discovery, Szent-Gyorgi referred to creativity as “looking at the same thing as everyone else and thinking something different” (p. 11). In order to get noticed, this skill is essential. In a sea of sameness on your campus, what can you do to make people notice your publicity?

Remember, people tend to think rather conventionally when they market events, and many rules are self-imposed. While you should make sure your advisor knows about anything unusual you might want to try, doing things in a unique way will go a long way toward getting your event noticed.

Of course, getting people talking about your event is what you want to accomplish. Many people assume this is something that happens naturally without much effort. This is sometimes true, but more often it is the product of very careful work. (Check out Illustration 3, “Five BIG Marketing Myths,” to avoid some other common mistakes).
ILLUSTRATION 3

Five BIG Marketing Myths

MYTH 1  "If you build it, they will come."
This is based on the belief that an event is so unique or desirable that it requires very little (or no promotion).

MYTH 2  "If you feed them, they will come."
Food can spice up an event, but it may also have no effect at all. It is important to remember that food is an aspect of an event, not a substitute for marketing. If it helps the event, chances are it will help the marketing, but if the audience feels the event isn’t worth attending, chances are that food won’t help much. Ask yourself what you would be willing to sit through for a free slice of cold pizza?

MYTH 3  "Our marketing plan is word of mouth."
Word-of-mouth is not a marketing plan. It’s the positive effect of a well-executed marketing plan. Getting people talking about your event is what your marketing plan is supposed to do.

MYTH 4  "Printing a flyer is our marketing plan."
A flyer can contain all three elements of a marketing plan. It is more likely, however, that even with a small event, you’ll want to approach marketing from several angles to have a better chance of reaching as many people as possible.

MYTH 5  "It’s free publicity, it can’t be very useful."
I never really hear people say this one, but they must think it because it seems the free methods of publicity are the ones most often overlooked. Don’t forget how useful press releases, community calendars, and interviews can be in promoting your event.

There are many ways to create buzz and get people talking about your events. Whisper campaigns are one way to do it.

* * *

© Whisper Campaigns

Finding someone who can keep a secret is often hard to do. We have the best of intentions, but when something is really juicy, we’ve just got to tell someone. Whisper campaigns rely on this aspect of human nature.

Use the whisper campaign approach when you are ready to make a big announcement you think will create strong interest. Instead of releasing the information all at once, consider trickling it out by telling people you know cannot keep a secret (which is pretty much everyone if the secret is big enough). One good way to do this is to announce the information at an open meeting of your programming board. Let people know that it is a secret and that they shouldn’t tell anyone. Stress the point, but do it mildly. After all, you do want them to tell your secret. Soon, your “secret” will be all over campus. People will be more anxious to tell it because it has a forbidden quality. This is a great tool for creating early awareness of your event.

Once people are aware your event is going to happen, you are ready to tackle a very important stage, creating interest.

© Creating Interest

Interest is a little trickier to create than awareness because people pursue widely varying interests. Clearly, it is hard to tell people how your event will be of interest to them if you don’t know what interests them. This requires a little bit of research. This can be an intimidating word. Research often makes us think of people in white lab coats with clipboards coaxing a mouse through a tiny maze, or worse—those people at the mall who are so determined to get us to try them what chewing gum is the chewiest.

The funny thing is, many schools do research and never use it. Event assessments, required by many institutions, contain tons of great information that get passed along to the proper authorities and never looked at again. Assessment is a tool for understanding what people think about your events, why they came and who they are. Obviously, this can be very useful information.

Don’t be afraid to go beyond the surface in gaining information about the people who attend your events. Collecting information about your school’s favorite music, movies and TV shows, and what they have free time can aid you greatly in planning and marketing events. If your current assessment tool doesn’t ask for the kind of information, you need to make these kinds of decisions, consider revising it.

© Target Marketing and Affinity Marketing

Once you have data, there are a couple of cool ways to let people know they may be interested in your event. The first is target marketing. This approach involves finding people your data suggests have liked similar events in the past, determining why they were interested, and finding ways to let them know your next event will interest them as well. Determining who your event is for and who might enjoy it is an important step in knowing why people would want to come. Of course, it will also guide you in determining who you will need to make aware of your program in the first place.

For example, if you brought in a classical violinist last year and this year are bringing a cellist, it is reasonable to assume the same people might be interested in this program. Common sense indicates it would be good to put posters in the music school, but your data may tell you that for some reason electrical engineering students came in large numbers to the event. Think through some possible causes for that. (Was the event held in the engineering building? Was it required for some reason?). If you come to the conclusion that engineers on your campus just seem to have an abiding
love of stringed instruments, you can begin to brainstorm ways to reach them.

Affinity marketing takes things a step farther. This approach is based on the belief that if one group likes something, a similar group may like it, too. And, if people like to do something that is similar to your event, they might like your event, too. In the example of the violin concert, we might guess that if electrical engineers liked it, maybe chemical engineers will also. In addition, people in the campus string ensemble and music appreciation classes, who have demonstrated a love of music, might also be interested in your event.

After you determine and target groups that may be interested in your event, the next step is to figure out how you want to appeal to them. This stage can be as sophisticated as you would like it to be. You can create an ad and put it in the program of the fall string recital and place the same ad in the engineering newsletter. Or, you might plan different marketing for each group. I routinely plan different posters for different genders. This is effective because:

1) Men and women think differently in a number of ways and, therefore, likely would want to come to an event for different reasons; and

2) It is an easy way to divide your population in half, appealing to each group differently without having to make multiple appeals.

There may be a great temptation to skip the step where you collect and analyze data about students who attend your events and act based on your perceptions about different groups. The kind of judgments this produces will be highly reliant upon your own biases and beliefs and may not be as universal as you might think. If you don’t have good information about people who attend your events, why not conduct a survey of students in general. The conclusions you come to will only be as good as the data on which you base them.

Rumor Marketing

Rumor marketing is similar to whisper campaigns and is a great way to create interest in your event. This approach is based on the age-old technique of reverse psychology. Experience tells us that rumors rely on two factors. First, the information has to be privileged information that not everyone has. The moment you confirm a rumor, it’s over. If you start a rumor that a given performer is coming to campus on the same day that you put up posters, the information won’t be exclusive and therefore will have no effect. Secondly, rumors travel fastest when they are in some way negative. You might ask, why would I want to spread a negative rumor about my own program? The answer is because negatives may sometimes be positive.

At a school where I was previously employed, my students and I once spread a rumor that the fire marshal had limited the number of chairs to be placed at a free event in a given venue to 600 and that anyone who arrived after the capacity had been reached would be turned away. This was in fact true—the posted capacity on the wall (set by the fire marshal) was 600. We expected strong interest in the event, but an attendance of 600 would have been almost double our normal crowd. On the night of the event, nearly our entire on-campus population, almost 600 people, turned out for it. Some came as much as two hours early! By creating the perception that not everyone would be able to participate, we were able to greatly increase interest in the event.

There are ethical issues to be considered here, though. It would be bad practice and bad marketing to tell outright lies about your event. Be careful to use this idea carefully and in consultation.
A your advisor. Also, shock value may be your travel, but in the long run, it can hurt you if not handled with care. If you wouldn’t be proud to tell your grandma about it, maybe it’s better to come up with another idea.

Commitment

Commitment is the holy grail of marketing. Without commitment from your potential audience, everything else you do will be for naught. You will get very little satisfaction from saying 20 people attended your event but a lot more want to participate. So how do you get commitment? Here are a few simple tips.

First, remind your potential audience that the event will take place soon. There is a natural tendency to put things off until they are immediate. This is why we sometimes wait until the night before a paper is due or an exam is scheduled to complete the paper or study for the test. We have other priorities and attend to them first. We figure that something is important enough, we will remember to do it.

However, it may not be enough to simply remind people your event is about to happen. It would also be a good idea to remind them why they were interested in it in the first place.

If you are selling tickets, this really underscores the importance of point-of-sale marketing. This is advertising placed at the location where people actually buy your tickets. If you can minimize the time between when they decide they are interested in your event and when they decided to commit to attending, your job will be considerably easier.

When getting people to commit to your events, it’s important that you look desirable. Your fellow students can smell fear like a dog smells fear. Frequently, marketing entices people to believe that the event being promoted is popular. If your marketing efforts appear desperate, however, people will assume there must be a reason you don’t believe the event is worth attending. They will take your advice and do something else to do with their time.

Incentives

One useful way to create commitment is by providing an incentive. Again, if you are selling tickets, the first 10% you sell are the most important because the more people buy tickets, the more they talk about the event. Consider offering an incentive for people who buy their tickets early. I like to offer a “meet and greet” with the artist where a limited number of early ticket buyers get to meet the artist after the show. Of course, this means working out details with the artist and including it in the contract so you won’t promise something you ultimately can’t produce.

If people on your campus tend to buy tickets at the door, you may be tempted to charge a higher price at the event. If this is your practice, it can serve as an incentive for people to buy tickets early to save money. However, it can be difficult to change people’s buying behavior, and charging a higher price at the door may give some procrastinators an incentive to skip the event altogether. On the day of a show with poor advance ticket sales, you are likely to draw little comfort from the knowledge that the audience members who do show up will be paying more for the privilege of attending. The main thing to remember is that you want to make it easier for people to commit to your event as it approaches, not harder.

Marketing Beyond Today’s Event

As time passes, I find I repeat myself more and more. One theme I find myself repeating is “today’s event is a commercial for tomorrow’s event.” It will either encourage people to attend or discourage them from attending your next event. I would rather have 10 people attend a good event than have 10,000 people see a bad one. The 10 people will tell others how good the event was, while the 10,000 may say much to negatively impact our future events. This reality leads to another thing I often repeat: “Promise only what you can deliver.” If we don’t follow this advice, people may leave our events disappointed even when they are good.

Assessing Your Event

Once your event is over, don’t forget to assess it. Even if your institution does not place a priority on assessing events, you will want to find out why people came so you will know better how to tell them about future events.

Marketing your campus events can be a tricky business. It is a process that deserves a high level of commitment and sophistication. Make a plan and stick to it. Think of new promotional and marketing ideas, and then roll them out with an eye toward creating awareness of, interest in and commitment to your program. The success you achieve will make all of your efforts worthwhile.

Don’t you love it when a plan comes together? I certainly do.

References


About the Author

Adam Peck is a former comedian who currently serves as senior student affairs administrator at The University of Texas at Austin, where he will complete his PhD in higher education administration in May 2005. He has previously served as director of student activities at McKendree College (IL) and Texas Lutheran University. In NACA, he has served as showcase coordinator for the former Illiana Region, marketplace coordinator for the former Southwest Region, and as coordinator of the Advanced Leaders Institute for the NACA Huge Leadership Weekend. He has presented educational sessions at regional conferences and National Conventions, and has been a featured speaker at colleges, universities and professional associations.

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