

ATTRACTING

Education, and specifically, the quality of America's elementary and secondary schools, tops the list of the most important issues facing the US government, according to the Harris Poll – a nationally representative survey of Americans. George Terhanian, President of HI Europe & Global Internet Research for Harris Interactive and John Geraci, Vice President of Youth and Education Research for Harris Interactive, report on how UK institutions could benefit from the vast US student market.

This is not new news. Year after year, education nearly always tops the list. One can trace the roots of this perennial problem to the landmark Supreme Court case of Brown versus the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas (1954), when the Court condemned race based segregation.

Although fifty years have passed since the Supreme Court required the Board of Education of Topeka to desegregate its schools, Americans continue to worry about the quality of its elementary and secondary education. This is partly because the educational research community has struggled to identify specific school policies, practices and procedures that promote student achievement and learning.

Americans are far less concerned about the quality of their higher education system. In fact, American colleges and universities are more popular than ever. According to estimates from the US Department of Education, for example, enrollment in US higher education institutions is at a record high, with no decline in sight. And according to Harris Poll findings, the prospect of not attending college worries high school students more than being cool, finding a boyfriend or girlfriend, or contracting AIDS or cancer.

Notwithstanding this increasing demand for higher education, all is not good for American colleges and universities. Competition for the 16 million students that will attend a college or university is intense, and the target population (high school students) is becoming increasingly sophisticated and brand

conscious, so college and university recruiters must now work harder and smarter than ever before.

Truth be told, American education marketers recognised this several years ago. At the time, they regarded the world of higher education as largely undifferentiated, noting that many colleges and universities were offering similar programs and seeking the same student base. They believed that the absence of differentiation in their offering commoditised higher education and frustrated many prospective students and their parents. In response, they began to call on US college admissions personnel to encourage them to consider introducing brand building and management tools, population profiling and targeting methods, and product tailoring that would cater to the evolving needs of prospective students and their parents.

At that time, the audience was not particularly open, let alone receptive to the message, and the sector nearly called it quits. In retrospect, it would have been quite easy for them to more or less dismiss admissions personnel as slow moving, methodical, and indifferent to the important social and cultural changes that manifested themselves in the character of today's youth.

Fortunately, American education marketers did not call it quits and, consequently, American colleges and universities are now beginning to behave more like UK marketers to increase their competitiveness and to improve the quality of the education they offer. There has been a huge shift in 'market power' in higher education from seller to the buyer. No longer are students and



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parents willing to entrust their education to a system without questioning the rationale for why schools operate as they do. We regard this as a positive change.

In what follows, we begin by sharing four lessons denominated as 'Core Beliefs', from youth marketers that, we think, can inform and influence how UK colleges and universities compete more effectively for America's students. We then offer advice to those UK educational institutions that are attempting to attract more American students.

Core Belief 1: The youth market is too important to ignore

Although Socrates allegedly maintained that children are, "tyrants...who contradict their parents,

gobble their food, and tyrannize their teachers," contemporary marketers recognise that the youth of today possess enormous spending power, and renowned influence on others. Marketers who ignore today's youth do so at their own peril.

Core Belief 2: Youth marketing has evolved with the times

Fifty years ago, marketers subscribed to a philosophy that minimised the importance of the youth market. The motto "children are to be seen and not heard," ruled the day. During the 1970s, marketers recognised that children and young adults were too important to ignore, but chose to target them through their parents. They then decided in the 1980s and 1990s to target youth directly, bypassing parents altogether. Today,

successful youth marketers understand that they must regard parents and children as a collaborative unit, partly because today's youth are less alienated than in previous eras. Illicit drug use, unwanted pregnancy, and school crime are declining while SAT scores are increasing.

Although it is difficult to classify, categorise or otherwise label entire generations of youth, our colleagues and clients must at times do so to facilitate the development of marketing programs. The generational differences that have been observed are striking, witness the table below that compares attributes of Generation X (1965-76) and Generation Y (1977-94)¹.

schools are a third source. Of course, after one identifies these prospects, one must then find out whether and why they might consider education in the UK; To have fun? To see the world? To gain a global perspective? To represent America? In the long run, UK educational institutions will save time and money if they start by investing in research to develop appropriate programmes and to inform approaches in recruiting American (and other) students.

Final Thoughts

Today, more than 160,000 Americans study abroad. Of these, roughly 30,000 do so at institutions within the UK. At first glance, and in light of concerns over

Generation X	Generation Y
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > "The Pill"/Legalised Abortion > Absentee Parents/rise of the non-traditional family > Distrustful > Increasing teen crime rates, drug use, pregnancy > Individualistic > Unstructured childhood > A "lost" generation > Pessimists > Talkers > Uncertain 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > "Baby on Board" Signs; "Have you hugged your child today?" > "Helicopter Parents" - always hovering > Respectful of authority and rules > Decreasing crime rates, less drug use, teen pregnancy decreasing in all 50 states > Prefer team activities > Structured activities > A "found" generation > Optimists > Doers > Confident

Core Belief 3: Today's youth are getting older, younger

Effective marketers recognise that development occurs along a number of different dimensions: cognitive, physical, emotional, and social. They also understand that today's youth are progressing cognitively and physically faster than ever, although there is little evidence of similar progress emotionally. The marketing messages they develop reflect these understandings.

Core Belief 4: It is not a man's world, or won't be for long

Effective marketers appreciate the differences they have observed between boys and girls and tailor their marketing messages based on these differences, which are summarised below.

security in the wake of 9-11 and an unfavorable exchange rate for Americans, these numbers seem encouraging to those UK institutions that are attempting to attract American students. Of course, numbers can be misleading. The 160,000 students who study abroad, for example, represent only one per cent of the 16 million Americans who are enrolled in a college or university, and the 30,000 who study in the UK represent only 0.2 per cent (if we do not round).

UK educational institutions could attract more American students by developing approaches that are informed by the core beliefs of marketers within the youth market, who view the 100 million Americans who have not yet reached their 25th birthday as an enormous target market with unique needs.

Girls:	Boys:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Have much higher reading scores than boys. > Have caught up to boys in math. > Dominate extracurricular activities. > Dominate college enrollments: 57% women. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Still are far more likely to take part in sports (63% versus 49% of girls.) > Way more likely to be in special education programs (73% of all special ed. students are boys) > Continue to earn more than girls, but the gap is closing.

Advice for UK education marketers

The question that we attempt to address here is deceptively simple: How can UK educational institutions attract more American students? The broad recommendation we make is intended to serve as a starting point - we recognise that there is much heavy lifting to be done.

Identify, profile and survey the target population

Understanding which of America's 16 million college and university students to target is hard work. The 500,000 students attending independent day schools, for example, are one likely target. The 50,000 students attending America's boarding schools are a second. And the 10 million or so students enrolled in America's more affluent

These 'youth marketers' understand that they can only compete successfully for share of mind and share of wallet by varying the four P's: product, the promotion around it, its placement and distribution, and its price. UK institutions should follow this kind of framework as they develop or fine tune programmes and approaches to increase the yield of their recruitment efforts.

Of course, UK institutions need to be encouraged to stay away from reading Mark Twain; "When a child turns 12 you should put him in a barrel, nail the lid down, and feed him through a knot hole... When he turns 16, plug the hole." **EM**

¹Adapted from Howe and Strauss, *Millennials Go To College*