

# Does the promise match the reality?

As we have seen, an effective distinctive position is one that is real, rare and relevant. Here, we outline a structure for internal research that a marketing department can conduct to ensure that communications used to promote its institution's distinctiveness satisfy the first of these criteria, by reflecting reality.

## **What this is**

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The people who are best equipped to advise on the accuracy of a prospectus are your current students – they are experiencing the reality of studying with you, they are similar in profile to your applicants and they have the added advantage of being on hand. In this briefing note we consider:

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- How to structure the research;
- Issues to explore in the research; and
- Applying the results of this research.

## **Why conduct this research?**

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With detailed information about your courses readily available on-line – through UCAS and many directories and listings, as well as your own web site – the printed prospectus is increasingly seen by many as a statement of an institution's core values. Although it may also contain

some detailed information about programmes of study, its role in the range of contacts that an institution has with prospective students is more to convey the ethos and character of a university or college – its distinctiveness.

The purpose of this research is to test the accuracy of those messages in this high-profile publication. By conveying reliable messages about your institution to potential applicants, you can expect to increase the likelihood of achieving a good fit with your students; this in turn should enhance retention and completion rates, not to mention NSS scores.

## **How to structure the research**

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The people who are best equipped to advise on the accuracy of a prospectus are your current students – they are experiencing the reality of studying with you, they are similar in profile to your applicants and they have the added advantage of being on hand. So, it makes sense to ask them to look at designs for your prospectus while they are being developed and carry out a 'reality check' – of course, this is something that can be done with undergraduates, postgraduates or both.

### **Issues to explore in the research**

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When a university or college tests its marketing materials in focus groups, it is usually seeking to establish how attractive the messages it is conveying are to its target audiences. On this occasion, the questions to be explored are different, but a focus group would also be a suitable method. If possible, the members of the group should first be shown roughs of a proposed design, without identifying the institution

Initial questions should cover:

[Before showing rough]

- When you applied for your course, did you look at the printed prospectus? What information were you looking for in it/would you expect to find in it?

[Show rough]

- Looking at the design and images used in this prospectus, what do you think the university/college is trying to say about itself?
- What would you expect studying at the university/college that produced this prospectus to be like?
- Why do you say that? (is it the images, the layout or something else?)
- Does this prospectus give you a full picture of the institution and, if not, what are the gaps that need to be filled?
- Now, thinking about your time at this university/college, if you were describing it to someone who is thinking about applying, what would you say?

Working with a fuller rough of the prospectus which makes it apparent that the design is for their institution, further questions for the students in the focus group would be:

- Please describe the picture that this prospectus paints of this university/college
- Why do you say that? (is it the images, the layout or something else?)
- How does that picture compare with the institution you see as a student here?
- What could/should be done to make the image presented in the prospectus closer to the experience that you are having while studying here?
- If we wanted to pick just one or two key messages to explain what is different studying here, what would they be?

### **Applying the results of this research**

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If your results suggest a close match between the image that you convey in your prospectus and your student experience, you can proceed with the production of your prospectus with some confidence that it is playing its part in supporting your desired distinctive position.

If there is a significant gap between the image that you are presenting and the reality of your student experience this may be for a number of reasons including:

- Your designers may not have been briefed fully, or may not have acted on the guidance they were

given about the messages you wished to send

- Your prospectus may not be communicating effectively with your target audiences, even if it works well for other groups (eg senior university managers!)
- Your distinctive position may be complex and difficult to communicate effectively
- Your distinctive position may, itself, not be an accurate reflection of your university/college
- Your prospectus may have succumbed to being designed by committee, thus losing sight of the key messages of your distinctiveness

The actions you take will depend on the details of what your research tells you about the gaps between prospectus and reality. The last three reasons above emphasise how important it is for an institution's prospectus to have senior involvement, to understand how strategic direction comes across to the people who matter. Elsewhere on this web site, you can find advice about approaches to questions that your reality check may raise.

### Find out more

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[www.distinct.ac.uk](http://www.distinct.ac.uk) has a growing resource section.

### Get involved

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If you have a case study, report, or other resource you would like to share with colleagues in the sector we would love to hear from you. Please contact us at:

[contact@distinct.ac.uk](mailto:contact@distinct.ac.uk)

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