Summer Academe

Forum

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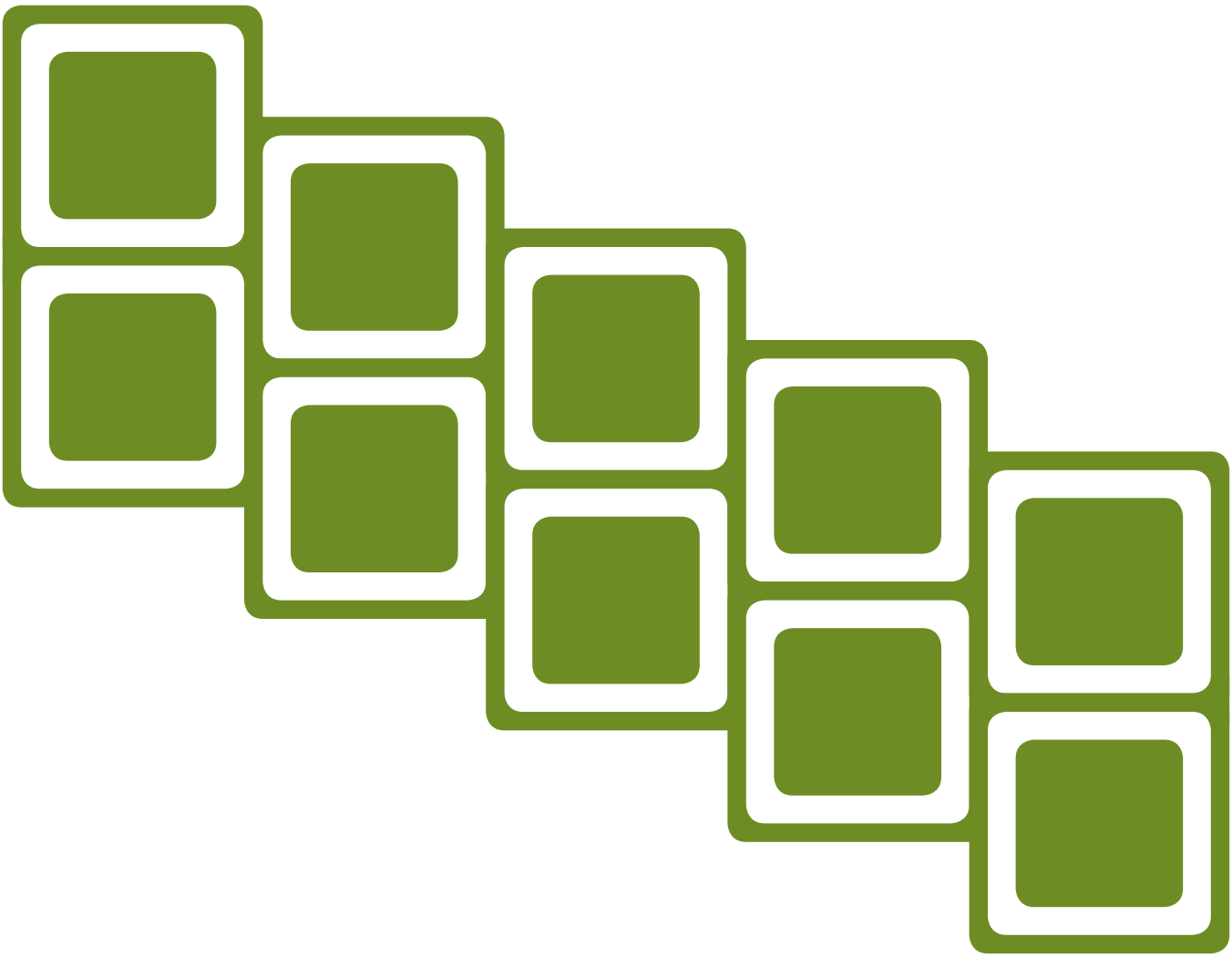

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The Seven Laws of Summer Marketing Revisited

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My purpose here is to present material that you already know because it has become part of the Western Association of Summer Sessions Administrators' (WASSA) memory. By revisiting these ideas, I hope to provide a useful focus for what you are doing now to market your summer program and to remind you why you are doing it. And, if we're lucky, to spark one new idea that will end up paying for your trip.

Whenever confronted with complex ideas, I seek a simple and concise statement of the situation. The Seven Laws came from this instinct and emerged from discussions held with virtually everyone I came into contact with in WASSA, the North American Association of Summer Sessions (NAASS), and the Association of University Summer Sessions (AUSS), over years of conferences, telephone calls, meetings, lunches, and coffees. To refresh your minds, here they are:

The Seven Laws of Summer Marketing

1. Market to increase enrollments
2. Know your competition
3. Market to your own students
4. Try something new
5. Know whether you succeed or fail
6. See the big picture
7. Talk to your colleagues

Market to Increase Enrollments. The first law seems deceptively obvious. But many faculty were opposed to the notion of advertising an educational program and raised credible questions about the efficacy and suitability of advertising. Arguing in favor of ads, summer directors cited the enhancement of the institution's image when the ads are done well, and the very public support of the community service mission. But there is one simple and overriding reason to market the summer program: to increase enrollments. If you have all the students and revenue you can handle, print a schedule, prop your feet on the desk, and relax. If you need to grow, you must advertise. That is the goal of each of the other six laws.

Know Your Competition. The second law requires analysis of your particular situation. You compete with other schools in your area, including community colleges, so you should be familiar with their programs and leadership. To some extent, you are in competition with your own school's regular-term FTE goals. You should be aware of what those goals are and look for ways to supplement the academic program—traditionally, by such practices as offering classes that are impacted in the other terms, offering sequential courses so students can be off prime-time schedules, and providing nontraditional course opportunities such as travel study. And you may conflict with your campus extension program if adult learners are eligible in the summer, a situation that can easily be managed through frequent contact and collaboration with extension staff.

Knowing your competition shows your place in the market and allows you to expand by filling needs others cannot.

Market to Your Own Students. The third law is really the basis of my reputation as a marketer. As a new director at a new school, I changed the catalog distribution method. The old way was to place stacks of catalogs where students were apt to see them. I mailed a catalog to every student. Summer enrollments went up more than 10% and stayed up from then on. Students are shoppers, with options for their summer activities, and they need information about your program to make an informed decision. And your interactions should be based on the customer-service model. While listening in at the counter one summer, I heard a student walk away saying, "Why can't the registrar be like you guys?" This is exactly what you want. I think by now, most registrars have seen the light, too. In addition, I learned an important marketing rule along the way: it is better to have a small increase in your largest market segment than a large increase in your smallest segment. For most, the largest market is your own students, and an increase of a point or two can mean more students and revenue than any other group could provide. If you have a small amount of money or some extra catalogs, aim them at your best market for the highest return.

Try Something New. Nothing will work forever. I recall that for about two years, I could not offer enough sections on how to use the Internet—and then, nothing. As a marketer, you should try new approaches or new markets every year, keeping the ones that work and discarding the rest. Over time, you will have a set of projects you can count on and several in development. Modern times require that I add that you must be current with the state of communications technology, for the same reasons. Just a few years ago, no one would have believed that the paper catalog would not always be the centerpiece of your marketing plan, or that students would move away from email. Invite some students in for pizza and conversation to learn what's up now.

Know Whether You Succeed or Fail. This is the key, the source of my favorite admonition at conferences: "The untracked life is not worth living!" With apologies to Socrates, this marketing law is the big one. I have many examples, but the best involves my great idea to send catalogs to denied applicants. This was a large group of about 6,000 who, I reasoned, might see summer as an alternative to their desire to attend our campus. Fortunately, our catalog had a code stamped on the tear-off registration form, so we could track the number that came in with checks attached. After all was said and done, the number was: zero. Without that tracking, I would have blindly believed in my great idea and sent to those lists for years. This is true for every single marketing project you can think of—you must know how well it worked before you can decide to do it again.

How do you track a project? The traditional ways involving catalogs and mailings are fading fast. Special short-duration phone numbers, use of web stats, and online surveys are candidates. I like the practice of an online DVD distributor who sends out one-question surveys that are completed with one stroke. How to track a project should be a roundtable discussion or a session at every conference.

See the Big Picture. Summer directors should know how their competition is doing, how the industry in general is doing, and what effects you might expect from the economy. Is the dollar weak or strong for international visitors? The political climate is pertinent (certainly in California), as is the availability of financial aid. Can summer fees be lower than the regular term fees? Can summer fees be advertised not to change? Sometimes it seems that most of our conference interactions are to explain how the big picture looks from our perspective. The more you know, the better.

Talk to Your Colleagues. The summer director has a unique perspective—usually, there is only one to a campus. So, if no one else has your set of problems or challenges, whom do you talk to when a little free associating would be helpful? The answer is your colleagues at other campuses, who do face your problems and who are a network developed at the annual conferences and utilized throughout the year. They are your network, and you should cultivate these relationships diligently.

Conclusion—The Character of the Association. Our professional associations are based on the unique perspective of the lonely summer director and the assumption that we are not in direct competition with one another. Over the years, we have found ideas and techniques that can work at many campuses. We embraced the notion of best practices in a very practical way, counting on our colleagues to tell us when something is a bad idea and nominating their good ideas for an award.

An example of this professional collaboration was my discovery that you could buy a list of college students in your area who did not attend your school. The idea was to send a catalog and cover letter to the address in your area—probably the parents'—pointing out that the student could attend your program while home for the summer. Not only did the list produce a healthy number of enrollments, but almost every other campus that tried it found the same success. This best practice was the basis for my claim that every conference could produce an idea that would pay for the trip.

Finally, a note about organizations. I started attending annual summer conferences in 1974 and have seen colleagues move in and out. And, of course, we have lost quite a few along the way who are greatly missed. From the earliest times to the present, with the faces changing and the environment shifting, somehow the association culture has been maintained. Ours is a rich history of sharing, helping, and networking. I think it is important for all current members to know it has always been that way, and that with their efforts, it always can be.

Biography

Gary Penders, now retired, represented three universities at WASSA and NAASS from 1974 to 2005: San Francisco State, UCLA, and UC Berkeley. He is a past president of WASSA and AUSS, a past Western Region vice president of NAASS, recipient of WASSA's Distinguished Service Award, and a NAASS Honorary Life Member. He has hosted both the WASSA and NAASS conferences and conducted numerous conference sessions over the years, including several New Administrator's workshops.