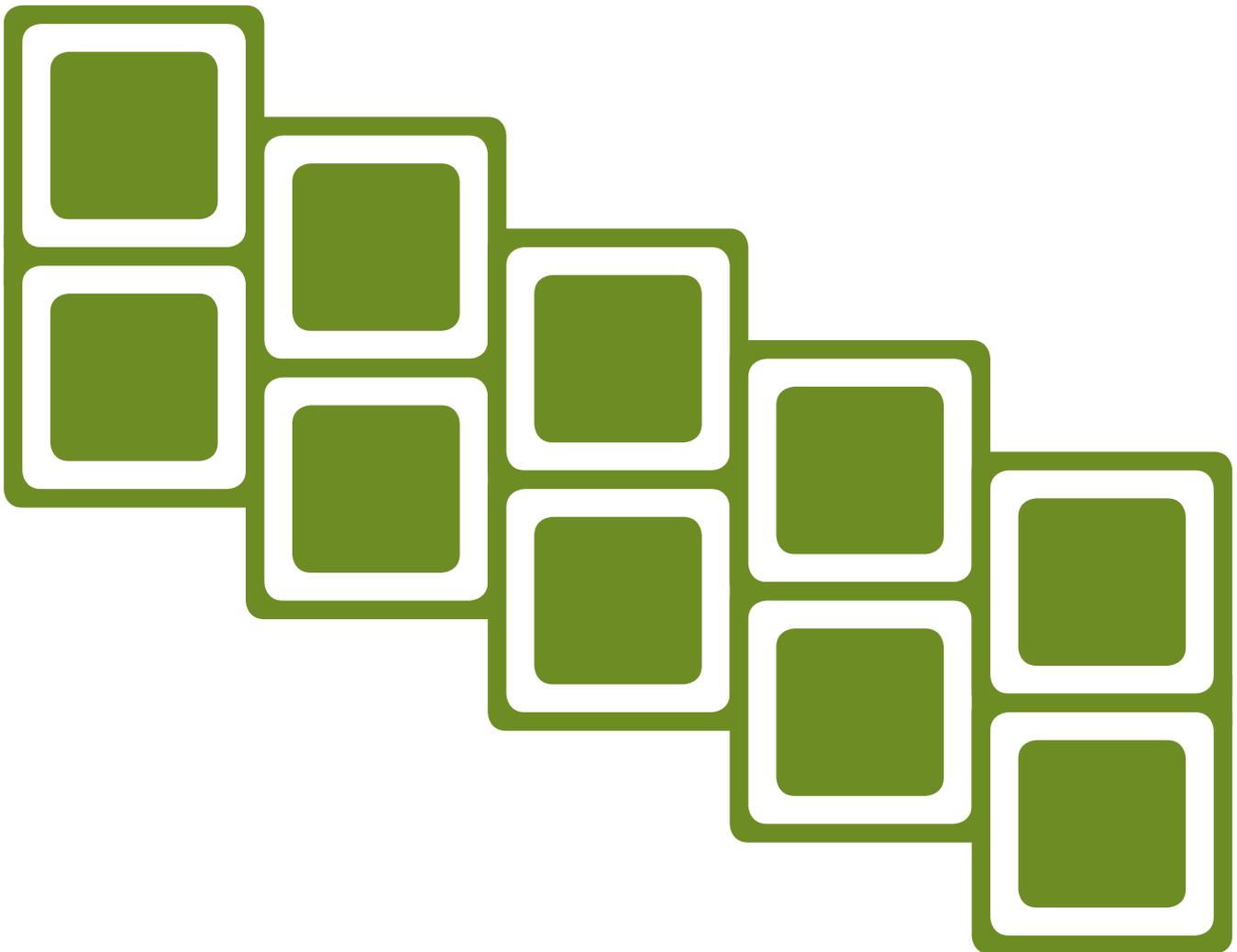


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Unleash the Beast: Promoting Summer Sessions Using Guerrilla Marketing

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Abstract

Despite record summer enrollments in 2011 and 2012, Georgetown Summer School anticipated a drop in enrollments in summer 2013 because of both external and internal challenges. The usual marketing strategies utilized precious financial and personnel resources. For 2013, the Summer School staff and marketing team sought new and creative marketing strategies that would connect directly with prospective students at a low financial cost. For the Summer School, a guerrilla marketing approach was implemented that embraced technology and social media as well as pop culture. This marketing approach was a refreshing addition to our strategies and garnered attention from students in a new way. The overall financial cost of the guerrilla-marketing approach was just 6% of the total marketing budget. Enrollments increased in undergraduate language institutes as well as among specific student segments. The guerrilla approach used in 2013 is being used today, which highlights its sustainability.

Introduction

Georgetown University's Summer and Special Programs Department consists of three main components: Georgetown Summer School, Summer Programs for High School Students, and Special Programs. The department resides within the School of Continuing Studies but works with each of the colleges within the university to offer courses and programs, including Georgetown College, the McDonough School of Business, the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, the School of Nursing and Health Studies, and the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. Georgetown Summer School enrolls around 200 nondegree undergraduate and graduate students, about 100 high school students, and about 1,200 degree-seeking students each summer, or about 10% of the main campus's overall student population. The Summer School accounts for over 70% of the Summer and Special Programs Department's total revenue and has experienced record enrollments each year from 2009 through 2012, despite a struggling economy. In 2013, however, there were both internal and external challenges, including nationwide trends of declining enrollments coupled with rising tuition costs, increased competition, and limited resources.

As is true at other national institutions, the decreasing college-age population has led to declines in enrollment, one of Summer School's biggest challenges. The number of college-age students began to decline nationwide in 2010 and is projected to continue declining until 2016 (Perez-Pena, 2013). In addition to the shrinking student base, students and their parents have been suffering from sticker shock, and some young people are opting out of postsecondary education altogether, as evidenced by a nearly 10% drop in postsecondary yield rates over the last decade (Marcus, 2012). According to a research brief on summer sessions conducted by the Education Advisory Board, a research and consulting firm based in Washington, DC, tuition increases are one of the main reasons students have been hesitant to enroll in summer sessions (Scholl & Thomas, 2012).

The cost of summer courses and programs continues to go up, and the rise mirrors increases in tuition for the regular academic year. In fact, Georgetown Summer School year-over-year gains in revenue were in part due to increases in our tuition rates. While some schools at the university did see year-over-year gains in summer enrollment from 2009 through 2012, other schools saw increases in the number of students registered for summer but decreases in overall summer credits taken. In 2012, Georgetown College, the largest feeder into Summer School, registered 168 more students in summer courses than in 2011, but the total number of summer credits taken was 113 fewer than in 2011. The data suggest that students were being more cautious and possibly taking only the minimum number of summer credits to stay on track with their degrees. Similarly, the McDonough School of Business registered 39 more students overall in summer 2012, but the total number of summer credits was 54 fewer than in the previous year. As well, business students were the vast majority of students registered in one-credit internship courses, which suggested that unpaid internships were a possible competitor to the option of taking summer courses.

Competition, not just from internships but from other institutions, was another external challenge. Every summer, hundreds of Georgetown students study elsewhere and transfer credits back to their degrees. In 2012, 347 students transferred credits from the summer term, representing just over \$2 million in potential tuition revenue. Of course, the decision to study elsewhere

involves many factors, such as study abroad opportunities, simply wanting “a change of scenery,” and the high cost of staying on campus to study. Summer School could not combat the threat of high costs or the opportunities offered by competition, but we did need to remain competitive and relevant in the sluggish economy.

In a time of austerity, resources for extensive marketing efforts and campaigns are limited, which presented a big internal challenge. Traditional Summer School marketing efforts on campus had previously been restricted to posters on bulletin boards, a small number of print advertisements in our student newspaper, and a single blast email when summer registration opened. With declining enrollments from our own degree-seeking students, Summer School posited whether Georgetown students were being taken for granted. Did they know enough about the courses, programs, and opportunities available? In developing a marketing plan for summer 2013, an approach was sought that would connect directly with our own degree-seeking students in order to showcase Summer School courses and programs. In light of both external and internal challenges, marketing approaches needed to be cost-effective, easy to implement, and helpful in engaging Georgetown degree-seeking students. The idea of guerrilla marketing was introduced for summer 2013 because it was known to be cost-effective and to generate high energy—perfect for a college campus.

Guerrilla Marketing

Guerrilla marketing is a term coined in 1984 by Jay Conrad Levinson, who describes it as “achieving conventional goals, such as profits and joy, with unconventional methods, such as investing energy instead of money” (2014, para. 3). One guerrilla marketing tactic is a flash mob, where a large group of people spontaneously break into choreographed song and dance to promote a product or service. As much fun as that would be, the Summer School team was considered too small to implement such a tactic (only six people, with only two devoted to Summer School). It was important to think not only about the “unconventional” aspect but also about the “energy” aspect of guerrilla marketing. Ultimately, the guerrilla marketing approach utilized at Georgetown connected directly with students and expanded the audience through new, low-cost tactics.

Summer School utilized social media as one guerrilla marketing tactic to capture the attention of prospective students. Social media is certainly not a new tool; however, summer 2013 was the first time social media was used to engage with prospective students in addition to current students. Previously, social media platforms, like Facebook, were used primarily as a communication tool with registered students. Facebook pages, for example, often promoted events and activities for students already on campus or served as a forum for students to connect with each other after they arrived on campus. The aim was to utilize social media slightly differently and to welcome both applicants and current students to follow Summer School. This meant potential students could be kept informed throughout the application process and not just once they were registered. Prospective students were able to see that there was a vibrant summer community awaiting them. Summer 2013 was also the first time Summer School used Twitter for the purpose of attracting new students. It became a critical component of the larger guerrilla marketing approach called the “Know Jack” campaign.

The “Know Jack” campaign was based on the university’s immensely popular mascot, Jack the bulldog. The Summer School marketing team created a black-and-white digital image file of Jack and captioned it with a new slogan, “Know Jack,” as a riff on a popular saying. The new slogan was important to the success of the marketing effort; it was witty and resonated with the younger student audience more than the typical slogan, “Make the most of your summer!” The image accompanying the slogan was cool and simple. At first, it did not mention Summer School—what it is or what it offers.

A wide open space in the center of campus called Red Square was used to launch the campaign. To create an effect similar to the feel of a flash mob, the space was “poster bombed” once a week for several weeks throughout the spring term while summer registration was ongoing. A poster bomb spells out phrases and popular terms with fliers to create a larger-than-life image. Each poster bomb would take up an entire wall and could be seen from across the quad. For the first poster bomb, which spelled “Know Jack,” the team arrived on campus early in the morning to plaster the vast space with the “Know Jack” fliers before any students had arrived, to create an element of surprise. Subsequent poster bombs spelled things like “YOLO” and “Summer.” After students began seeing the image repeatedly on campus and became familiar with it, a hashtag and our Twitter handle were added to the flier. Another poster bomb, which spelled “#KnowJack,” got students to start following Georgetown Summer School @GUKnowJack. The poster bombs were impossible to miss and there was a new one each week, so there was anticipation and buzz surrounding them.

Traditional single posters throughout campus are often invisible to today’s typical college student, who walks through campus with earbuds in and eyes down on a smartphone. The cost associated with traditional posters is over \$10,000 in design, printing, and employee hours to cover the campus. The poster bombs were designed and photocopied in-house and took no more than two hours a week to hang. Coupled with social media utilization, the poster bombs and the “Know Jack” campaign helped to connect directly with students in a new and playful way. These tactics invested time and energy rather than dollars.

Results

Compared with campaigns of previous years, the guerrilla marketing approach used in 2013 was much more affordable than traditional marketing. Out of the 2013 marketing budget, guerrilla marketing activities were only 6% of total costs. Traditional marketing efforts continued to be used, such as advertisements in the student newspaper and online banner advertisements to attract visiting nondegree students.

Overall, the results of the guerrilla marketing approach were positive. The Summer School Exit Survey is administered each summer to all registered students, once in mid-June (to all pre-session and first-session students) and again in late July (to all second-session students). Out of 2,140 registered students in Summer School, 369 students responded. When asked to rate the influence of various marketing efforts on their decision to attend Summer School, 19% ranked the poster bombs 4 or 5 on a Likert scale (1 is least influential and 5 is most influential). The Twitter

campaign was ranked 4 or 5 by 5% of the degree-seeking respondents. While it is difficult to establish a causal relationship between marketing efforts and improvements in enrollments, these survey data suggest that the guerrilla marketing approach may have contributed to the goal of connecting directly with Georgetown degree-seeking students.

Conclusions

The year-end reporting data showed that despite the challenges, there was success in select areas. For example, Georgetown Summer School was able to increase awareness of special programs like our foreign-language institutes. The Arabic and Persian Language Institute saw a 6% increase in registrations over the previous year while the German Language Institute saw a 40% increase. The data also showed that students from the McDonough School of Business took 16% more credits in 2013 than in 2012. Finally, there was a decrease in both the number of degree-seeking students transferring in summer credits and the number of credits transferred. In summer 2012, 347 students transferred in 1,850 credits; in summer 2013, 287 students transferred in 1,384 credits. It may be that the time and attention given to Georgetown degree-seeking students through guerrilla marketing helped increase their awareness of our programs and offerings and motivated them to stay on campus to study in the summer. Without administering a survey that links marketing efforts and student motivation to register for Summer School, it cannot be determined whether these successes were the result of the newly implemented guerrilla marketing approach.

Looking forward, there is a plan to recycle the strategies used in 2013 and utilize a guerrilla marketing approach to increase awareness and generate buzz. The plan is to expand a social media presence onto additional, increasingly popular platforms like Vine and YouTube. One idea is to post more visual images and videos that can be absorbed faster and more easily by busy, technology-savvy students. Partnering with student organizations to create events is another strategy to stretch the limited marketing resources to further connect with students in a low-cost and high-energy way that is in keeping with the idea of guerrilla marketing. At a time when enrollments are expected to continue shrinking along with budgets, a guerrilla marketing approach that involves investing more time and energy than money will be important to success.

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Biography

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