

## **Selling the Dream: Marketing an Education**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the manner in which a Christian Brothers boarding school, founded in 1891 as an altruistic response to the socio/economic distress of Queensland's Irish Catholics, undertakes the marketing of its educational product in a contemporary setting. St Joseph's Nudgee College has displayed a remarkable capacity for compromise, balancing from its first year of operation the philosophical heritage of Irish Catholicism with the pragmatic aim of promoting social mobility amongst a group conscious of its outsider status. It is this inheritance of compromise that has ensured that there has been no perception that marketing an education in a religious institution raises any ethical dilemmas. This is even more remarkable given the evolution of the College into one of the State's elite educational institutions, yet one still publically committed to education serving as an agent of social change. The challenge for the Development and Communications Department of the College is far more pedestrian than a clash of world views. For they operate in a milieu divorced from the traditional core business of the College and must therefore operate as promoters rather than producers of the institution's core product of teaching.

### **Introduction**

St Joseph's Nudgee College, a boarding school for boys based in Brisbane, is committed ideologically to providing a holistic education in the Edmund Rice tradition; however it is also subject to the rather more pragmatic need to maintain or increase its market share of pupils, particularly in the current economic climate. Though a relatively new phenomenon, there has been considerable research into how schools market themselves (DeZarn, 1998; Foskett, 2002; James & Philips, 1995; Lander and Hughes, 1999; Oplatka, 2002a, 2007; Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2004). Beginning in the early 1990s, the initial research was, in the eyes of Oplatka (2007) primarily theoretical (Gray, 1991; Kotler & Fox, 1995). From the mid-nineties, however, there is an identified emergence of an empirical knowledge base (Bell, 1999; Foskett, 2002; James & Phillips, 1995).

Even amongst educators who concede that marketing is an indispensable function of schools, there is a perception that it is incompatible with education (Birch, 1998; Grace, 1995; Oplatka, Hemsley-Brown & Foskett, 2002). It has been sixty years since marketing theorists began to argue that corporations should pay more attention to the customers' needs and wants. This is a paradigm shift of immense importance in the literature of marketing (Johnson, Christensen & Kagermann, 2008; McKitterick, 1957; Teece, 2010). McKitterick argued that "the principal task of the marketing function in a management concept is not so much to be skilful in making the customer do what suits the interests of the business as to be skilful in conceiving and then making the business do what suits the interests of the customer" (p. 78). Regardless of whether one accepts the appropriateness of such a symbiotic relationship existing between a business's offerings and customer needs in an educational context, one of the major purposes of marketing is to communicate to potential clients the services or products they are about to purchase as well as trying to persuade them to buy a

particular brand (Harvey, 1996). The use of creative entrepreneurship has an historical antecedent in the recruitment drives in Western Queensland in the early decades of the College's existence. The modern marketing techniques therefore do not represent a philosophical shift, but merely an alteration in process driven by broader social and technological developments.

### **Theoretical Background**

Educators are more than mere transmitters of information, for their role must inevitably involve an element of care that transcends the bounds of a mere professional relationship (Noddings, 2002). It appears that the 'selling' aspect of marketing causes the most angst amongst educators, for to some it is "unprofessional, if not unethical, for professional carers to try to attract custom when their implicit professional codes emphasize looking after people altruistically" (Harvey, 1996, p. 31). This paper contends that there need not be an ethical dilemma in marketing a school's strengths to potential clients. As Gummesson (1981) argues "it is not unethical or unworthy to express the advantages of a service of a professional ... as long as the truth is told" (p. 34). The fact remains, however, that educational marketing does raise a variety of ethical issues that are peculiar to altruistic institutions which are reliant on clientele for their very existence. Wragg (1993, as cited in Harvey, 1996) expresses a clear opposition bordering on hostility to any development that would make education subject to similar market forces experienced by corporations.

Gray (1991) argued that education was at the end of the spectrum in terms of service, which makes it difficult for potential clients to make any meaningful assessment of the quality of the service they are receiving. They are left with details such as those that can be gleaned from public domain websites, including the contentious My School website (<http://www.myschool.edu.au/>) in Australia. This website provides a wide-ranging overview of every Australian school, from basic details such as enrolment and staffing numbers to the more complex Index of Community-Socio/Educational Advantage (ICSEA). The student population is also broken down into indicators such as the percentage of Indigenous and/or English as an Additional Language students. Other indicators, such as school finances and direct comparisons with schools catering to students of a statistically similar background, are more problematic.

Other less tangible evidence available to the public can be garnered from indicators as anecdotal as the amount of litter on school property. The traditional private school obsession with behaviour on public transport is a reflection of the understanding of the administration that the physical appearance of a school is often a barometer to the public of the standards that it implements. As Harvey (1996) contends "both positively and negatively, the importance of a school's reputation locally, and the style and welcome which is offered to parents, must be seen as major factors in its success in recruiting services" (p. 29). A major difficulty emerges, therefore, which can leave a marketing department attempting to market a 'service' with a 'good,' for example publicising a holistic education by offering a view of a new library building, a swimming complex or a chapel.

In the United Kingdom, research has shown that there is little evidence that marketing pressures have impacted on the culture of schools (James & Philips, 1995). Though it would be a dangerous precedent for any school to reimage itself to the extent that, for example, a religious school altered its affiliation; the same school would be remiss if it did not expand or alter its program to meet demand and the changing demographics of its student body. The

first response would be unconscionable; the second would be completely compatible with an ethical education. This highlights a further definitional difficulty in balancing education and marketing - differentiating between a 'good' and a 'service' when the latter has as its most important characteristic 'intangibility' (Rushton & Carson, 1985, as cited in Harvey, 1996).

Evidence from the United Kingdom, the United States and Israel suggests that a majority of school management teams do not appear to base their financial decisions on reliable and systematic marketing research findings (James & Philips, 1995; Oplatka & Hemsley Brown, 2004; Oplatka, 2002a). Information tended to be gained from parents and stakeholders in ad hoc ways. There is also the question of the extent to which schools are aware of the need for 'market segmentation' or able to act on it appropriately. Devising a marketing plan, including conducting marketing research, positioning and segmentation of the market using a systematic, theory based approach, is unlikely to take place in schools acting in competitive environments. Oplatka and Hemsley (2004), Bell (1999) and Foskett (2002) found that schools often employed simple, unreliable techniques of marketing research and segmentation, and refrained from establishing coherent plans, although marketing aims are familiar to the management teams in schools. James and Philips (1995) found in many schools only the principal had an explicit responsibility to market their school. Amongst British and Israeli principals there was general agreement that marketing was a characteristic of school management (Foskett, 2002). As Harvey (1996) contends marketing an education can in the view of some educators "create a tension between an emphasis on social values which put the good of the individual above that of society and those social values which give preference to the greatest good of the greatest number of people in a community" (p. 26).

## Methodology

The research discussed in this paper adopted a qualitative narrative approach in order to investigate the complex phenomenon of marketing a religious school. Qualitative research recognises that peoples' lives are situated within a social and cultural context and that this context is an integral part of the phenomenon that is under investigation (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Using this approach, qualitative researchers begin with the individual participant, seeking to understand their experiences and interpretations of the world around them (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). A narrative approach emphasises the importance of giving voice to the participants and emphasises the personal meaning that each person constructs (Creswell, 2005). The more "complex, interactive and encompassing the narrative, the better the qualitative study" (Creswell, 2003, p. 182).

Narrative research does not aim to produce findings which are generalisable, but to create those that are 'well grounded' and 'supportable' (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 4). Reliability in narrative research is often described as 'trustworthiness' as described by Amsterdam and Bruner (2000). As they note, "Stories derive their convincing power not from verifiability but from verisimilitude: they will be true enough if they *ring true*" (p. 30). Narrative's emphasis on the experience of the individual encourages differences to emerge. Reliability therefore is not a statistical measure but is measured by the accuracy and accessibility of the data. Individual semi-structured interviews of between 30 – 45 minutes were conducted with the Development and Communication team comprised of the Director, the Marketing Manager and the Brand and Publications Manger. The interview schedule investigated each participant's role in the school, their understanding of the particular challenges of marketing an institution, and their institutional and informal relationship with the teaching staff. The questions asked of the participants focussed on their perceptions of a tension between the

altruistic aims of education and the financial pragmatism that underpins the marketing of a 'product'. The interviews were recorded and transcribed and common themes were sought in the data in order to provide insights into the phenomenon under investigation. Narrative accounts were then written which included the perspectives of each participant and their experience of being part of the marketing team at the College. Extracts from the individual narratives have been presented in the discussion and are signified by italics.

Huberman's (1995) measures of access, honesty, verisimilitude, authenticity, familiarity, transferability and economy to justify reliability and validity in narratives have been utilised in this paper. Access has been granted to the reader by the provision of extracts of narrative data in order to provide the reader with a first-hand account of the experience of the participants. Honesty has been achieved through questioning of the participants in seeking their views of the phenomenon under discussion. A common theme was chosen for the narratives which assisted in achieving verisimilitude which allows the reader to recognise a plausible experience in the narrative which may have possible relevance to their own educational context. Authenticity has been achieved by ensuring the narratives are coherent and have been written with integrity through reflection. The familiarity with the participants and the events under discussion enabled greater insights to be obtained. Transferability was provided by providing enough detail and accessibility to allow a similar study to be created in another setting. Efficiency and economy are evident through the inclusion of relevant sections of the data at strategic intervals in the paper in order to support the issues under discussion.

### **Discussion – Narrative Account**

During the 1901 summer vacation, Brother Thomas Duggan, Headmaster of St Joseph's Nudgee College, travelled through northern Queensland pursuing student enrolments in a manner described by the College Historian as 'questing' (Boland, 1991, p. 37). He was well aware that the institution's survival was dependent on a steady stream of students from regional areas. Duggan had made a similar journey in 1895, enjoying the experience in spite of the "heat, flies, trains, bush hotels and other incidentals" (*Nudgee College Annual*, 1896, pp. 52 – 53). Far from being perceived as a marketing exercise, it was still being celebrated in 1991 as something far beyond the earthly confines of pragmatic financial considerations. As Boland (1991) notes:

They did more than bring in boys to fill the classrooms and dormitories, more than preserve Nudgee from incursions by the Marists or the Jesuits. They created a bond between Nudgee and the remote areas. This fostered a College spirit. It also provided a pastoral link with families and with Old Boys, which had been one of the strengths of the Queensland Church. (p. 22)

It is unsurprising that the Christian Brothers motto is *Facere et docere*, the translation of which means 'To Do and to Teach', for they are at their core, pragmatists who for over two hundred years, have marketed a Catholic education as a statement both of religious affiliation and a shared commitment to social mobility. Marketing in the modern context is philosophically consistent with the early 'questing' forays into outback Queensland. These forays likewise communicated the benefits of a Nudgee education to potential clients. However, it is not the communication of these 'benefits' which creates unease about educational marketing. As Harvey (1996) contends:

Marketing subsumes an ideology that makes the needs and wishes of an organisation's customers/purchasers more important than its members' preferred methods of working. It can also appear to define the value of a product or service solely in terms of what purchasers are prepared to pay for it and therefore to encourage providers of services, such as schools, to consider questions of cost of service more important than ethically rounded processes of practice. Teachers find the commercial values of competition and individual choice incompatible with educational goals of providing equitable opportunities for the learning and development of all people. (p. 26)

A school, particularly one founded by a religious order, is particularly vulnerable to any public perception that it is being driven by marketing rather than philosophical considerations (Lubienski, 2007; Shaw & Brian Jones, 2005). This vulnerability is exacerbated by Nudgee College's evolution into an 'elite' educational institution, although one with a significant social justice program and arguably the most inclusive enrolment policy of any of the other Greater Public Schools (GPS) in Queensland. In contrast to the literature, which supports the contention that marketing is viewed with considerable suspicion and mistrust by educators, the perception shared by the interview subjects is that teachers are more accurately described as uninterested. In part, this might be the result of viewing marketing as the modernisation of a traditional activity, but also, at least anecdotally, reflects a compartmentalisation of 'teaching' and 'business'.

This modernisation of the College as a whole is reflected in the increasing professionalisation of the College's promotional arm. The current Director of Development and Communication, Paul Daly, is an Old Boy who initially stepped into the role as a short term replacement following the surprise departure of the previous incumbent. He came with a number of important qualities not readily integrated into a conventional curriculum vitae. During the mid-seventies he had represented the College in its flagship sport of rugby, had sent his sons to his alma mater, and had further established himself through a major fund raising venture on behalf of the College. His instant credibility did much to counter the instability of a third change of department head in less than two years. Having just sold a successful financial planning business, Daly has been able to function as both an 'outsider' drawn from the business world, and an 'insider' with strong links across the broader community. As Daly noted:

*Nudgee is a multi-million dollar business, and like any business it is subject to fundamental business principles, principles which govern the way it is run. One of these is the need to market its product which in this case is education. My part in this process is to market the College, manage the enrolment process and to co-ordinate fundraising.*

As an Old Boy, a past parent and an employee of the College, Daly is committed both to the task of marketing Nudgee as a product, but more personally, he is a believer in the intrinsic worth of that product. Furthermore, he understands that the choice of school is one that brings into play emotions that would not be generated in a more perfunctory purchase.

*It is about understanding the product that you are marketing, and in the case of an education it is not the same as going into a shop and buying something. There is a lot of emotion for parents looking to provide the best possible opportunities for their son. In a marketing sense it is about differentiating yourself from other Colleges and showing that you are best placed to provide those opportunities.*

Daly works with a variety of stakeholders, including the Nudgee College Foundation, Nudgee College Old Boys Association and governmental agencies offering grants such as the Indigenous Placement Program. The Foundation, which was established in the early eighties as an indication of the relatively early awareness of the need to professionalise fundraising, is tasked with raising funds to support the building program which reached its apogee in the campus wide renewal of the last eight years. The Old Boys Association directs the greater part of their efforts to the Jack Ross Bursary which provides the opportunity for boys to attend Nudgee who might otherwise not have the financial means to do so.

In his interview Daly also spoke about the critical role of teachers who have not traditionally been designated roles in the marketing process as they see themselves as primarily educators. However the impact of what they do has lasting impacting on how the College is viewed in both the school and wider community:

*Based on my business background, teachers have not had much ownership of the marketing side of things. They see themselves as the educators, the providers of an education, while typically seeing enrolments as something left to the marketing area. Teachers are actually central to enrolments because it is the work they do which elevates the standard of academic excellence or spirituality, or in sport or culture areas. When they do their job well we can market the school promoting those attributes. I don't know whether that has been articulated to them enough to allow them to appreciate that they are a critical part of the whole process.*

This separation between the two arms is no more evident than in the call for staff to contribute time to events such as Open Days. Without being a member of the College House system and without ready access to student leaders, the human resources are not as readily available to the marketing division as they otherwise might be to a member of the teaching staff. Nevertheless, the issue of attracting an 'outsider' familiar with marketing, rather than education, is problematic. In Daly's case, though not strictly speaking coming from a marketing background, he is an Old Boy success story, and at that level, becomes an advertisement just as much as an advertiser. It is a trade-off therefore to draw someone with particular skills from outside of education to be the spokesperson for an educational institution. The balancing act that this requires needs to inform any decision regarding the recruitment of personnel to work in this area.

It is possible as a member of the teaching staff already involved in a myriad of co-curricular activities to see marketing work as completely divorced from their sphere of activity. Harvey (1996) argues that teachers' concerns are "usually with the quality of educational experience which they provide to students and only rarely and reluctantly with the commercial or marketing aspects of their work. Yet the latter provide crucial constraints on resources which inevitably affect outcomes" (p. 31). Although teachers may well view marketing as a necessary evil or an activity far removed from the classroom, the continued financial means to provide solid educational outcomes are reliant, as Daly knows all too well, on something as basic as healthy enrolment numbers. The success of a rugby team, or the reach into regional Queensland exerted by a College group such as the Cattle Club, might be of only passing interest to a classroom teacher, yet the publicity will invariably help fund a social justice program or further curriculum support and resources.

Daly also operates in an environment increasingly politicised by contested views of how the quality of an education is measured. In March 2011, one hundred and ten years after Duggan had “preached everywhere the Gospel according to Nudgee” (Boland, 1991, p. 44), Peter Garrett, the Minister for School Education, Early Childhood and Youth received a letter signed by the Australian Education Union, Australian Primary Principals’ Association, Australian Special Education Principals’ Association, Australian Secondary Principals’ Association, Catholic Secondary Principals and the Independent Education Union. The letter concerned a perceived misuse of the My Schools website which had made public the finances and performance statistics of 10 000 Australian schools. The subsequent publishing of ‘league tables,’ which rank schools based on this statistical and contextual information, was viewed as a clear breach of the restrictions of commercial use. The criticism of the offending newspapers was coloured by the fact that any information of possible use to a parent when deciding where to spend their education dollar was inevitably ‘commercial’. For at one level the site provides a narrow view of competing businesses (the schools) to clients (students and parents) who then make decisions regarding their purchases - in this case an education. The embattled Garrett saw the publication of the data as “a game changer” (*Courier Mail*, 2011, March 3). This over-stated its significance, for it did not change the game of school selection markedly from what Duggan, or indeed Daly have understood it. It has merely altered some of the rules by which the game is played.

Tanya King, the Marketing Manager, is responsible for advertising, writing stories for the web, liaising with media outlets, and organising events such as Open Days, enrolments and regional visits. Similarly to Daly, her line manager, she is well aware of the challenge of marketing an education:

*Marketing is very different in schools than in the corporate sector. Schools are really unique in that there are thousands of other schools looking to provide exactly the same service. We have qualities we can obviously work with, such as our size, the open spaces, our broad curriculum, but it is still a challenge to promote what is different about us and why parents might want to send their sons here.*

Susie McDonald, the Brand and Publications Manager, is also aware of the challenges of marketing an education. She concedes that “it can be very difficult to find a point of difference. Each school believes that they’re doing good work and it can be challenging to make yourself stand out.” She reveals this is exacerbated by the particular challenge of marketing a holistic education at one of the Commonwealth’s pre-eminent sporting colleges:

*It is not only about marketing a vision, it can also be about challenging perceptions. We have been known as a rugby school for forever and a day. Sometimes even Old Boys think that we are exactly the same school they attended, not realising that there has been massive building changes, changes in structures and alterations in curriculum focus.*

In contrast to Daly’s view that teachers did not have a sense of ownership of the marketing process, one of McDonald’s tasks as Brand Manager was to rein in some of the activities of groups which were in part motivated by a sense that the Nudgee Brand was communal property.

*We found that parents were receiving different messages and different looking material from departments and groups across the College. My job was to help create a*

*consistent brand by putting guidelines in place to help ensure that there was a consistency, that it looked professional and that we were easily identified.*

One of the flagship enterprises which remain at the vanguard of this process is *Nth Degree* the triennial school magazine which is sent to members of the school community, both past and present. It was conceived as a means to publicise both the heritage of the College and to capture the diversity of its current image. The professionalism of its appearance and content is indicative of the modernisation of the College's marketing and is a strong contrast to the image of the first headmaster arriving at an outback town in a horse drawn carriage or a gestetner produced newsletter from the College to the parents, often found lying crumpled in a school bag.

### **Conclusion**

The implications of this study are relevant for a variety of stakeholders including, but not necessarily limited to, those directly involved in the marketing of educational institutions and those tasked with employing them and overseeing their work. At a broader level it also has relevance for marketing professionals who are employed in contexts with which they have no direct experience. The question of whether marketing is philosophically compatible with the provision of altruistic outcomes will remain at the core of this discussion.

Professionals such as Daly, King and McDonald operate in a far more modern environment than Duggan could possibly have dreamt of, however there is little in their activities which would have attracted his approbation. Attracting students was, and remains, the lifeblood of the College. Though people such as Garrett might choose to view initiatives as the *My School* site as 'game changers', this is not necessarily consistent with the buying patterns of the 'customers.' In a survey conducted by Independent Schools Queensland only 11.8 percent of the 2292 respondents had actually logged onto the site, and only 8.2 percent named *My School* among their three most influential sources of information. Independent Schools Queensland executive director David Robertson noted that most parents were "values driven" and were in fact more concerned with "the capacity of a school to prepare their children to fulfil their potential in life, good discipline and a good attitude to schooling" (Owens, 2011). These are similar to the qualities that Brother Duggan would have marketed to his customers all those years ago. The challenge for Daly, King and McDonald are in marketing these intangibles in a competitive environment and in mobilising the educators to perceive that they have a role and to articulate it in a manner that emphasises the symbiotic relationship between each of the stakeholders.

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