



Marketing, Strategy and Communications for an Educated World

**Prospectus Request Response
Reflections on Service Issues**

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We do not claim that this is a serious piece of research! However we thought the results might be worth a five minute read at your next tea break!

In the spring of this year we set our new graduate the task of collecting a set of reference prospectuses for our company. We thought that this was an ideal opportunity to monitor the service she received.

A letter requesting a prospectus, as if from a prospective student (although the letter was ambiguous it used a residential address), was sent out on 14th March 2006. Each institution was recorded on speed of delivery, any extras that were included and any unique features. In total request letters were sent out to 166 institutions.

Our hypothesis was that the newer universities and colleges would be the most likely to respond quickly, in part because they are recruiters rather than selectors (need), and in part due to them having better response systems.

Here are the results...

1 Speed of Delivery

One month after we sent the letter 24 of the institutions had failed to send us anything. Surprisingly some of the top '92 universities were amongst this tardy group. Now our letter may have slipped through the net or gone missing so we cannot rush to conclusions, but as the so called top up fees market for HE fast approaches, this was a little disappointing. We are not going to "name names" in this section so your reputation is safe with us!

However, we are very pleased to name those that responded within 3 days – which allowing for the post meant an immediate turn-around. Full marks for speed and efficiency here but perhaps some of the institutions might reflect that such speed might be inferred as being too quick of the mark by our cynical youth and their parents (our graduate thought 1-2 weeks acceptable as a turn round). Some of these institutions were providing us with postgraduate prospectuses, so direct comparisons with the UCAS market are not appropriate.

Bristol University is worth highlighting. Here is a highly rated university that one might have anticipated being less responsive but no. Combining reputation with speed and efficiency is a powerful combination.

3 Days

Canterbury Christ Church University
Cranfield University
University of Bristol
University of Plymouth
Bishop Grosseteste College
College of Estate Management
European School of Osteopathy
London School of Jewish Studies
Peninsula Medical School
Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama
Warburg Institute

4 days

A very speedy service from this group too. Warwick Business School was hot off the mark – a paragon of management virtue, as too Bradford.

Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College
Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London
Robert Gordon University
Royal College of Art
University of Abertay Dundee
University of Bolton
University of Chester
University of Luton
Warwick Business School
Bradford College
Cumbria Institute for the Arts
Dartington College of Arts
Harper Adams University College
Hull York Medical School
James Watt College of Further and Higher Education
Northern School of Contemporary Dance
Trinity and All Saints College
University College Falmouth
York St John College
University of the Arts - London College of Communication

As expected the *majority* who were quick in sending out their prospectuses were recruiting/new universities and smaller HEIs who perhaps position themselves on the basis of a more personal touch.

We received a prospectus from 64 of the 166 institutions (39%) within two weeks of sending the letter which was thought to be an acceptable time frame. That means that two weeks later and the majority had sent nothing at all. Most did send something eventually so the missive had not been lost.

As a sector is this level of response adequate? We think not!

Three universities managed to send two prospectuses to us - which did not create a very good impression either – left hand and right hand not co-ordinated, and the environmentalists amongst the applicant population less than impressed.

Also, some even managed to send out two prospectuses carry a different year (2006 followed by 2007). Although keen to issue the new version, this did not create a positive impression with our tester. Better to write a personal letter saying a new version was available and to order one from the website if required?

2 Packaging

The prospectuses were either sent in paper envelopes or in plastic packaging. By far the most effective in terms of protecting from damage was the plastic packing. Often those in paper were delivered in a *ripped condition* which consequently meant that some of the contents were damaged. In one case the paper packaging was so badly damaged the prospectus was delivered in Royal Mail plastic packaging. This does nothing for presentation and reputation. Also plastic packing, when clear, allows for more of the University name and identity to be visible which created added exposure.

One college of art sent their prospectus in bubble wrapping. This will have been more expensive than the plastic and provided no extra support as the evidence is that basic plastic was adequate. However, it may have been an artistic statement, so we have kept it in case the Tate is keen on a future purchase.

One University has created an over sized prospectus. Now you have all heard the complaints from careers advisers on this (designers seem to be deaf on this one) but think about the implications for home deliveries. This prospectus was “delivered at the end of April (so no marks for speed) and it was easy to assume they stockpiled requests until the new prospectus was available. However because it would not fit through the letter box the Postman left them against a wall, open to the elements (April showers?). In most cases the Royal Mail simply leave a card saying “we tried to deliver but were unable to do so, please visit this sorting office to collect”. This may have a potential negative impact on applicants and parents and may not even be picked up. Those from WP backgrounds in particular that rely on public transport could find this a real pain. So, be distinctive but also practical. The C5 was distinctive – remember!

3 Extras Included

3.1 Covering letters

43% included a covering letter with their prospectuses. A few of these were personally addressed whereas others were addressed “Dear Enquirer”, and in some cases an enquirer identification number had been allocated (from which can be inferred that a database record was being created – good practice and projects a professional image). Covering letters often included some information about open days.

So that leaves the majority not even enclosing a letter! So much for IT driven relationship marketing. Many other those not enclosing a letter had used plastic covers – probably delivered to them direct from the printer. So plastic is good for robustness but perhaps a barrier to personalisation? Slap on a label and off she goes!

3.2 Open day information

23% included some additional open day information aside from that mentioned in covering letters. This was most commonly in the form of a leaflet or information sheet.

3.3 Postgraduate application form

38% of postgraduate prospectuses received included a separate postgraduate application form. In a few cases pre-printed envelopes were included for references. Seems like good practice to us.

3.4 Financial information

The table below shows those institutions (21) who included some form of financial information separate to that which may be included in the prospectus text. Clearly these HEIs are trying to address the confusion in the market relating to financial arrangements. Some here are offering discounted fees and thus have an interest in promoting financial issues, but some of those who have heralded their lower fees did not include any such information (and some were late in delivering so might project a cheap image through their service) .

Institution	Financial Information Provided
Aberystwyth	Scholarships information
Anglia Ruskin	Financial information booklet
Birmingham College of Food, Tourism and Creative Studies	Finance information booklet
British College of Osteopathic Medicine	Fees sheet and funding sheet
Buckingham	Fees sheet
Buckinghamshire Chilterns	Funding guide
College of Estate Management	Career development loan flier
Greenwich	Finance leaflet and tuition fees by subject guide
Hull	Bursaries and scholarships leaflet
Keele	Fees and living expenses information
Lincoln	Fees and funding guide
Northern School of Contemporary Dance	Financial assistance and fees booklet
Oxford Brookes	Finance booklet
Peninsular Medical School	Student fees sheet
Plymouth	Bursaries sheet
Rose Bruford College	Fees information
Southampton Solent	Bursaries and scholarships leaflet
Swansea Institute	Fees information for English, Scottish and Northern Irish students coming to Wales
University College London	Postgraduate sources of funding guide
University of Wales, Swansea	Tuition fees sheet
Warwick Business School	Fees sheet

3.5 Unique features

Any additional extras/features that were uncommon are recorded in the table below. We have highlighted some of the ones we found most interesting.

Institution	Extras/Features
Aberdeen	Teaching in Scotland advert and postgraduate CD Rom
Aberystwyth	Open day send back cards
Anglia Ruskin	Letters prior to prospectuses informing they had been dispatched. Maps with prospectuses
Bangor	CD Rom prospectus and postgraduate courses contact details sheet
Bradford	Mini guide to the city
British School of Osteopathic Medicine	10 reasons sheet, admissions charter sheet, term dates and statistical information
British School of Osteopathy	Directions sheet
Cardiff	Hotel advert with university promotion offer
College of Estate Management	Distance learning individual course booklets, UG and PG key facts pages and further information card
Croydon College	FE prospectus, free computer training flier , FE application form and part-time guide in newspaper format
Durham	Questionnaire card
European School of Osteopathy	Summer science course leaflet and application procedure flier
Harper Adams	HE Choices conference leaflet and Students Union 'Alternative Prospectus'
London Metropolitan	Contact details for each school
London South Bank	"Ranked top 10 for graduate salaries" printed on packaging

Newcastle	Postgraduate apply online card
North East Wales Institute	Prospectus in the form of a box of mini books
Peninsular Medical School	UG admissions FAQ sheet and non-school leaver admissions test information
Plymouth	Details card to complete and return
Ravensbourne College of Design and Communication	Student achievements and awards booklet
Rose Bruford	Season brochure – open days, summer schools, theatre and workshops
Royal Academy of Music, University of London	CD of students performing
Royal Agricultural College	Taster course information
Scottish Agricultural College	Part-time study information sheet
Sheffield	DVD
St Andrews	Visit day booking form
St Martin's College	PGCE grants sticker on postgraduate packaging
Surrey	New course in entrepreneurship sheet
Swansea	Sports booklet and university newsletter
Swansea Institute	"Not £3,000" flier
University of Wales, Newport	National Student Survey results flier
Warburg Institute	Information for applicants booklet
Warwick Business School	School profile booklet and newsletter
Wolverhampton	2006 visitors guide
York	Equal opportunities monitoring form, written work information sheet and open day information on packaging

4 Follow up contact

As at 1 May (six weeks after sending), two of the institutions had re-contacted our graduate regarding the enquiry.

The University of Lincoln sent a postgraduate open day postcard with a list of the subject areas available for PG courses and research.

University of Wales, Newport sent a personal letter asking if any further assistance was needed, checking that the prospectus had been received (nice touch and a good pretext for another point of contact). They also included details of full-time study open days and booking information and details of their part-time study information evening. The letter was sent by the Head of the University Information Centre (and not marketing or recruitment which to us sounds more "soft sell").

By the end of May (10 weeks) the following had made follow up contact:

Institution	Follow up contact
City College Norwich	Post card reminding contact details for any further assistance
Birkbeck	Open evening flier
London South Bank	Postgraduate/Professional open evening letter
Richmond University	Personalised letter and flier regarding scholarship opportunities Separate open day card "invites you and your parents to attend" with return address registration section
University of Westminster	Spring 2006 newsletter
Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College	Open day letter and card. If register for open day by 16 th June entered into free prize draw for an i-pod
The Open University	Open day events card

So there we have it. What can we conclude and advise?

1. The claim that database marketing and conversion activities are now state of the art across the sector seems wide of the mark. Service and standards vary widely and response is patchy.
2. We think that unless you have a good need to do so (event upcoming) or a top reputation, being too quick off the mark during the regular season might be a mistake. Better to be reasonably swift but provide a personal letter and some extras.
3. Do not post prospectuses than cannot fit through your average letterbox.
4. Use plastic envelopes but not at the expense of enclosing a covering letter.
5. Do include extras where they add value, but do not make you look desperate. Not too many inserts otherwise they fall out like confetti. Check that inserts do not take you into a new post band (you may not pay for it but the university or college does). Going over could cost £5,000 a year.
6. Try to test your system by contacting a small sample to find out if the material has been received.
7. Do NOT send two editions. Advice of the new edition in the covering letter and how one can be requested or downloaded.

Visit www.theknowledgepartnership.com for downloads of this report and for jobs in education marketing.

Forthcoming research activity from The Knowledge Partnership includes projects that HEIs can opt into:

1. The role of parents in higher education – a new era of engagement and expectations
2. Internal communications - best practice for campus communities
3. The impact of the Olympic Games and other major sporting festivals on HE – lessons from Sydney, Athens, Manchester, Melbourne and more.
4. Understand and marketing to the black and minority ethnic population – the major growth segment for domestic HE