

Marketing the Public School

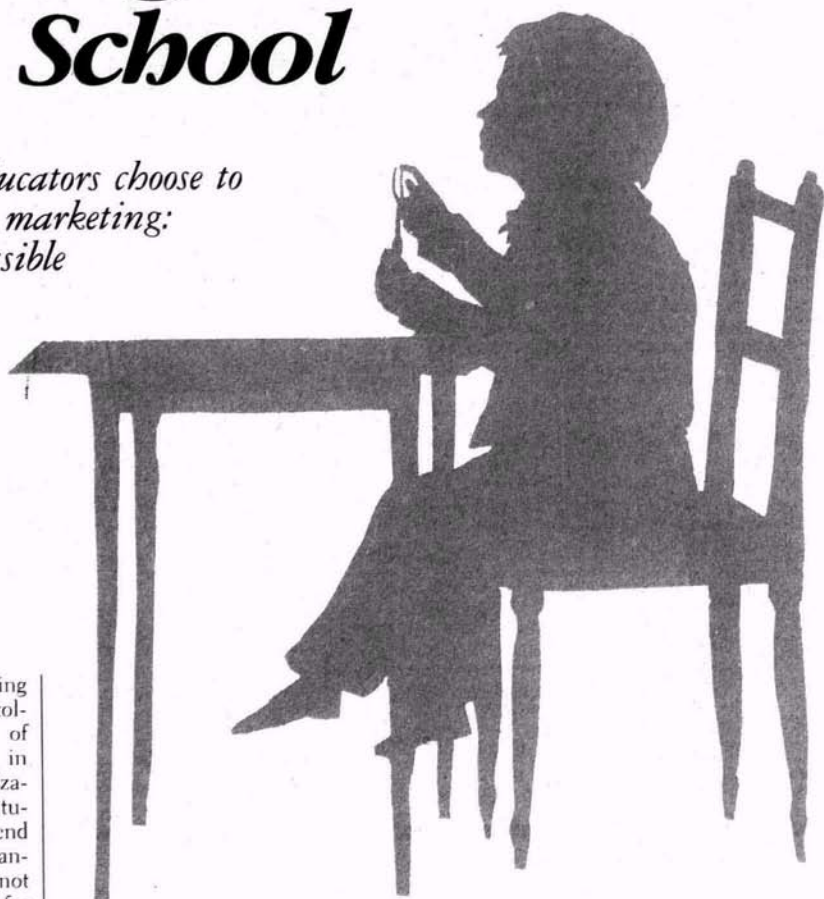
Regardless of what educators choose to call it, they should be marketing: developing the best possible product to fill the changing needs of students.

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Since the late 1960s, a growing body of literature has been extolling marketing as the means of resolving management problems in public and private nonprofit organizations, including educational institutions. Marketing professionals contend that "The choice facing those who manage nonbusiness organizations is not whether to market, or not to market, for no organization can avoid marketing. The choice is whether to do it well or poorly."¹

Educators interested in marketing have centered on "selling" or "promoting" the schools. Since 1980, California educators have staged a number of educational "expos" and "supermarkets" to showcase public education. The National Committee for Citizens in Education sells merchandise proclaiming "I Care About Public Schools!" The National Education Association sponsors television and radio spots that laud the achievements of public schools, plug

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volunteerism in classrooms, and plead for loyalty and support of the institution. There is little indication, however, that educators are considering aspects of marketing other than promotion and selling.

In the business world, the trend in successful companies has been away from a promotion and selling mentality to a total marketing orientation that pervades and influences decisions throughout the company. Marketing has come to mean attention to the changing needs and wants of consumers, with product development and delivery aimed at satisfying identified human needs. This consumer emphasis is exemplified, for example, by the job description of the brand managers of the Clorox Company:

- **Product.** Ensure that a product that fulfills consumer needs and wants is marketed. Requires consumer usage/attitude and product research, establishment of product improvement objectives, and periodic review of progress toward these objectives.

- **Positioning.** Periodically review marketing strategy in light of changing consumer needs, wants, and attitudes and competitive product positions. . . .

- **Media.** Requires periodic review of target audience criterion. . . .

- **Package Design.** Ensure that the package in the marketplace . . . connotes those attributes of the product most important to consumers.²

Since there are those who tout marketing as "the key to survival of the

public schools,"³ it makes sense to explore the marketing concept to assess its applicability to public school administration.

The Task Environment. A profit-seeking organization operates in a task environment consisting of three basic institutions: suppliers, marketing intermediaries, and the market. Suppliers provide the necessities of production, including labor, materials, and information. Intermediaries facilitate the distribution of the firm's product to its market by performing vital functions such as research, promotion, and transportation. The market is all actual and potential buyers of the firm's product.

The task environment of the public school encompasses an enormous government superstructure that acts as both supplier and intermediary to reach its market, school-aged children. Through elected officials, the general public maintains a close scrutiny of the public schools. Nearly one of every 4.3 persons is involved in the instructional processes of public elementary-secondary education.⁴ Public schooling is "big business."

Competition. Almost no firm operates alone in providing goods or services to its market. The successful firm identifies, monitors, and outmaneuvers all others to gain and maintain the loyalty and patronage of its desired market. Generally, companies prosper when they meet consumer needs; they fail when they do not.

American public schools have enjoyed a near-monopoly in educating the nation's children. Now, the public school "market share" is being seriously eroded. Estimates of nonpublic school attendance have risen since 1975, from 7 percent to "over-10 to 12 percent."⁵ The growing number of nonpublic school options threatens the financial base of the public school which is tied to per-pupil funding ratios. The voucher system looms as a powerful threat to public school hegemony. Voucher initiatives would have the state allocate money for the education of any child to a public, parochial, or private school depending only on family choice, making every school an equal competitor. The public school also competes with nonschool enterprises in providing many noninstructional activities, such

as driver training, sports, and recreation.

Publics. In its efforts to woo its target market, a firm encounters several publics. A public is any individual or group with potential or actual interest in an organization; who can affect an organization's ability to conduct its business; or whose own interests, activities, or well-being can be affected by the organization. The main publics of any organization include government, local or citizen-action groups, financial institutions, media, and the general public.

In business, government publics are often regulatory. They constrain the activities of a firm in matters of product design, pricing, packaging, advertising, and selling. Financial publics of a firm include groups who take an interest in or influence the organization's ability to obtain funds. Media publics can strongly affect the firm's capacity to achieve its goals. Favorable publicity is extremely valuable; unfavorable publicity can be devastating.

Nearly every citizen belongs to at least one school public since time invested in education indefinitely affects one's personal performance and quality of life. Fiscally, government, financial, and general publics of the school merge. Nearly 100 percent of public school income derives from taxation, state and federal governments contributing over half of the revenues.⁶ This post-1979 funding arrangement places public schools in tight competition for funds with other essential public services, including health, transportation, criminal justice, fire protection, and safety.

Ideally, regulatory functions of government over public schools involve protection of children, ensuring efficiency in management and providing the framework for instructional programs that produce an educated citizenry. In practice, however, government intervention hampers as often as it helps because of wide-scale bureaucratic inefficiencies.

Mass media play a dominant role in shaping public opinion of the public school, portraying it as the school of last resort through reports of violence, drugs, poor standards, low achievement, and a general decline in quality. Favorable publicity is rare.

Organizational Purpose, Goals, and Objectives. Every organization exists to achieve some specific end, its purpose

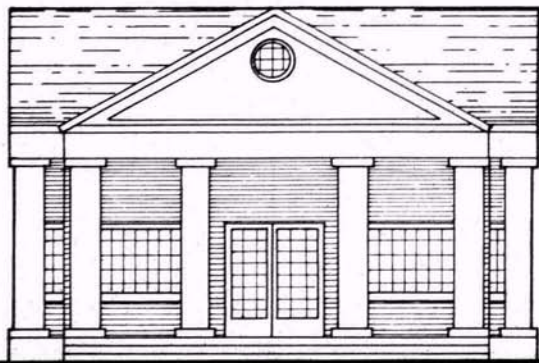
or mission. The answer to, "What business are we in?" defines the firm's mission, indicates the products it will offer and the consumers to be served, and suggests the communications and distributions policies.⁷ The statement of purpose translates into a set of goals and objectives which, to be maximally useful, are realistic, measurable, hierarchical, and consistent.

What, really, is the distinctive mission of the public school? Many educators are hard-pressed to answer. A common criticism is that public education lacks a sense of direction, or mission. For more than 63 years, the goals and objectives of public education have been linked to the "Seven Cardinal Principles." Grand and gloriously vague, they lack the specificity and relevance needed for the 1980s and beyond. In addition, because Americans have regarded the public schools as a "panacea for all social ills," the schools have tried to serve the range of intellectual, social, emotional, vocational, moral, and political needs of all young people and of society as a whole.

Strategic Marketing Planning. The key to a firm's survival and success is the quality of its strategic marketing planning. The strategic plan centers on selection of the market and the marketing mix, that is, the controllable variables the firm combines to satisfy its market. The four basic elements of the marketing mix are product, place, price, and promotion.

Profitable product policies emerge only from consideration of the consumer in the overall social and economic milieu. It is the single-minded pursuit of knowledge about, and sensitivity to, changes in public tastes and desires that determine marketing success. Products are designed based on the findings.

Product includes anything capable of satisfying a need or desire, such as an object, a service or activity, a place or an idea. Place refers to the provision of appropriate and accessible distribution and response channels so that motivated persons know when and where the product can be acquired and feel comfortable about making the acquisition. Price represents the cost to the buyer. It includes not only money, but any opportunities foregone, the expenditure of energy, and the psychological concerns aroused by the transaction. Promotion includes the range of communications



that make the product familiar, acceptable or desirable, and unique to the market.

In marketing terminology, the public school competes for "prospects" (students, the market); "develops products" (plans and develops educational programs); "prices the products" (sets minimum psychological, intellectual, and time commitments); "distributes the products" (schedules time and place for instruction); and "promotes the products" (disseminates information about school, students, and programs). All too often, these acts are perfunctory and rote, devoid of any sense of immediacy, concern, or informed innovation.

Management of Change, Research, and Evaluation. Essential to a firm's survival and growth is its ability to adapt to a rapidly changing environment. Performance in the marketplace reflects the degree of alignment of its purpose and objectives, marketing strategy and management system with consumers in their world. When an organization grows complacent, indifferent, or unresponsive to outside changes, its survival is threatened.

To remain viable, a firm periodically reassesses its basic purpose, target groups, competence, differential advantage, marketing program, and overall effectiveness. For this purpose many use the marketing audit, which is "an independent examination of the entire marketing effort of an organization covering objectives, programs, implementation, organization, and control, for the purpose of determining and appraising what is being done and recommending what should be done in the future."⁸

The public school faces large-scale problems caused by changes in demog-

raphy, economics, and public attitude. It appears these changes were not anticipated, and the public school is now at risk. Research encompassing operational issues and technological, demographic, psychographic, economic, and environmental changes should underlie all public school planning and programs. As it is, however, educational research enjoys almost no credibility or practical application at the public school level.

Ostensible evaluations of the adequacy and appropriateness of public school programs are, usually, merely measurements of student achievement of fixed academic standards. From some perspectives, this mode of evaluation is unsatisfactory, if not actually irrelevant. A more useful evaluation could be a measure of the satisfaction of the school's graduates as indicated by their life-role performance and their perceptions of the school's contribution to their own quality of life.⁹

Strategic Marketing Planning in the Public School? There are significant areas of comparability in the operations and problems of the public school and private business firm. A few schools and a few school districts actually do operate in accordance with the marketing concept. They identify their specific purpose and objectives; they conduct needs assessments of their target populations; they prepare programs based on their findings; and they affirmatively communicate with parents and other publics. They may neither have encountered nor countenanced "marketing" in the context of managing the school or district.

Whether the application of techniques common to the successful business firm and the effective school is called "marketing" is not really impor-

tant. What is important is the ability of educators to recognize when successful business strategies may appropriately be applied to the management of the public school and commit themselves to adapt those strategies where applicable.

Marketing as a corporate state of mind is a powerful concept. Its potency lies in aggressive and unrelenting efforts to stay in touch with the needs of the consuming public and the changes affecting them and in continuing efforts to satisfy needs more effectively and efficiently than any competitor. Maybe that is exactly what the public school ought to be doing and, in the process, leave to competent intermediaries and suppliers all the auxiliary tasks and activities. What the public school ought not be doing is "selling and promotion" designed merely to gloss over a tarnished image. **EL**

References

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