The Importance of Strategic Marketing in an Era of Enrollment Decline
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Colleges and universities across the nation observed a 7 percent decrease in undergraduate enrollment from 2010-2017 ("The Condition of Education - Undergraduate Enrollment", 2019). This decline has undoubtedly had an impact on fraternity/sorority communities across the country. Although institutions have felt the impact of declining enrollment in the past seven years, there are encouraging projections for the next decade. In fact, the National Center for Education Statistics projects a 3 percent increase in enrollment between 2017 and 2028. Nevertheless, it is important for fraternity/sorority life professionals to focus on strategic marketing to aid in garnering interest in fraternal organizations.

In 2017, fraternity/sorority life (FSL) at Jacksonville State University recognized a plan was needed to recruit and retain membership in fraternities and sororities, so a four-year strategic marketing effort was created. The first step was to measure the fraternity/sorority experience on campus. FSL worked with the Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness to develop a survey that measured our learning outcomes and the general experience of fraternity/sorority members. Next, we developed a non-fraternity/sorority member student survey to measure perceptions they had of the fraternity/sorority community, reasons for not joining, and what students are looking for when joining a campus organization. These two assessments were instrumental in developing a data-driven plan.

The purpose of this article is to serve as a practical guide to assist fraternity/sorority professionals in developing a data-driven strategic marketing plan for their community.

Developing the Strategic Marketing Plan
The first section of an effective strategic marketing plan is the executive summary. The executive summary is the last section to be written as it summarizes the key findings and future marketing initiatives to be taken by the office.

The next section of the plan includes a situation analysis. The situation analysis begins by examining the internal environment, the current marketing goals and objectives, the current marketing strategies and performance, the current and anticipated organizational resources, and the current and anticipated cultural and structural issues. The situation analysis then examines the customer environment. The customer environment analysis includes the answers to questions such as:

● Who are the office’s current and potential customers?
● What do students do with FSL membership?
Where do students join?
When do students join?
Why (and how) do students join an organization?
Why do students not join an organization?

After the customer environment, it is important to examine the external environment. The external environment examines competition, economic growth and stability, political trends, legal and regulatory issues, technological advancements, and sociocultural trends. The situation analysis is the foundation of an impactful strategic marketing plan. As such, it is important to allocate adequate time and resources to this section.

The third section includes an analysis that identifies strengths, opportunities, weaknesses, and threats (SWOT) to the fraternity/sorority community. It is important to note the strengths and weaknesses are internal factors while opportunities and threats are external factors and would exist even if the fraternity/sorority community did not. After the SWOT analysis is conducted, it is important to develop a SWOT matrix. This is a visual representation of the SWOT analysis and illustrates the need for weaknesses to be converted to strengths, threats to be converted to opportunities, and to utilize strengths to capitalize on opportunities. The next portion of this third section is to develop competitive advantages. Developing competitive advantages includes describing how the community will match the opportunities to strengths, how the community will convert weaknesses to strengths, and how threats can be converted to opportunities. It is also important to identify liabilities for the community (unconverted threats). The final portion of the SWOT analysis is to develop a strategic focus. In other words, what will be the main strategy employed by the community? FSL at JSU chose differentiation as the guiding strategy for the community. In other words, the FSL community chose to pursue a strategy that involves highlighting aspects of the fraternity/sorority experience that other organizations cannot, or do not, offer.

The fourth section involves developing a marketing goal and objectives to reach the goal. It is important to be as specific as possible when developing goals and objectives, so they are easily measurable. Vague goals and objectives lead to implementation issues.

The fifth section involves developing the marketing strategy for the community. It is important to utilize all of the data collected in other areas of the report when completing this section. This section will determine the primary target market and the secondary target market for the community. Primary and secondary target markets are important to identify so communities are allocating resources appropriately. Identifying a product strategy is the next step in developing an effective marketing strategy. It may sound strange, but the fraternity/sorority experience is
essentially the product to be marketed. The product strategy involves branding, benefits, and how the community will differentiate from other organizations. Pricing strategy is another important part of the marketing strategy. Although fraternity/sorority professionals do not have control of the cost of membership, we can share the socioeconomic data of students to help guide chapters’ decisions. It may also be necessary to help chapters develop a plan to effectively communicate the value of dues. The final step of developing a marketing strategy is identifying a promotion strategy. How will the community promote the benefits of membership and the fraternity/sorority experience?

The sixth section of the strategic marketing plan is to develop an implementation plan. While developing the plan, it is important to identify structural issues that may impede the progress of the plan and to develop tactical marketing activities. The tactical activities should include a specific description of the activity, person/department responsible, required budget, and target completion date.

Finally, the seventh section involves identifying evaluation and control mechanisms. It is important to identify formal controls, informal controls, and how the plan will be audited. Strategic marketing plans are living documents that must be frequently reviewed and adjusted to meet the needs of the community.

FSL at JSU has experienced an increase in membership since the implementation of the strategic marketing plan. In the plan, we set a goal of increasing the number of undergraduate students involved in FSL by 1% of the undergraduate student population for four years to reach a target involvement rate of 15% of the undergraduate student population. Our community achieved the first year’s goal and is currently at 12% of the undergraduate student population as of spring 2019. We will review the plan for effectiveness at the beginning of 2020 and make necessary changes to ensure that growth continues in the future.

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*Josh Robinson attended Jacksonville State University where he earned a Bachelor of Science in management and a Master of Business Administration. Josh currently serves as the assistant dean of students - fraternity and sorority life at Jacksonville State University. He is also a member of Pi Kappa Phi Fraternity.*
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