

# *University of Toronto: Marketing from Scratch*

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UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

**E**stablished in 1827, the University of Toronto is regarded as one of Canada's leading academic and research institutions. It has the highest number of students (both undergraduate and graduate), the most faculty members, and the widest range of courses among Canadian universities. It has often been referred to as the "Harvard of the North" because of both its high academic and research reputation and the fact that it has Canada's largest university endowment<sup>1</sup>.

The University of Toronto School of Continuing Studies (SCS) is the nondegree, general continuing education arm of the University of Toronto. It offers five distinct areas of study: Business & Professional Studies, Liberal Studies, Creative Writing, Languages & Translation, and the English Language Program (ESL). The school is committed to community engagement and accessibility and is open to all adults, regardless of prior educational status. SCS provides both individual courses and professional certification. Enrollment for the 2008 academic year was approximately 14,000. This case study traces the school's marketing efforts that resulted in recognition by the University Continuing Education Association in the form of a gold award for the school's strategic marketing campaign in 2008.

## **RECENT SCS HISTORY**

Since the installation of a new director in January 2006, the School of Continuing Studies has been undergoing a complete operational and programmatic transformation. Renewal continues to take shape in each of its five program areas as well as in its central corporate services areas. At the beginning of January 2007, the marketing department—three full-time employees with additional components of marketing held within other positions—was eliminated and a new head of marketing position was created to engage in a more strategic approach to SCS' marketing activities.

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As with many educational organizations, there are constraints on resources. The marketing department currently consists of one manager and one administrative coordinator. Although SCS previously engaged the services of an advertising firm, it was decided that the firm's services were no longer required because much of the strategic, marketing, and communications expertise was now in-house, and the amount that was being spent on the firm was better used elsewhere. The marketing department now project manages much of its marketing and communications efforts in-house, hiring third party vendors only on a case-by-case basis.

There was a clear consensus that SCS' marketing and communications needed to be remade: There was minimal awareness of the SCS mission and role within the larger university; its visual identity was inconsistent and "fuzzy;" and most significantly, what existed was underwhelming. Its entire marketing and communications strategy, materials, and visual identity needed to be reformulated.

However, despite the need to start from scratch, resource constraints dictated prioritizing the creation of a new brand, visual identity, and messaging in order to increase awareness and enrollments. A crucial component—our digital strategy (email and web)—would have to be kept in place with only minor tweaks to its search engine optimization (SEO); it would not be addressed until the second year of implementation.

The school envisioned a medium-term period of three to four years to adjust fully all aspects of the marketing mix and gain significant traction for its branding and awareness goals, given estimated current and future resources available. This would include full implementation of the new brand promise and identity; overhaul of basic print and digital materials and processes; consistency among channels; stability of both consumer and business-to-business (B2B) marketing mix; inquiry management/customer relationship management (CRM) application; metrics and market research.

## **CHALLENGES TO BRANDING THE SCHOOL OF CONTINUING STUDIES**

Despite being a division within one of Canada's best known and most prestigious universities, the School of Continuing Studies was relatively unknown to the wider community. More importantly, its mission as a nondegree, open-enrollment education provider was unknown. This was the case with consumers and, in significant measure, among individuals internal to the university.

Among those who were aware of it, it was often confused with the School of Graduate Studies; not perceived as being open to all members of Toronto's diverse population; not current, relevant, or significantly differentiated from its many other competitors.

Additionally, the University of Toronto possessed (and continues to possess) high brand equity related to its degree programs. Contributing to its high brand equity is the selectiveness of its degree student admissions. This also functions as a psychological barrier to prospective students, who may assume that this barrier to entry also applies to School of Continuing Studies registration.

The broad solution was to communicate SCS' high level of openness to and accessibility for the entire Greater Toronto Area community regardless of socioeconomic status, race, language, or educational background. It was also necessary to communicate that SCS programming was current, engaging, and useful. These qualities had to be conveyed while bolstering the perception of high quality and academic integrity coincident with the University of Toronto's already existing brand equity.

### **THE VALUE PROPOSITION**

The first step in articulating SCS' brand was to identify and articulate its fundamental value proposition, the value that a service or product offers to its purchaser. However, it is important to distinguish between a practical benefit and the value proposition.

A classic example of the difference is the marketing of an expensive sports car. The practical benefit being offered may be the fine engineering, high-quality finish, or its ability to go from zero to sixty in five seconds. The value proposition would be the feeling of power or success, or the promise that the product will enable a purchaser to win the dream "wo/man."

The value proposition of the University of Toronto's School of Continuing Studies—and indeed, of continuing education providers everywhere—is that it enriches the lives of its participants. In other words, it helps make lives better whether materially, intellectually, or socially. This was taken as the central value proposition of the school. This proposition was expressed by our theme, "Learn more." Supporting that central theme were the benefits that include the qualities of relevance, responsiveness, inclusiveness, and professionalism.

## COMPLICATIONS OF THE UMBRELLA BRAND

The brand equity associated with the University of Toronto's reputation, although high, is not completely coincident with the value proposition of the School of Continuing Studies and its role as a nondegree, open enrollment education provider.

The university's reputation for excellence serves SCS well as a cornerstone of SCS' value proposition. However, the university's reputation as a research institution with highly selective student criteria is somewhat of a deterrent for individuals considering nondegree continuing education options. Additionally, the university's mediocre to poor showing in the student-engagement components of high-profile rankings of university degree programs<sup>2,3</sup> in Canada works against SCS' message of student engagement and responsiveness.

For the larger university, the prestige deriving from research excellence implies long-term investment return. This is the nature of academic research and study. However, in general, many of the individuals who pursue nondegree and some degree continuing education programs do so in hopes of achieving immediate return on their educational investment<sup>4</sup>. They expect this through immediate application of their new knowledge and training or improved professional/career prospects.

The university's high level of student selectivity, while definitely enhancing the perception of brand excellence, is the opposite of the SCS mission of open enrollment for all individuals, regardless of educational or socioeconomic background.

It was important, therefore, to create a brand that could capitalize on the quality aspects of the University of Toronto's high brand equity, while carving out a positioning space unique to the School of Continuing Studies. Just as important was ensuring that the SCS brand was a variation of the university's best brand associations, and not dissonant with them.

## THE SOLUTION

Extending from the main proposition were the related values/outcomes arising from the principal proposition. It was expressed in various creative executions and throughout our materials by variations of the "...more" phrase: Learn more, Express more, Achieve more, Lead more, Live more, Earn more, Enjoy more, Create more, Celebrate more, Discover more, etc.

The message conveyed was that if one chose to learn more with the University of Toronto School of Continuing Studies, individuals were in a position to “earn more, understand more, relate more, express more, and celebrate more.” Individuals featured in all materials represented our goal of inclusiveness of the wide range of demographic, cultural, socioeconomic backgrounds and interests found in the Greater Toronto Area’s audience. The visual components, as well as the supporting copy, communicated the values of the school’s openness, professionalism, and relevance. The graphic elements were consciously designed to be modern, of the highest quality, and extremely professional.

Just as important as communicating the value proposition was differentiating the University of Toronto’s School of Continuing Studies. The “more” phrases, in conjunction with the University of Toronto’s high academic reputation, allow a related interpretation of our value proposition: that the University of Toronto’s School of Continuing Studies, due to the University’s reputation for high quality, enabled our students to “learn more, achieve more, earn more...etc.” than if enrolled elsewhere. Central to the differentiation of our program was the credibility and quality provided by the University of Toronto brand.

Our positioning strategy was to occupy the space in the consumers’ minds that says the University of Toronto School of Continuing Studies is the high-quality, high-impact provider for continuing education. Given the intensity of competition in the Greater Toronto Area, this positioning allows us to capitalize on the quality reputation of the University of Toronto (supported by examples of star students and instructors); justify some higher pricing; and create a brand identity that is not easily reproduced. It was a positioning that had provable points embedded in our campaign messaging and was applicable to both consumer and B2B target groups.

### **THE CAMPAIGN’S TARGET MARKET**

The two main marketing goals for the year were to increase awareness of SCS and its mission and to increase enrollments, particularly in selected program areas. Awareness campaigns tend to be very expensive, and the goal of increased enrollments was required in the short term. To resolve the two needs, and having relatively modest resources (given these two goals), SCS used both mass-marketing tools such as print and transit ads as well as more targeted tools such as direct mail, email, targeted placement, guerilla marketing, and targeted channels.

The main thrust of this campaign was to function as a brand awareness campaign. The initial first-layer target audience was, therefore, all adults within the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) seeking noncredit courses for personal enrichment or career enhancement (e.g., certification). This broad target group was warranted due to:

- the nature of the campaign (awareness);
- the wide variety of study areas within the school (business; liberal studies; ESL; creative writing, and languages and translation); and
- the goal of creating the perception of openness to all sectors of Toronto and Canadian society.

As a result, a wide variety of demographic (age, gender, ethnicity, employment) groups were visually represented in our materials so as to encompass deliberately GTA's wide social and cultural diversity.

However, within this widely represented group, we aimed primarily at those individuals most likely to enroll in our most significant revenue area, business and professional studies. This targeting was implemented through choice of communications channels, geographic placement/delivery of materials (direct mail, postal code drops), and by selective media placement.

This group is generally found in middle- and upper-income geographic areas; are likely to possess some level of accredited postsecondary education (university degree or college diploma); and range in age from 28-55. Those at the younger end of the age spectrum are motivated by the desire to augment their postsecondary degree/diploma with learning that will help establish their careers and/or enhance their prospects for meaningful employment. Individuals at the other end are motivated by the desire to ensure relevant career options or wish to upgrade/keep current their existing skills. Historically, we find that gender balance within business studies is relatively equal, with the balance slightly skewed towards females<sup>5</sup>.

## **CAMPAIGN GOAL**

The specific goals of the campaign were to:

- Communicate a new brand and visual identity that would, with great clarity, convey SCS as relevant, engaging, open to all, inviting, and of the highest quality.
- Publicize the wide range of offerings, the value that we bring to our students, the professionalism of the programs and services,

- the many “star” instructors who teach at the school, and the beneficial results for many of students who have enrolled.
- Increase awareness as indicated by more requests for calendars, more web visitors, and higher enrollments.
  - Create higher awareness and positive predisposition towards SCS and its offerings, both internally and external to the university.

### **CAMPAIGN COMPONENTS**

Communications materials were created to ensure consistency of visual identity and messaging. In the “Learn more” campaign, the value proposition was the focus of all materials. This campaign conveyed the idea that SCS allows you to “Learn more, Enjoy more, Earn more, Create more, etc.”. They were tied to the various areas of study offered at the school.

All materials supported the value proposition, positioning and brand differentiation of high “U of T” quality and credibility by using examples, either student or “star” instructors, of how SCS has helped make individuals’ lives/careers better; why/how continuing education is important, and; how qualified and passionate the instructors are about student success. The materials particularly focused on individuals within the School of Continuing Studies community who:

- already possessed national or local celebrity and who were acknowledged experts(instructors) or who had experienced success due to their experience with SCS students);
- represented the cultural and racial diversity of our community; and
- highlighted the wide range of subject areas for which we offer programming.

SCS also engaged the following channels:

- Transit advertising
  - o internal to subway cars, streetcars and buses
  - o strategically chosen subway platform locations
- Print advertisements
  - o newspaper placements in both local and national newspapers, generally in interest-specific sections
- Personalized / targeted email
- Direct mail to target groups based on desirable demographic data
- Street promotions / event giveaways of calendars (screened giveaways & information providers)

- Media (radio) mentions/ publicity
- Targeted locations/ distribution of calendars

### **CAMPAIGN RESULTS FOR 2008:**

#### *Increased community awareness*

During the most intense periods of promotion, the school experienced significant increases in requests for course calendars, including some historical highs during the months of August and December.

- The response to fall session promotions (from July 1 2007 to October 5 2007) resulted in significant increases in calendar requests. During July, August, and September, requests for our material increased significantly by 40 percent, 101 percent, and 37 percent, respectively, for an overall average of 59 percent during that period.
- In response to our promotion for the winter session (run from the last two weeks of November through December 29, 2007), we saw an extraordinary increase of 660 percent during December and 29 percent during January 2008.
- Website visits by unique IP addresses and individual visitors increased by an average of approximately 30 percent and 40 percent during this period.

#### *Enrollment increases*

- Fall: Overall enrollments increased only modestly during the fall session. However, selected / targeted areas such as Business & Professional Studies and Creative Writing saw gains of 20 percent and 18 percent, respectively.
- Winter: The cumulative effect of the campaign appeared to present itself for the winter session, which saw an overall increase of 21 percent, and increases of 21 percent in Business & Professional Studies, 55 percent in Creative Writing and 72 percent in Liberal Arts.
- Spring/Summer: Although data for the entire term are not yet available, as of June 2, by which time the majority of our spring/ summer courses began, we saw an overall increase in enrollments of approximately 62 percent compared to a similar period the previous year.



*Increased awareness and positive perception amongst internal stakeholders*

The school received appreciation and kudos from a number of important internal university stakeholders, including those at the highest executive levels. In addition to positive anecdotal feedback, one expression of appreciation has been the fact that other university departments have begun to replicate our look and use our suppliers.

*Creation of brand identity and assurance of quality of execution of materials and strategy*

To some degree, we have been able confirm the quality of our strategy and materials by acknowledgment and awards from external professional associations. The SCS marketing department has received eight awards for our materials and campaign strategy from three different organizations, including three (one from each organization) for its strategic marketing campaign and strategy.

## **WORK IN PROGRESS**

Although SCS has made significant progress over the last year and a half, there are still significant areas to be addressed over the next two to three years. SCS continues to develop its brand and positioning and look forward to consolidating the gains of the last year. In terms of new initiatives, of highest priority is developing a full-fledged digital marketing plan that will work in coordination with a new website (under development). The school's marketing continues to address issues such as the growth and maintenance of our email list and initiation of productive inquiry management system. Other significant priorities are more effective marketing metrics, market research, and the coordination between front-end customer inquiry and student services systems and their impacts on marketing and prospect growth. 📧

## **ENDNOTES**

1. *University of Toronto Endowments Annual Financial Reports*, 2007.
2. Sandy Farran, "Students Grade Their Universities," *Maclean's University Rankings '06*, November 2006, Volume 119, Number 45: 66.
3. "Globe Report Card on Universities," *Globe and Mail*, November 2006.
4. Eduventures, *Strategic marketing to adult learners* (February 2007), 33 pp., 299 KB, PDF.
5. In contrast, the school overall finds a much higher skew towards women.