



Contributed by
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Marketing the Institution

Until just fifty years ago, the idea of “marketing” a college or university was deemed inappropriate, even unprofessional, as it conjured up images of a high-pressure salesman using every means possible to push a product on an unwilling consumer. That is not to say, however, that academic institutions, like Nichols, did not promote themselves or adapt to consumer needs and interests, because they clearly did.

In the early 1800s, Nichols Academy relied heavily on word of mouth. The first students were presumably children of local Universalists whose parents were either founders of the Academy or heard about the new academy at church meetings or through correspondence. Although the Academy’s roots were religious in nature, the school itself was non-denominational, attracting non-Universalists in the surrounding area who were also interested in furthering their education.

Marketing an academy throughout the 19th century also included advertisements in newspapers and the publication of circulars and catalogues sent to prospective students and their families. Not too long after its founding, ads for Nichols Academy appeared in local papers in Southbridge, Webster, and Worcester, and later in larger cities such as New York and Boston. [A]

EARLY MESSAGING

The Academy’s promotional materials generally focused on five main areas of presumed interest, which became the staples of the Nichols message:

Academic courses. Early ads talked of “fitting” students for higher education at elite institutions, such as Harvard and Yale, and/or business careers and, by the 1840s, for careers in teaching, presumably more for females, as that was a significant career path for women at the time.

Rural location. By the late 19th century, there was a distinct bias against “the city” and the perceived ills that came with industrialization and urbanization. The 1875 Cata-

logue assured that “The student here is free from the temptations of city life, and the quiet of the country is more congenial to thorough scholarship.” But by the 1840s, promotional materials pointed out the proximity to the Webster train depot and accessibility “from stage lines from every direction,” to show that Nichols was not isolated.

Technology. By the 1840s, new “Philosophical (i.e., natural science and physics) Apparatus,” which may have included instruments such as air pumps, electrical machines, and microscopes, was noted, and after 1882 the Observatory was always mentioned.

Accommodations. Describing Roger Conant Hall, a new boarding house erected in 1883 when the previous one was destroyed by fire, the 1886 Catalogue boasts, “...The furniture is new, the beds are all fitted with the best quality hair mattresses, and the building is heated in the most approved manner by steam, radiators being placed in every room. The utmost care has been bestowed upon the plumbing and sanitary arrangements, and for comfort and convenience it has no superior....”

Athletics. After 1895, a new gymnasium in the back of the Academy building was touted as “equipped with parallel bars, dumbbells, chest weights, punching bag, etc.”

THE COLLEGE VIEW BOOK

The early 20th century saw widespread use of a new marketing tool, the college “view book.” A view book, as the name suggests, was typically an 8 1/2” x 11” bound or unbound collection of campus-related pictures accompanied by a bit of text. The first Nichols view book, titled, *Nichols: A Junior College of Business Administration and Executive Training*, was published in 1931 and featured captioned photos of the residence halls, campus buildings, and students posed in classes or with athletic teams and organizations. [B]

In the 1960s and 1970s, as competition for students increased dramatically, the college view book began to reflect new potential market populations. After 1971, when Nichols became coed, white males were still predominant in view book photos (as they were in real life at Nichols) but now women and people of color appeared. A more “customer-oriented” approach was clearly evident in the view books. Students became the focus, always pictured “in action” whether in class or on the field, and there were now many more photos of students in social and informal contexts than was previously the case. A single aerial photo of campus replaced the many pictures of buildings that were

the mainstay of earlier view books, and captions were dropped in favor of more text. The word “community” appears frequently. Faculty are also highlighted, lauded for their “academic excellence...their ability to impart that knowledge...and, above all, for their genuine concern for students.” [C]

ADVERTISING AND MARKETING

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, with the pool of high school graduates shrinking, the division of continuing education allowed the college to expand its reputation and markets. Dr. Edward G. Warren, dean of academic affairs, oversaw the marketing of the evening program, promoting satellite campuses around central Massachusetts with billboards, radio, and large newspaper ads (Nichols was “20 minutes away from wherever you are”) that were credited with keeping the college name and programs visible.

By the early 1980s, “marketing” was being embraced by colleges across the country and by the end of the decade an entire industry had developed to aid in the creation of marketing campaigns. Like other colleges, Nichols experimented with creative design to help separate itself from the pack. It also began to recognize the value of producing

higher end publications, as full-color images now popped off the page on glossy coated paper. [D]

In the early 1990s, the college employed a succession of marketing agencies. One marketing agency developed a humorous ad campaign for undergraduates that ran for a year. A series of ads took familiar business phrases and jargon and connected them to the undergraduate programs and experience Nichols provided. To maximize the campaign’s reach and frequency, the ads rotated a variety of headlines throughout the year. [E]

By 1997 the college reversed a previous trend to recruit out of state, even out of New England, and re-focused efforts in the tri-state area. An “Add It Up” advertising campaign highlighting positives that “add up to a successful value-based outcome” was developed.

BRANDING TAKES CENTER STAGE

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, “branding” became a ubiquitous term on college campuses. Nichols made a concerted effort to brand itself as a business school with a career success focus and a place where students could receive personal attention.

After being field-tested in a number of local high schools, the Nichols’ tagline of the early 1990s

went from “Invent Yourself” to “Your Success Is Our Business.” (Apparently other educational institutions liked this line as well; Nichols had to defend its trademark from unauthorized use a number of times – always successfully.) Mission statements were revised. A new logo was created. [F]

Technology, in the form of the Internet and the World Wide Web, was also making a significant impact in college marketing and recruitment. In 1996, the first Nichols website was created in a computer applications class by students of Professor Mauri Pelto. Before long, students could “tour” the campus, look at the college catalog, submit application forms, and pay their bills online. Today’s website is much more sophisticated, but the main objectives and features remain the same. [G]

The college’s most recent (and ongoing) branding campaign centers on “leadership” and a new vision statement (“Nichols College is a college of choice for business and leadership education as a result of its distinctive career-focused and leadership-based approaches to learning, both in and out of the classroom”), logo and tagline – “Learn. Lead. Succeed” – have been created. [H&I]

Currently, the college’s marketing effort is focused on reaching poten-

tial Bison where they live – online. To enhance the Nichols brand and name recognition, along with pictures and text on the college’s website, short videos – especially student-to-student testimonials – are embedded on our site and distributed on social networks. In November 2015, within the first three days of the posting of virtual tour and open house videos on Facebook, it was reported that there were over 7,492 views.

As important as technology is, however, the college has not forgotten the importance of one-on-one contact. A fully staffed, student call center, for example, is busy most evenings maintaining a personal touch with potential students through all stages of the admission process, from the inquiry to arrival on campus as new Bison.

Marketing and promotion have come a long way in the last 200 years, from word of mouth and small ads in local papers to harnessing the power and reach of the Internet. The fact that Nichols is still going strong is a testament to our ability to create a valued product and being able to successfully attract attention and interest.

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Nichols Academy, for Both Sexes, Dudley, Mass.



[A]

Text only was the norm in Nichols Academy ads, but one 1878 Academy circular had an engraving of the new boarding house, and an 1895 newspaper ad featured a picture of the campus.

[B]

In 1931, the first Nichols College view book was a tan-colored three-page, double-sided, folded pamphlet.



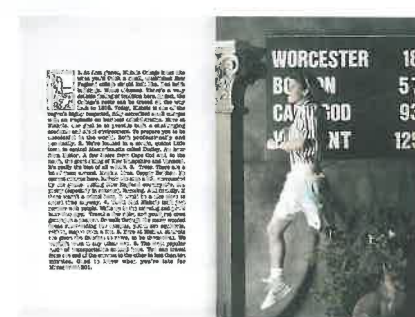
[C]

Large format photos and images showing greater diversity on campus characterized view books in the 1960s and 1970s.



[D]

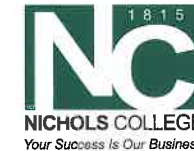
In fall 1987, Nichols distributed an oversized 11” x 15” view book that featured large type and eye-catching “tongue-in-cheek” photos. “First impressions” (left), for example, shows a running girl in shorts, sneakers and an official’s striped shirt in mid-air in front of a scoreboard. In the bottom right corner is a fox sitting in front of some shrubbery. On the far left is a Greek column. “A little culture” exclaims that one can “soar with the arts at Nichols.”



[E]



[F]



[H]



[G]



[I]

