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MARKETING

Guest Column: On campus it's all one big commercial

By **Ambika Sharma**
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A few academic sessions ago, while conducting a focus group session with the budding engineers from one of India's premier institutes, I was treated to a deluge of marketing jargon explaining why brands want to market to them and it took about five minutes to understand that this group had long since become disillusioned with the bombardment of brands branding their campus.

"Brands are here every week, we have five festivals in a year," they shared. When I probed and asked why do you participate? They very quickly said, "The gifts are cool!" They recall something! Unfortunately the next set of responses was not so heartening.

Here is what I found. They remembered the 'gifts' but hardly any one remembered the brand's activities with any enthusiasm. It was great that they recalled the brands but they didn't recall much else. As a marketer, who spends half the year engaging these budding premium consumers, this spelt bad news. A few more focus sessions down the line it was clear that I was standing on the foothills of change. Remembering the brand name is just not enough nor is the wildly enthusiastic 'day in campus' engagements, well not if we need to build a relationship with this group. On campus it's all just one big commercial. A game changer was needed.

So, having thought all of these insightful things the answer was quite simple "Who better to sell to a teenager than a teenager?" College students are, however, a tough crowd for marketers. Wired as the generation may be, its members not only tend to ignore traditional media - television, radio, and newspapers - but studies show they are no more likely to click open an internet ad than older adults are. They do, however, listen to one another. What breaks clutter is peer recommendation and consistency.

In the last few years, there has been a paradigm shift in how marketers are approaching campus marketing internationally. Peer-to-peer marketing hinged on the 'student ambassador' model has embraced the crux of effectiveness in strengthening a relationship with the campus communities.

Having worked to evolve a model intrinsic to India, here are five key to-do's that make for a successful campus programme and a must-have for any brand serious about marketing to youth long-term.

Recruit carefully: This is the make or break of the peer-to-peer marketing campaign. Recruiting the campus ambassador is easy; recruiting the right person is not. There is no real formula here - what you are looking for is a popular, ambitious, influencer with the right attitude and aptitude, who can be motivated to evangelise a brand on campus. This does not necessarily mean you zero in on the most popular guy on deck. It is important that this person be interested in your product. E.g. the person you may pick to evangelise a smartphone brand may not be the right person when looking at an ambassador for a social media platform. While he may have the aptitude for technology, he may not have the writing skills necessary to keep 2000 of his peers interested. Identifying the right skill-sets is necessary. More so is identifying the need, which will drive long-term focus or you may just end up with bored youngsters who "dint sign up for all this work" as one ambassador once informed me.

Motivate and keep interest alive: Why will youngsters on their way to building a serious long study lectures and exams to top that, every quarter devote his or her time to work Resume Fodder! It is the strongest motivator. Working with a well-known brand during the c serious weight to a fresher's resume. This does not mean that other motivations of short-ter or kind should be conspicuous by their absence. There are instances wherein large brand their brand ambassadors closely equating the programme to an interns^{hin}. Whatever be the final mix it must add value long-term or short-term in proportion to the effort you expect t _oungster to contribute.

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In a recent ongoing programme for a global online media giant, we saw that the ambassadors were struggling to build engaging and relevant online content. The solution was simple quickly put in place with a page that provided fun India-specific content on fashion, sports, and cute but rewarding contests. With more than 800 ambassadors finding their 'research' time cut by 80 per cent, productivity and quality went up within a few days. It's important that not only the workload is judged well, but also that it is balanced out through the academic year and all expectations be managed smartly. We may tend to miss the minor fact but they have to study too! Always keep their interest at the core of the programme; they will not miss the gesture.

Equip, train and empower: What every HR manager knows and every marketer will agree to. Access to a

pool of raw talent means that each step must be hand held and prepared for. An equipped team is an empowered team and the student ambassador is no different. Develop a relationship; give access to tools and tricks of the trade. Provide short-term goals with regular rewards. In a programme this very year we saw that having regular brown bag sessions informally with the campus ambassadors kept them informed as well as motivated to complete a specially challenging set of tasks. Empower your student ambassador and make him feel special, a notch above his peers. This could mean cool merchandise or an annual conference at a fun location, why not both! He is your strongest spokes person in his community, his endorsement and outreach is why the programme began in the first place.

Personal connect and support: This is perhaps the most critical and customised of the 'do's'. Just because you have a 1000 students to talk about your brand does not mean the task is easier; it's actually just the opposite. While your co-workers will appreciate your Saturdays, the student ambassador will not be so accommodating. They must have some one to reach out to always and they deserve quick accurate responses. If you expect them to bring a sudden spike in connections with peers, make sure you help them out. In one recent programme to help certain ambassadors evangelise the brand, a day of fun and engagement was organised with them for their friends at campus. The key is 'this was their gift to their friends'; it made them the campus hero. On the other hand, the brand well seeded in the campus community didn't hurt either. We saw that this 'day celebration with the brand at campus' saw 50-70 per cent better results than if we went to campus with no ambassador or ground seeding at all.

The method is a blend of other emerging tactics: buzz marketing, in which people talk up a product to friends and family without necessarily revealing corporate representation; WOM marketing; promo marketing; relationship or street marketing, etc. But the use of campus ambassadors makes it all of this and something more. It packs the power of endorsement in its subtlest yet most powerful forms.

This is not a map and when going for a strong campus programme, it would be best to have all experiential learnings at hand. Ensure you have a team that has its ear to the ground.

There have been strong RoI numbers, powerful sales figures, spiking brand health graphs, a recent one is that of 1.1 lakh product adoptions in five months. The ambassadors have made careers with global brands, some of them even by the brands they evangelised on their campuses. Over the years, the programmes have become stronger and potential for deep seeding has grown larger. All this innovation and constant evolution has had its rewards - for me as a marketer and I will like to believe for the students who have been or are ambassadors.

The author is CEO and Managing Director, Pulp Strategy Communications

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