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Ad Tracking, Brand Equity Research, and . . . Your Honors Program?

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All honors programs face the problem of making their institution's student body aware of the program's existence, its eligibility requirements, curriculum, and benefits. Directors who are already comfortable with the number of the program's members and applicants do not need to think much about awareness, publicity, and advertising. For example, the college's admissions department assists many honors programs in their recruitment. However, some directors must think hard and carefully about campus-wide awareness. These directors will naturally consider some type of advertising method. However, both before and after turning to advertising, directors need to address two important questions. Before embarking on an advertising campaign, they need to know *why* eligible students are not applying. After the campaign, they need to know *how effective* the advertising methods were. We will provide a template for other honors programs to use in answering both of these questions by describing a planned marketing research evaluation of a program's image among the student body and of our advertising efforts.

Advertising is defined as the communication of persuasive information about products, services, or ideas by identified sponsors through the various media (Bovee & Thill 9). Typical examples of advertising seen on campuses include advertisements from external sources (soft drink and credit card companies) and advertisements from internal sources (the registrar's office), and they may take the form of fliers, posters, displays, informational tables at school events or in common areas, or announcements on campus closed-circuit television. Daniel Starch explained in 1923 that, regardless of the medium,

advertisers historically have recognized that, to be effective, advertising must be seen, read, believed, remembered, and acted upon.

Since Starch, researchers and practitioners in advertising have developed advanced methods to understand the target audience's attitudes about a product or brand and also the effects of exposure to advertising. These methods are called, respectively, brand equity research and advertisement tracking.

Brand equity is a measure of the strength of a consumer's attachment to a brand (Feldwick 37) and includes measures of brand awareness, perceived quality and other consumer associations with the brand (Aaker 27). In the context of honors, brand awareness is an important marketing measure. We can ask students to recall the program name if prompted ("What programs for academically gifted students exist at York?"), and we can ask them to recognize the program name from a list ("Which program, from this list, requires a thesis for graduation?"). Measuring associations to an honors brand is another element of brand equity. A list can be developed of suspected *selling points* of the program ("classes with only other honor students") and also a list of *fears* concerning student beliefs ("only nerds are in the program"). Students can then be asked to select all statements which they feel are advantages of the program and to select all statements which they feel are disadvantages of the program. Honors brand quality can be measured by statements regarding the benefits of the brand ("The honors program improves the image of the college to the public" and "The honors program encouraged higher academic standards for the entire college") and by asking students to respond to Likert response scales (one-to-seven-point numerical scales).

While brand equity methods generally examine pre-existing attitudes about a brand, ad tracking research determines the effectiveness of advertising by examining the consumer's response to advertising (McDonald 119). Useful ways of measuring consumers' responses vary and include recognition of advertising (McDonald 120), recall of advertising, awareness of brand, perceptions of brand, attitude toward brand, and reported consumer behavior (Feldwick 114). In the context of honors, ad tracking can be measured by asking students how often they heard their instructors talking about the program or whether they remember an honors student coming to their class to speak about the program. Another way to measure student awareness would be to question students about the content of advertisement messages. For example, students can be given a list of statements about the program ("Honors students take special classes just for honors students") and asked how confident they are that the statement is true.

These marketing research techniques can be applied to the publicity work of any honors program but are especially useful for those that must rely on self-generated advertising.

CHARACTERISTICS OF HONORS PROGRAMS AND THE NEED TO ADVERTISE

While all honors programs must at some time advertise, certain situational factors can make this process easier or more difficult. One such factor is student living arrangements. On residential campuses, students are part of many communications networks that can be accessed and used for the dissemination of recruitment information. Residential life, for example, can be asked to pass on messages, or fliers can be posted in dorms and dining halls. These avenues for advertising are not always available on commuter campuses. The duration of the program, measured in semesters or terms, can be another factor. Four-year honors programs usually integrate recruitment information with general college admissions and scholarship information for incoming high school students. In many cases, honors programs are created or used as general admission incentives (Sevier 30). Two-year programs that run only during the junior and senior years and recruit from the college's matriculated students will not have the benefit of the organization, funding, and reach of the admissions office. Finally (though not exhaustively), the ratio of adjunct to full-time faculty can affect recruitment efforts. With higher ratios, students will be in classes more often with adjuncts, who may not be familiar nor feel a connection with the college's honors program. Adjunct faculty may be less likely to encourage students, as a class or individually, to explore the honors program.

OUR TRIAL ADVERTISEMENT METHODS AND OUR ASSESSMENT OF THEM

These three situational factors—commuter campus, high adjunct ratio, and two-year program—describe the unique situation at York College in Jamaica, New York. York College is a commuter liberal arts college which grants bachelor's degrees in over forty majors; it also has several professional programs and one master's degree program. The youngest senior college of the City University of New York's system, York was founded in 1966 and moved to its current campus in 1986. Over forty percent of York's classes are taught by adjunct instructors.

York's student body reflects the diversity of its location in Queens: of the 6,727 students, most of the students are Black (47%), with fifteen percent Hispanic, nine percent Asian and four percent White. Forty percent are not U.S. citizens, and over a third (38%) are twenty-five years old or older.

THE HONORS PROGRAM

The York College honors program is, like the college itself, a young program that has been in existence for only seven years at the time of this study. The program traditionally has had only twelve to fifteen active members, who all enter the program in their junior year. Students are required to take two

interdisciplinary honors seminars, convert two general curriculum courses into honors contract courses, and complete an honors thesis, all while maintaining a 3.25 GPA. The program graduates about four students per year.

The main impetus of this study was to better understand the general student body's impressions of the honors program. Even though approximately three hundred first-year and sophomore students meet the GPA requirement to apply to the program, barely 20 apply each year. Anecdotal conversations revealed that students had incorrect impressions of the honors program or were unaware of its existence. This lack of awareness suggested that our publicity methods were lacking. Thus, we included ad-tracking measures in our study to objectively examine the effectiveness of our traditional publicity methods as well as two novel publicity methods.

Traditionally, we advertise the program by sending letters, emails, and fliers to instructors, requesting that they read the fliers to their class and then pass them out to interested students. Two new activities were implemented and tested: starting an honors student club and sending honors students to classes to talk about the program.

THE HONORS CLUB

By design, York College has a very active student club system, which is used to create a sense of community on the commuter campus. The importance of the clubs at York is illustrated and reinforced by "club hours"—a reserved time from noon to 2:00pm every Tuesday and Thursday when classes cannot meet—that provide exclusive meeting time for student clubs.

The honors club is a student club sanctioned and funded through the Student Activities office and Student Government. All student clubs, regardless of their focus, must be open to all college students. The honors club was suggested by our second author, who served as the honors director at another college for six years; it was envisioned to serve campus students who are not currently associated with the honors program. This outreach club would not just advertise the program (such a club mission could not exist under student activities rules and in any case would not be very interesting) but would promote the honors program by providing a sample of the activities engaged in by members of the honors program, such as cultural events or scholarly talks, and by providing fellowship with honors students who were also engaged in club activities.

In the spring of 2008, the honors club hosted two events. The first was a talk given by a popular professor titled *More on the Psychology of Evil* (attended by twenty-four non-honors and five honors students), and the second event was a pizza and film night that involved the viewing and discussion of the Kurosawa film *Rashômon* (attended by five honors and four non-honors students). Both events were publicized by fliers posted around campus.

THE CLASS-VISITOR PROGRAM

The class visitor program was our second new advertising scheme. Two honors students contacted instructors teaching lower-level courses and requested ten minutes of class time to talk about the program. When invited to a class, the visitors would describe the eligibility requirements, the program, and its benefits, and then they would pass out application forms.

TIMELINE AND OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

Both the honors club and the class-visitor program were implemented during the middle of spring semester, 2008. During the first few weeks of that semester, we collected our pre-test data by using an online questionnaire with access to a representative sample of York College students. After the activities were completed, we collected our post-test data. By analyzing the pre-test data, we assessed ambient student attitudes toward the program. By comparing the pre-test and post-test data, we assessed the effectiveness of the combined effects of the honors club and class-visitor program.

SURVEY OUTCOMES AND CONCLUSIONS

We will present an overview of our survey's outcomes organized by our three goals for the assessment:

- Goal 1: Using brand equity measures to better understand the ambient attitudes York students have toward the honors program.
- Goal 2: Assessing the current publicity methods using pre-test ad-tracking questions.
- Goal 3: Assessing our trial publicity methods using the post-test ad-tracking questions.

GOAL 1:

UNDERSTANDING AMBIENT ATTITUDES VIA PRE-TEST BRAND EQUITY

An important component of ambient attitudes is brand recognition and recall, i.e., whether students remember or recognize the program. When our 136 participants were asked to list the names of college programs for academically gifted students, 86% of the students surveyed indicated that our college had no program for academically gifted students or were unable to recall one. Only about half of the students were able to recognize the honors program name based on a description of its basic characteristics. These findings not only indicate a lack of awareness of the program but suggest a more general problem for the college regarding student perceptions of the quality of York's programs and students. The honors program is not the only program at the college

for gifted students (there are six of them), yet 86% of York's students could not name even one of these programs. In response to the data, we have suggested that the college administration review the effectiveness of their public awareness activities regarding the many outstanding York programs for academically advanced students and the many high-achieving York students.

Even though students generally did not know that York had an honors program, they responded positively to all of the questions about their attitudes towards the brand. They thought that an honors program was important to the college, helped improve the image of the college to the public, and encouraged higher academic standards for all college students. These results would suggest that students do not naturally associate York College with academic excellence, but, if forced to consider the possibility, they *assume* that some program exists. This assumption indicates that the honors program should focus on brand advertisement (name recognition) and that this focus should be a high priority. Beyond that, the data from the advantages/disadvantages portion of the survey allowed us to further tailor our advertising message.

The participants were given twenty-three items and asked first to select the items that were advantages of the honors program and then to select the items that were disadvantages of the honors program. The percentages of participants who selected each item are presented in Appendix A.

Among the advantages, those with the highest percentages were: helps on application to graduate school (77%), helps on job application (76%), and improves career opportunities (71%). The disadvantages with the highest percentages were: extra classes to take (40%) and honors courses cost extra money to take (38%). These top advantages and disadvantages can help us design the specific content of our advertising and also reconsider issues of program development. Currently, the selling points of the program on our recruitment literature are program elements themselves: cultural experiences (44% saw this as an advantage), research experiences (55%), special courses (43%), writing a thesis (29%), and working with a mentor (47%). In order to make our recruitment message more appealing, we needed to emphasize graduate school admissions, job application advantages, and career opportunities.

The disadvantages with the highest percentages were informative about the success of our advertising and the direction that advertising and our program should take. Thirty-eight percent of the students thought that honors courses require extra money to take, a surprising result since honors courses do *not* require additional funds. Thus, we added, as one of the elements of our recruitment advertising, the statement that honors courses do not cost any extra money and are covered by normal tuition. The disadvantage with the highest percentage was having to take extra courses. Currently, honors program courses satisfy no general education or major requirements, but they are part of the student's liberal arts requirement, which requires students to take courses beyond their major and general education requirements. We now, in our recruitment literature, explain the concept of the liberal arts requirement

(students seem uncertain about this) so that students can understand that the honors program does not require additional credits. Also, the honors committee has been trying to convince faculty and administrators to support a plan to develop an honors curriculum that satisfies general education requirements. Our data can be used to support such a plan.

Finally, students saw as advantageous two items regarding scholarships for honors students. Currently, our college does not provide any scholarships for honors program students. However, the program director and faculty committee have been petitioning the administration to begin some type of financial aid program for honors program students. Our data provide us with strong empirical support for the petition.

GOAL 2: CURRENT PUBLICITY EFFECTIVENESS VIA PRE-TEST AD TRACKING

Key to our traditional publicity methods was that instructors mention the admission requirements for the program. Two thirds of the students reported that they could not recall an instructor mentioning either the honors program or club. Only half reported having “heard” about the honors program, and a third reported hearing about the club. Furthermore, only 17% were able to recognize the GPA required, and only 34% were able to recognize the credits required to join the program.

Beyond our basic advertisement message (the admission requirements), what did students know about the program? To answer this question, we gave students several statements about the program and asked them to rate their confidence in the veracity of the statement. Overall, students lacked confidence about all of the elements of the program. Participants lacked confidence in whether there were special classes for honors students, on- and off-campus activities for honors students, a thesis required for graduation, a thesis mentor, and a special honors lounge for members.

Based on our ad recall data, we concluded that our current advertising methods were ineffective, most likely for one of two reasons: the professors do not talk about the program, or students do not remember such talks. Regardless of the reason, we concluded that the time and effort taken to encourage professors to talk about the program in class could be curtailed without much effect on program awareness.

Segmented Market Analysis

Although we had over a hundred participants, most were not within our targeted market segment. A market segment is a subset of the entire market with a desired demographic characteristic (Wright 892). Our desired characteristic was eligibility to apply to the honors program. The data records of participants who met our application requirements (GPA and credits remaining) were identified.

This segment was represented in our sample by twenty-seven participants. These students were not more likely than the participants who did not meet the application requirements to have heard of the honors program. In fact, our target demographic responded to our questions similarly to the non-target demographic except for three questions: our target segment was more likely to know about the honors lounge and more likely to desire to join the honors club and honors program. This finding suggested that our target group was unaware of the program itself but felt that they themselves were honors material. This knowledge possibly indicates that our target market is interested and motivated to learn about the honors program (please see below about the honors club).

GOAL 3: NEW PUBLICITY EFFECTIVENESS VIA POST-TEST AD TRACKING

On all of these items—program awareness, ad recall, knowledge of the brand and brand attitudes—we detected no improvement from pre-test to post-test in students' familiarity with the brand and attitudes toward the brand. Thus, the combined effect of the honors club and the class-visitors program did not make students more aware of, knowledgeable about, or favorable toward the honors program than previous marketing methods.

However, nearly 13% of post-test respondents reported attending club events versus 2.3% in pre-test. This finding is another positive point in the data and is especially interesting if we consider that no recruitment messages were included in the club events. Thus, attendance probably did not influence knowledge about the program, which suggests a course of action for the future: increase the number of club events in a semester, and include recruitment messages about the honors program in each meeting. If we take this finding along with the findings from our market-segment analysis (that our target segment is not more aware and knowledgeable but motivated), a speculative conclusion can be constructed. Since our target segment students consider themselves honors program material, perhaps they attended honors club events to learn about the honors program; if this is correct, program advertising should be added to the honors club events.

In summary, our study has indicated several courses of action: (1) provide scholarships for honors students; (2) design honors courses to satisfy general education graduation requirements; (3) include in our basic message that honors classes do *not* cost extra money, nor do they add to the total number of credits needed to graduate; (4) de-emphasize the importance of professor in-class announcements; (5) do not proceed with the class-visitors program; and (6) schedule more honors club events, and include announcements about the honors program at those events.

CONCLUSIONS AND NOTES ON DESIGNING AND CONDUCTING A STUDY

We had two goals for this paper: to share our ideas about the honors club and class-visitor program and to share our adventures in objectively assessing our publicity activities.

We believe that the honors club, a student club for non-honors program students, is a unique and potentially useful idea. We hope that other programs may benefit from emulating our idea. While our class-visitor program was unsuccessful, we believe it could be usefully implemented at other campuses. We have a small and nascent program which relies on students who join the program after their sophomore year. If your program has similar characteristics, you may wish to test the effectiveness of a visitor program. We would caution you that, even though our study found some positive results for the honors club and no results for the class-visitor program at our college, your college may be different. The honors club might not work at your college while the class-visitor program might. To find out, you will need your own marketing research study.

A second goal of this paper was to describe and share our idea of applying marketing research strategies to an honors program. Such strategies are not time-intensive. Our evaluation program was conducted using about two hours per week for one and a half semesters and provided us with some very useful information. Also, in this era of outcomes assessment in academia, the results of such a study are understandable to and can be used to influence administrators.

If you decide to conduct your own study, please remember that some parts of our survey can be directly copied, but other parts of the process should be re-conceptualized for your campus. For example, our brand equity questions (advantages/disadvantages) were specifically developed with our program and our student body in mind. To develop our list of twenty-three items, six honors students and the director had a fun brainstorming session developing phrases such as “only nerds in the program.” Ad recognition (“Did an honors student speak to your class?”) and ad recall (“What is the GPA requirement?”) questions should also be developed uniquely for your program and campus. However, the attitudes toward the brand, brand awareness, and consumer behavior questions will probably require minor adaptation for your own use.

Materialistic concepts such as ad tracking and brand equity may seem at odds with the urbane world of college honors. However, honors programs must work with the situation they are in and work with the resources they have. We have identified situational characteristics some honors programs face and have also described our efforts to succeed with our program’s marketing in spite of some limitations. We have also described our efforts to evaluate carefully and objectively the expenditure of our resources. With limited resources, a program has to assess their activities carefully and objectively rather than relying on anecdotal beliefs or tradition. We have identified several directions our program should take using these methods and hope you find our experiences useful.

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APPENDIX A

**PERCENTAGES OF PARTICIPANTS SELECTING A STATEMENT
AS AN ADVANTAGE OR DISADVANTAGE OF THE
HONORS PROGRAM IN PRE-TEST**

| Statement | Pre-test | |
|---|-----------|--------------|
| | Advantage | Disadvantage |
| Classes with only other honor students | 29% | 15% |
| Extra-curricular activities | 43% | 16% |
| Extra classes to take | 26% | 40% |
| Financial aid for other honors students | 41% | 8% |
| Greater/more responsibilities | 38% | 24% |
| Helps on application for graduate school | 77% | 10% |
| Helps on job application | 76% | 8% |
| Helps students transfer to other colleges | 51% | 9% |
| Higher academic expectations | 49% | 22% |
| Honors courses cost extra money to take | 11% | 38% |
| Improve career opportunities | 71% | 7% |
| Lack of appreciation for efforts | 7% | 24% |
| Lack of recognition for efforts | 7% | 22% |
| No scholarships or financial help | 6% | 22% |
| Only nerds are in the program | 7% | 16% |
| Scholarships for honors students | 55% | 7% |
| Special recognition | 62% | 8% |
| Special scholarships for honors students | 57% | 7% |
| Students get laptops | 17% | 7% |
| Students have cultural experiences | 44% | 7% |
| Students have internship experiences | 55% | 7% |
| Students have research experiences | 53% | 7% |
| Students take special honors classes | 43% | 9% |
| Students use honors lounge | 31% | 11% |
| Students will write a thesis | 29% | 24% |
| Students works with faculty mentor | 47% | 6% |

Percents calculated based upon the number of participants selecting an item: n=136

