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Marketing to Future MBAs: The Dean's Perspective

As Sally Blount knows all too well, even a leading business school has its work cut out for it when it comes to branding, positioning and customer feedback.

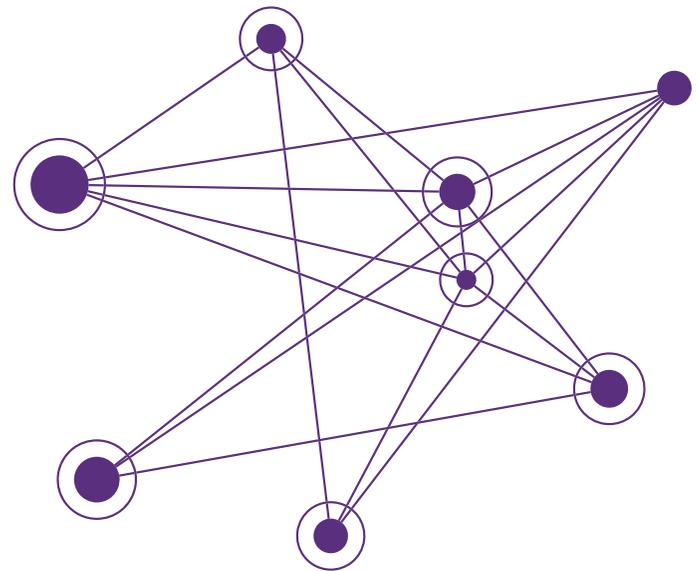
Now in her third year as dean of the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University, Blount has adopted a textbook approach to positioning Kellogg. Her process, strategy and implementation program may someday be taught as a graduate-school case study. It's certainly worthy of examination by marketers seeking to advance their businesses.

Blount began in July 2010 with a classic focus on listening and learning. "The first 100 days were very relational," she says. Though Blount is a Kellogg alumna with deep knowledge of the institution, she actively listened to all stakeholders including students, faculty, alumni and prospective employers—everyone who had a view about the school. From there, she started collecting a fact base so that speculations and ideas from her initial conversations could be validated. "We started collecting a ton of data. One of the biggest challenges in our marketplace is there is so much data available and you have to figure out which data you need," she says.

Through her early analysis, Blount realized that several near-term changes were required. "We weren't living our brand as much as we needed to," she says. Then in her second hundred days on the job, she developed a concept for reorganizing "to be better at listening and responding to our stakeholders," she says. "We did a lot of operational adjustment, thinking about how we touch students, our faculty and our alumni."

One year into her tenure, Blount embarked on a comprehensive strategic planning process. "You have to have a great plan," she says. "We literally had hundreds of alumni, students and faculty engaged with us in developing our plan." She also had leading consulting firms "helping do a deep dive on our competitive positioning, evaluating where we were, where our competitors are and thinking about where the green space is that we should move to in the future."

From all of their research, Blount and her colleagues discovered Kellogg's points of differentiation, including the versatility of its graduates. "We looked at our top competitors and 80% of their student job offers come from 20 or fewer recruiting companies. At Kellogg, 80% of student job offers come from 200 recruiters, including the 20 that are on that short list for those other schools. Ninety-five percent of our students have jobs within three months of



graduating," Blount says. "We really create the well-rounded person."

With a comprehensive strategic plan in hand, Blount and her team developed a new advertising and communications program headed up by a campaign with the slogan, "Think Bravely." The communications say: "Businesses can be bravely led, passionately collaborative and world changing. It is time to elevate the art and science of management to bring together ideas and push complex human organizations forward. That's what we teach."

Blount's summary of Kellogg's mission is compelling. "At Kellogg, we're serious about changing the world," she says. She sees the purpose of Kellogg to be nothing short of "a very mighty calling."

"We are the only place in the university that teaches students everything that humans know about how to build strong organizations and how to leverage the power of markets," she adds. "I don't know of two better mechanisms for changing the world for the good."

Blount has multiple metrics for gauging the success of her efforts, but what delights her most is the rate at which admitted prospective students choose to matriculate at Kellogg. Kellogg hosts weekends to encourage admitted students to attend. "At the last one, we had our highest success rate ever," she says.

Blount is well-suited to lead one of the world's leading business schools. She earned a joint bachelor's degree with honors in engineering and economic policy from Princeton. She served as a strategy consultant at Boston

Consulting Group and then took over as the director of finance and accounting at an entrepreneurial design company, Eva Maddox & Associates, which was later sold to Perkins + Will, the global architecture and engineering firm. She earned her Ph.D. in management and organization at Kellogg, and then taught at Kellogg and the University of Chicago Booth School of Business before becoming dean of the Stern School of Business at New York University.

"It was at Kellogg that I finished discovering my calling, studying at the intersection of psychology and economics. My specialty is negotiations and behavioral decision-making. I think a lot about how people reach agreement," she says.

Blount has straightforward advice for young marketers seeking to advance their careers:

- "Get exposed to different environments early. It gives you more range for solving complex problems later in life."
- "Seek feedback constantly and learn how to take negative feedback. It's a rare skill."
- "Think systematically about what kind of education you need to make yourself more effective. More education is always better."
- "Education isn't always about vocation. It's about giving you a stronger, more resilient brain so you can contribute and make the world a better place." **m**



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