



The Career College Information Source

# **Career College Broadcast Media Commentary and Analysis**

*By Cheryl Hentz with Tammy Quadrini, president and CEO of  
Griffin Marketing Group*

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*This is part of a continuing series of quarterly reports on the media environment for career schools.*

**Career Education Review:** *We are nearly finished with the first quarter of 2013. What have you experienced so far this year?*

**Tammy Quadrini:** From a results standpoint it's still pretty consistent in the sense that the certificate-based clients are doing much better than the associate's or bachelor's degree clients. This has been a trend for several months now, which I think is a direct result of the fact we're still in a situation where the economy is hurting; people need jobs and when it comes to education, people want to get their training and get out there and get a job. They tend to want to do it quickly, and that is making the certificate-based schools more successful right now.



Tammy Quadrini

## Tackling Negative Press

One trend I've been seeing for awhile is that we've got a real issue

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with for-profits getting bad press – whether it be in the media or on review sites from individual posters – and poor reputation management on the part of the schools. It's something our industry really needs to address.

We need to figure out how we face it, how we attack it, and how we challenge it. Certainly, there are options for reputation management. You can hire companies to clear up things posted on review sites to help clear your name and to get more positive reviews out there and so forth. The problem with that includes several factors: First, it's expensive; second, it's like chasing a moving target. No sooner do you get one problem taken care of and you're chasing another

one on another level—and it never seems to end. Third, and most importantly, many of these review sites, especially when you dig into the details, have one main purpose and that is to trash the for-profit education sector. And, for all intents and purposes, many of them are actually extortion sites. They tell you that “for a small fee” you can improve the information or remove the bad reviews on their sites. One of the main obstacles with these negative reviews, whether true or not, is that the average person in our target audience doesn’t realize that the majority of the posts, just by their nature, are more likely to be negative. People who have something to say just want to vent; so oftentimes the comments are usually by individuals who are ticked off about something and were either an unsuccessful student, or perhaps a disgruntled employee. So, more than likely these reviews are going to be negative anyway. Conversely, more often than not, the people who have something really positive to say are people who did well in school, graduated and got jobs, and now don’t have time to sit and write a two-page horrible review about the school.

So how do we attack this? Do we chase down poor reviews through reputation management and try to get a hold on this or do we come at it through the back door? Our opinion at this juncture is to primarily come at it through the back door in a couple of different ways.

First of all, balance out the negative message with a positive one. When you’re pushing your creative message, get other people to tell your story. Get graduates to tell your story about

what a fantastic experience they had at your school, and how your institution has great ethics and integrity. Get employers who hire your graduates to tell your story, and how the first place they go to get good, qualified candidates is YOUR school. Get employees of your school to tell your story, and why it’s such a great place to work, and how it’s obvious that students



*A Workforce Communications Strategic Partner*

Since 1995 **Griffin Marketing Group (GMG)** has been providing direct response advertising services for education clients. GMG specializes in media negotiation, placement and detailed lead analysis, and can provide production, print and Web services, as well.

**Tammy Quadrini** joined GMG in 1998 and has been president and CEO since 2007. She has over 23 years of school TV direct response experience, starting with several small agencies and then switching to Bates USA as the direct response media supervisor in charge of ITT Technical Institutes and the Indiana Department of Tourism. Quadrini supervised the local buying for the 44 ITT school locations (at that time), as well as purchased all national cable. She left Bates to gain media buying and planning experience for Subway, Union Federal and Indianapolis Raceway Park. Quadrini’s overall media experience includes buying/planning for local television, national cable, local cable, radio, newspaper and billboard advertising.

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there are cared about and not just a number. And don't use actors; use real people. People want to hear a positive story from people they trust, which will also be the target demo they relate to, or employers for whom they would love to work or perhaps employees who work at your school with whom your audience can relate.

Along with that you can do a "see for yourself" message. In other words, stress that the time to make a difference in their lives is now, and that they should make an appointment and come see for themselves what your school is all about. Your target demo that is possibly seeing these negative reviews or hearing the negative press, may give you a second thought if you challenge them to make their own decision versus believing negative reviews.

### **Alternative Media**

This is a trend that's been happening for awhile, but it is still continuing, and is showing an uptick, and it is that many schools are gravitating much more toward alternative media outside of TV. (A few years ago your mobile components, web components, and the like could be negotiated as added value through station deals; they are currently much more cash-oriented). Now schools are pursuing other opportunities to generate interest in their course offerings as opposed to just using the typical radio, TV, or print buy. But is this the way to go? This could be another passing fancy looking for the "big idea" that will catapult us back into the days of plenty. For example, how many years ago was it that the latest greatest thing was the Internet lead aggregator leads that

you could buy for an nth of the cost of a TV lead? Remember? These were going to support all of our schools, our industry, and it was such a good deal; TV leads were going to be a "thing of the past" and

here was "the answer." But, fast forward to now, and everybody is steering away from lead aggregators because many, if not most of them, are double- or triple-selling leads to multiple

schools. Imagine how annoyed the person is who gave out some of his or her contact information with mild interest in a continued education, and is now being pursued by five, six, or seven different institutions. By the time you get to them this person is already pretty ticked off.

I think we have all concluded lead aggregator leads are oftentimes very low quality; these individuals are not very dedicated and have lukewarm interest. The aggregator may have offered something in exchange for receiving a potential student's contact info and the reality is people filled out requests for information just to get whatever is being offered and they're not really interested in school. None of this is to say that lead aggregators are "bad" or that our marketing should never include this as an option. However, if it is part of your plan, you should be selective—choose good, reputable partners, and focus on a multi-media marketing approach. As for GMG, we are steering much more toward SEO/SEM and putting much more credence

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behind driving candidates directly to our clients' websites. The people who are going directly to your website and researching your school are very high quality, serious, potential students.

Another thing that was supposed to be the answer for our industry was the dedicated URLs on creative for tracking purposes. But what we found out, after schools put a lot of money

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into overhauling creative for their dedicated URLs, was that it really didn't matter because people

were just Googling the school name anyway and we still had no idea the source that generated the interest. They (potential students) could have originally heard about us through radio, TV, word of mouth, or billboard, or a combination of all. We did find that if the dedication is not just the utilization of the slash, for example "school.com/TV" but rather a unique URL altogether, results were better on the tracking end.

So, now, everyone wants to jump on the bandwagon that "mobile mobile mobile" is "THE ANSWER" and we are supposed to refocus our efforts, and realign our budgets, and find the experts in mobile marketing! Personally, I think the jury is still out and we need some real data mining before this is considered a primary component of the media plan. Yes, a lot of people are on their phones all the time, but do they really want to get bombarded with marketing and have whatever they're doing interrupted by it, or do they find that more annoying versus intriguing? Have you evaluated how

much information you're asking for via the mobile site, and if it's too much? Or are you strictly doing click to call? Do you have a unique number through mobile for tracking purposes? What's the quality of these mobile respondents and what are the conversion rates to appointment or enrollment? What are the starts from mobile respondents? Be very careful buying into this as our industry's salvation. I'm not a fan of the "latest greatest thing"; I like data.

### **General Media Trends and Performance**

As far as general trends go, what's happening in first quarter is not only what we expected, but it hasn't changed in the last few quarters. Generally speaking, and this certainly depends on the market, TV clearance is exceptionally good. A lot of category advertising spend is down right now, and many big schools going through campus closings are backing off or cancelling their advertising dollars. Therefore, inventory is opening up. Stations are hungry right now so we're getting a lot of calls on a consistent basis asking for adds. I suspect this trend will continue for the rest of this quarter as well as the next, and probably for the rest of the year. This is a great opportunity to renegotiate rates and to readdress "per inquiry" deals or guaranteed cost-per-lead deals. It's also a great time to negotiate heavier from an added value standpoint. That might be free morning interviews, it might be inclusion on the station's collateral, or it might be free 10- and 15-second spots. But, given how hungry many stations are, now is the time to

secure lots of added value for the rest of the year.

For the most part, we're seeing better performance with 60-second spots than with 30s. But what's interesting about this is many schools are opting for the production of the 30s and the budget that provides for 30s. However, I think this is something everyone needs to pay attention to. Schools should evaluate cost-per-lead by unit because 60s are still very much outperforming 30s. So if that means they double-down on their creative budget, efficiency-wise I think it's going to be worth it because the longer message is still resonating more with our target audience.

Lastly, as far as trends, school competitive is down. Whether you are utilizing an agency or internal marketing department, your planners should be doing heavy evaluation on the competitive dollars being spent. Again, what we're seeing due to some of the campus closings and other challenges some of the bigger schools are having, is advertising in our category is down; there should be a great deal of competitive spend evaluation within the market or markets you are in. This will offer leverage with some of the things already mentioned, including but not limited to rate negotiation, added value, promotions, and anything additional that complements the buy.

### **Produce the Leads or Build the Brand?**

For the last 20 years I've probably been through this at least 10 times. It depends on the season, the temperature of the industry, and the way the wind blows. Our industry consistently fluctuates between whether it wants

to build the image, build the brand, or go for direct response and generate phone calls. We keep going from one to the other. But quite frankly, what I don't understand is why do we have to forsake one for the benefit of the

other? Whose idea was that? Why not have separate budgets? Have an image/brand-building budget that, for the most part, you expect

nary a lead from – not one. It's just all about supporting your image as a quality educator and building your brand for name recognition and awareness. If you get a lead out of it, consider yourself lucky. But it improves your image and top of mind awareness. In support of this objective you also maintain your standard, consistent direct response budget, direct response messaging, in which you're buying direct response rotations with high frequency, to produce phone calls, to get appointments, to enroll students, to educate through graduation, and to provide the individual with excellent knowledge to join the workforce, make a good living, and contribute to society.

For your image campaign you're buying news, network, program specific, AM morning shows and perhaps some prime. Your creative doesn't even have a phone number, just maybe a website. For your direct response buy you're buying 60-second units, mostly daytime, judge and talk shows, with heavy call-to-action creative to get the phone to ring.

At GMG, our philosophy is one in which the direct response buy

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complements and supports the image/brand-building objective and most definitely, vice versa. There's a benefit to each of them in their own right. But stop trying to mix them and achieve the objective of one with the creative and buy of the other. It doesn't work—never has, never will.

### **Civic Engagement/Community Awareness**

This initiative goes right along with the reputation management we talked about earlier. Schools really need to be involved in their communities now more than ever before. This can be accomplished through book drives, blood drive sponsorships, especially if it's a medical school, and really anything that does something for the community in which you can find an association with your school course offerings. There is nothing but positive to be had from these efforts and it can help offset any bad press and/or bad website reviews. The more community awareness that's out there on your

school, and the more local events you support, sponsor, and get involved in, the more you build your image and brand.

### **Miscellaneous**

Finally, we're starting to see more silent partners and investors putting money behind the for-profit education sector. In our mind, this is a good thing in the sense that the mid-sized to smaller schools will have the backing now to compete (to a certain level) with the bigger schools. They'll have additional support and funds to invest in a true multi-media marketing approach, expand campus locations, and perhaps enter the national arena. We're paying very close attention to that.

***CER: As always, Tammy, we appreciate it and thanks for sharing your thoughts and insights. We'll talk to you again in a few months.***