

Universities provide polished pitch

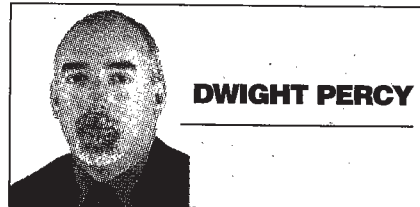
COMMENTARY

Every time I talk with University of Saskatchewan president Peter McKinnon, he relates stories about the increasing level of competition for students. It's fierce now, but will only get tougher.

To take a long step back to the point where I was faced with the decision about where to go to university, having grown up in rural Saskatchewan, the decision was straightforward — either the University of Regina or the University of Saskatchewan. The world of post-secondary education, for the class of '71, was within this province.

But that's no longer the case as I have witnessed, up close and personally, in the past few weeks. My youngest son, by virtue of carrying an average that is well into the 90s through Grade 12, has been looking at several options. As of today, he has been accepted at three universities.

One, of course, is the U of S. Another is McGill University in Montreal. McGill is typically listed as No. 2 or 3 in Canada by sources such as Maclean's magazine in its annual ranking of universities. One can argue about the inherent flaws in the



DWIGHT PERCY

Maclean's assessment process or its over-reliance on inputs versus outputs, but the reality is that people read the list and form opinions based on what they read without worrying much about the methodology.

One might think that a school ranked near the top might be fairly complacent. That's anything but the case. In fact, the sequence of events that occurred after McGill said yes to my son points out just how competitive the area of student recruitment has become.

The first step was the standard letter accepting his application. The letter itself was run of the mill, but most notable was the return address. It read, "Admissions, recruitment and registrar's office." I always thought of "recruitment" as something that universities undertake in their attempt to attract faculty. Apparently, that's not the case. Designating its admissions office as part of a recruitment process is a

telling statement about how fiercely spirited this institution believes the competition for students to be.

A couple of days after the first letter, our mailbox was filled with a comprehensive package of information about life on McGill campus, about the programs available and about the future prospects for grads. Following that was another letter about potential scholarships for students as they move into their upper years.

Then came the real kicker, in the form of two phone calls from students at the McGill recruitment centre, urging us to call them if we have any questions at all about the university, the programs or life in Montreal. This type of personal, one-on-one marketing is an interesting contrast. In a high-tech world, McGill understands that the human touch remains vitally important in connecting with their prospective customers.

As if all of this wasn't sufficiently aggressive, McGill is also hosting an information session in Saskatoon, as it is doing across the country. This is not an inexpensive process. Again, it speaks to the very substantial investment that university puts into student recruitment.

Equally notable is the tone and con-

tent of much of the communication. And herein is a good lesson for all of us in business. Despite the fact that McGill has achieved such a strong national and international reputation, the recurring theme in its communication is "we hope we will see you in September." McGill fully understands other institutions are out there pitching hard as well. It has taken the position that kids such as mine are not customers until they actually show up. Nothing is taken for granted.

The lessons for institutions such as the University of Saskatchewan are apparent. The university itself will undoubtedly have to beef up or shift resources in order to enhance its marketing efforts. And the reason is simple. Its potential customers have an increasing array of options available! The competition is coming at us hard, just as McKinnon keeps reminding us, and they are becoming ever more aggressive. He encounters that constantly as he puts on more miles than any U of S president I have seen before, inside and outside the province, in search of new customers for the U of S. This really is a brand new game.

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