

**MARKETING AGRIBUSINESS: PROFESSION,
EDUCATION, AND CAREERS**

By

Surendra P. Singh
Professor, Agribusiness
Tennessee State University
Nashville, TN 37209
ssingh@tnstate.edu

Sam Comer
Assistant Professor

Safdar Muhammad
Associate Investigator
Tennessee State University

And

Troy Wakefield, Jr.
Dean, School of Agriculture & Home Economics

Tennessee State University
Nashville, TN 37209-1561

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ABSTRACT

In a highly competitive market for entering students a good marketing plan is needed for a more effective marketing of agribusiness program. The paper focuses on presenting marketing of agribusiness as a multifaceted problem and responsibility. The discussion about agribusiness when dealing with enrollment, program development and related issues involves not only definition of education in our profession but also a definition of the profession and careers available that relates to the profession. The paper attempts to present short-range and long-range strategies and suggested activities under each strategy in marketing agribusiness. In developing strategies the assumption is that there is need to enroll, graduate and engage more people in agribusiness profession. The paper is an attempt to initiate discussion for future developments in developing marketing strategies for effective marketing of agribusiness programs.

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INTRODUCTION

Colleges and universities throughout the U.S. are being asked to “enroll more students, get them through faster, educate them better, make them more employable, and do it for less money.” This presents additional challenges for universities who are in the business of delivering educational services in a highly competitive market place. Not only universities but also disciplines within the universities are competing for entering students and for placement of their graduates. There are a lot of vendors (universities as well as disciplines) of these services and customers (students) can just as well go to any one of them, not necessarily agribusiness programs. The enrollment in many colleges of agriculture in the United States plunged in 1980’s due partly to the negative publicity agriculture received because of farm crisis. But some increase, in general, was observed in the last decade. Many university programs (including agribusiness, agricultural economics) made changes in their programs to adapt to changing needs of society. At the same time environment in which businesses operate and our graduates operate are also changing. The businesses need to adjust as quickly as possible to the effect of three forces that have together are responsible for ever changing business environment. These forces are termed as three C’s are: customer, competition, and change.

For several years universities in the U.S. have been struggling with defining undergraduate education programs in agriculture in general and agribusiness in particular for relevancy and quality. An important consideration impacting on degree in agribusiness is the ability to differentiate the degree from other degrees including an undergraduate degree from business school. Despite changes in curriculum, especially the smaller departments/universities are still facing lower or declining enrollments and are not able to attract students from non-rural settings. The declining supply of traditional male students with farm backgrounds, but growing demand for trained graduates, presents additional challenges for reorienting and differentiating agribusiness programs at smaller universities. The primary challenge is to manage and increase enrollment in the program. In this regard, the need is to reorient the thinking of faculty and administrators around customers and process.

PURPOSE

The paper focuses on presenting marketing of agribusiness as a multifaceted problem and responsibility. The discussion about agribusiness when dealing with enrollment, program development and related issues involves not only definition of education in our profession but also a definition of the profession and careers available that relates to the profession. Therefore, there is need to understand and develop our marketing strategy for agribusiness in the context of profession, education, and career. The paper attempts to present short-range and long-range strategies and suggested activities under each strategy in marketing agribusiness as profession, education, and careers. In developing strategies the assumption is that there is need to enroll, graduate and engage more people in agribusiness profession. The paper is an attempt to initiate

discussion for future developments in developing marketing strategies for effective marketing of agribusiness programs.

MARKETING OF AGRIBUSINESS PROGRAM

In a highly competitive market for entering students a good marketing plan is needed for a more effective marketing of agribusiness programs. It is important to dispel the misconception of declining demand in the entire agriculture industry. And it is especially important to inform teachers, counselors in high schools and colleges about the employment prospects in agriculture in general and agribusiness in particular. Many of them are not knowledgeable about the modern agriculture and Agribusinesses, and have been cautioning students against attending agriculture programs or at least not providing them relevant information.

Marketing of agribusiness program is a multifaceted problem and responsibility. The paper is primarily focused on agribusiness education. However, to develop a marketing strategy, we should also define profession and careers available that relate to the profession. For more effective marketing we are required to define what we are marketing and to whom. We need to have clear statement of what the agribusiness profession is. The answer should embody the special knowledge that constitutes the profession. It should embody the uniqueness of our profession and distinguish it from other related professions. The Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, 1981 defines Profession "a calling requiring specialized knowledge and often long and intensive academic preparation". The students (in my classes) when asked, are quick to identify with the later part of this definition and resort to examples such as physicians, attorneys etc. But when asked to describe the specialized body of knowledge that constitutes agribusiness, however, there are multitudes of answers delivered. Therein lies one of our problems in marketing agribusiness. A better understanding of special body of knowledge that our profession entails is needed to be able to clearly communicate to our public the nature of agribusiness.

In marketing of curricula we should be prepared to emphasize the uniqueness of our course of study. We must differentiate by emphasizing that the agribusiness curricula is designed to address emerging professional skill requirements which opens new opportunities for management practice relating to production, processing, marketing, and distribution of food, fiber, and farm inputs. This could be our marketing strategy to approach the potential student.

Each university program has a concept of what constitutes appropriate education in agribusiness as defined by their understanding of the special body of knowledge of the profession. In developing a marketing strategy for our educational programs, we will need to recognize that each program has a market niche that is unique to that state and locale and thus we must use this to our advantage. Another aspect of agribusiness that could be considered a unique feature is a calling to global mission to improve quality of life through distributing food and fiber more efficiently and effectively as well as preserving our diminishing resources.

Marketing career opportunities for our graduates should also relate to the uniqueness of the profession and the education. We should take advantage of rising interest in globalization, products of biotechnology, and agribusiness environment that is

customer driven. We should convey to the graduate that they're likely to have an opportunity to manage newly developing systems and meet global market demand.

Careers that follow from the educational program for practice in agribusiness profession are not necessarily related to agribusiness. Therefore, when we look at the marketing strategy for career development for agribusiness graduates, we have responsibility to educate them to career opportunities in the profession.

Developing a Marketing Strategy

The challenge is how do we attract the best students into the agribusiness careers or into our agribusiness programs? The best students are not always with the greatest academic skills. They also must have good communication and interpersonal skills. This means we must develop effective strategies to market our programs. It also means we must provide financial assistance including scholarships. This means that we are going to have to go out there and buy (recruit) some of the best students because other disciplines are going out and buying (recruiting) them in highly competitive markets.

Agribusiness programs are operating in a niche market and a highly competitive market place. Unless an agribusiness program is perceived as adding unique value relative to its competitors, the customers (students) will go elsewhere. Not only the environment in which our graduates operate is changing but also the nature and characteristics of our customers are changing as well. The traditional sources of agribusiness students (male students with farm backgrounds) are declining and therefore, new sources of agribusiness students have to be cultivated, starting in high school. These trends mean that not only programs need to be revisited often but also ways must be found to educate teachers, counselors, and parents about the newly evolving science and business of agriculture. There is need to attract and accommodate wide range of traditional and nontraditional students with different academic and cultural backgrounds. In short, there is need to develop programs to attract and better serve the demands and interests of the new groups of students.

Producing a Differentiated Product

Another important consideration that impacts any agribusiness program is the ability to differentiate the program (therefore, the degree) from other types of degrees. Differentiation can be created in three ways:

Quality: Quality is what determines sales. Perhaps the most important characteristic that can be differentiated is the quality of program. Quality requires resources and limiting the scope by segmenting the market of the program.

Specialization: specialization or emphasis on selected aspects of management skills and technical know-how required.

Tools: The degree must be able to respond to the specific needs of the specialized market for graduates of the program.

The successful agribusiness programs need to be close to their customers and understand and fulfill their needs. These needs include preparing students to be successful employees of today's agribusiness firms. This means graduates are equipped to understand the uniqueness of agricultural markets and the biologically based production technologies used in agricultural input, farm production and food processing industries. In addition to this solid management education, analytical, communication,

leadership and interpersonal skills, and ability to work as team members with diverse group of people are also needed.

Implementing the Marketing Strategy

With increasing competition for (quality) students, agribusiness programs can no longer rely on traditional methods of enrollment and traditional students alone. Unique approaches must be developed and adopted if students are to be attracted in agribusiness programs especially at smaller universities. This requires developing and implementing marketing strategies to market a program.

There are both long-range and short-range strategies in marketing agribusiness professions, education, and careers. In both cases, there is need to involve more people in the profession and increasing the awareness of the public of the profession. The immediate need is to enroll, graduate and engage more people in the agribusiness. Therefore our objectives should be to:

1. Disseminate information about modern agriculture and agribusiness
2. Identify potential students
3. Make the potential students aware of agribusiness
4. Enroll students
5. Nurture the students enrolled in the program
6. Provide job placement for the graduates
7. Collect and disseminate data or career opportunities/activities of graduates
8. Continue the above cycle (1-7) and change strategies that grow out of the data and experiences obtained.

The overriding principle is to find out what the customer wants and what the customer needs. This requires that we go to the customer (potential student). To meet the above objectives we have to be committed, as an organization to excellence in our educational program such that we know the product we are delivering is a quality product. A “team” approach involving faculty, staff, administrators, students, alumni and outreach into the targeted area are needed to the enrollment management.

The following five strategies involving team approach may be suggested for enrollment and retention of students in agribusiness programs:

Create Awareness:

Creating awareness of agribusiness and careers in agribusiness and identifying prospects, then maintaining contacts are essential to the enrollment development process. The importance of a personal approach through correspondence, interaction and communication helps to erode stereotypes. An in-place computer tracking system aids in the maintenance of the prospective student database, facilitates contact with these prospects, and allows for accurate record keeping of all contacts; several methods could be used for this purpose such as:

1. Web Page, Interactive Web Site
2. Video tapes
3. Visit schools, career programs to contact potential first time and transfer students
4. Newsletter, news releases
5. High school career fairs
6. Industry trade shows

7. Obtain SAT/ACT tests
8. Foster relationships with on-campus advisers
9. Invite high school teachers/counselors and students on campus

Provide Information:

1. Descriptive web sites
2. Descriptive brochures and career information in simple language
3. Respond to contacts
4. Personal contact

Encourage Involvement:

- Participate in open house events
- Participate in discussion forums
- Participate in student events

Make it affordable:

- Search for scholarship programs, fund scholarship
- Develop opportunities for financial aid to students. It serves dual purpose

Retention:

- Make full use of existing university retention programs
- Provide personal attention to students through an academic adviser
- Start where the student is
- Encourage involvement in student organizations
- Engage students by employing them or other ways. Involve them in a project or research program
- Provide for socialization
- Internships or coop programs
- Provide broader range of skills that would help them in their upward career moves.
- Provide lifelong learning programs in agribusiness curricula to enroll and retain non-traditional students as well

These strategies could also be seen in the context of

Marketing Mix – Product, Pricing, Promotion, and Place.

- Product
 - Quality – Relevant fulfilling the needs of customers
 - Type – Traditional, market niche
 - Value – To Students-traditional and non-traditional
 - To potential employers
 - Benefits to both
- Pricing
 - Acceptable/attractive – add-ons
 - Financial Aid – scholarships, work aid, corporate sponsorship
- Promotion
 - Creating awareness
 - Advertising – Media
 - Personal selling – students, faculty/alumni, others
- Place

Long distance or traditional methods of delivery

Partnership

Given the resource constraints and the pace of globalization and changes partnership arrangement are almost essential to develop relevant agribusiness programs at smaller universities. Before any partnerships can be developed, there is need to clearly state the rationale for partnership. The rationale may be based on the principle of comparative advantage. Following this principle, when partnerships make sense, the partners are entities that specialize and exchange or share resources; and the resulting effective partnership is collaborative arrangement that enlarges the resource base or enhances the performance/output of all the partners combined (i.e. synergy).

The question for any agribusiness program before developing partnerships is how do we bring together the right kind and combination of institutions, the right kind of delivery mechanisms and educational tools, to develop a quality agribusiness educational component. A discussion of the rationale for partnering should begin not by identifying the likely partners, but with a clear statement of intended outcomes. What do we most need to accomplish to make the program successful? What should be the central focus and objective? Then consider what are the combinations of inputs or partners most needed to get there.

CONCLUSIONS

It is recognized that developing marketing strategy for agribusiness is a dynamic process and more discussions on this and related topics would benefit all those engaged in developing and implementing agribusiness programs. The paper presents a somewhat organized and on-going framework of developing marketing strategy that may be used by others. As we seek to be more effective in marketing agribusiness through attaining the stated objectives, we will be evaluating the effectiveness of the techniques and strategies. Hopefully, we can also discover new ways to market as well. With our combined wisdom, we should be able to formulate a plan and procedures that can strengthen our service to agriculture, biotechnology, food systems and related industries through the education of agribusiness graduates.

We have made progress and can receive some satisfaction from our past accomplishments in agribusiness education and curricula. Many of our graduates have made major contributions to the food, feed and fiber production, processing and distribution system both nationally and internationally. From this tradition we are now prepared to move to preparation for practice in the twenty-first century and beyond. Now is the time to set the vision, implement the curriculum and attract the best and brightest young people to agribusiness profession. The full potential of agribusiness will continue to unfold as we identify and educate students for the profession and for many yet unimagined career opportunities. It is however, important for all stakeholders to actively participate and make best use of given resources and take full advantages of their specific characteristics.