

# The Best-Kept Secret in Town

By Mark C. Perna

Start spreading the news! The benefits of career and technical education programs should not be kept secret in your community.

I have toured many impressive schools over the years and have heard one familiar statement trumpeted repeatedly: “We are the best-kept secret in town.”

That statement amazes me. How can a school exist for any significant period of time and be virtually unknown to the community it serves? The truth is that if you consider your school to be the best-kept secret in town, marketing action is required, and must be taken swiftly and decisively.

In several recent issues of *Techniques*, I have expounded on the virtues of the enrollment funnel, doing right things right, and developing emotional attachment with prospects and students. It is through these techniques

that you create the strategies that expose your secret. Continuing the journey to becoming enrollment rich is the creation of a unique selling proposition (USP) that boasts your advantages and reasons for enrollment.

Simply put, a USP defines your competitive advantage. You must identify what makes you different from competitors and highlight these advantages in your marketing. This positions your school’s programs as different—and more valuable—than your competitors’ programs. It places that idea in the minds of your targeted audience, attracting students through a positive and unique identity. A USP is vital to distinguishing your programs and blowing the lid off the best-kept secret in town.

A USP is a strong, concise and simple statement about your school that tells the community why you are the only alternative for them—two to three sentences that serve as your definition of distinction.

## Uncover your Advantages

Why a USP? Everywhere you look, there are more and more products, services and programs being developed, and that can put prospective students and their parents on information overload. We are all exposed to more than 1,400 messages every day, so we must determine as consumers what value we attach to each message. Your competitive advantage must be fully visible, deliver clear value, and be memorable as a result of the value being delivered.

As an example, when I started my own marketing company, it was essential that we accomplish three objectives for every school client:

- Deliver dynamic marketing products



and services specific to career and technical education.

- Be the easiest company our clients have ever worked with.
- Provide a bigger marketing impact within each school's existing budget, allowing schools to use our services without spending one dollar more than they would have on their own.

That's unique. These are points of value that represent our competitive advantage and our USP.

## Creating a USP

These are some of the steps to consider when creating your USP.

First, write down every possible reason you can think of why someone would want to enroll in your school. If you want the best results from this exercise, involve everybody in your organization in a high-energy brainstorm-

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## Identify what makes you different from competitors and highlight these advantages in your marketing.

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ing session. You'll be amazed at where some of the best ideas come from.

Second, review the list and eliminate everything that is also true of your competitors. If a competitor can make the same claim, it's not a "unique" proposition. Some quick guidelines:

- What is unique about your school or programs as compared to your direct competitors?
- Which of these factors are most important to your prospects?
- Which of these factors are most difficult for your competitors to imitate?
- Which of these factors can be understood most easily by your prospects?
- What is your school "famous" for?

Based on the results, create a memorable message out of these unique, meaningful qualities. Make sure it's a message that speaks to the needs of your prospects. Keep editing and distilling until it's no more than two or three concise sentences that separate you from your competition.

## Measuring Success

Here are some steps to consider when implementing and measuring the success of your USP.

1. When surveying your community and requesting testimonials from your students, the responses you receive should be consistent with your USP. In fact, students should reiterate your USP virtually word for word, because they heard it, experienced it and appreciated it.
2. Use those testimonials in your marketing efforts that demonstrate your USP, build credibility in your programs, and prove that you are congruent with your message. Simply put, do what you say you do.
3. Integrate your USP throughout your marketing plan and deliver your message frequently.
4. Invest wisely. Rising above being the best-kept secret in town is tied directly to your ability to invest marketing resources in the tools necessary to spread the word.

Building a USP separates you from your competition in the minds of your community members, and provides the voice and value that can elevate your school from being the best-kept secret in town to ultimately being known as a school of value with a powerful definition of distinction. It is this powerful distinction that represents the key fork in the road leading to success on the journey to becoming enrollment rich. **■**

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