

2007 TDA Conference Business/Tertiary Round Table

- A lot has been said about the poor image and negative brand perception of TAFE. And its true that our market research tells us school leavers are often embarrassed to say they go to TAFE because its seen as second rate or where you go if you can't get in to uni. It also concerns me that employers often say 'I never knew TAFE did that'.
- So what does a TAFE Institute need to do to better meet the needs of individuals and industry and raise the sector's profile in the community?
- To answer these questions I will unashamedly use the example of my own Institute – Sydney Institute.
- Sydney Institute was established in 1891 and has a long tradition of working with industry and individuals to deliver vocational training.
- The list of successful graduates is impressive – Paul Keating, Lisa Ho, Alex Perry, Ita Butrose, Ken Done, Mike Bailey, Donna Hay and Margaret Ole to name just a few.
- So in an environment of skill shortages with employers crying out for workers with trade and technical skills, why is it so hard to position the TAFE system in its own right – rather than being seen as the poor cousin to the university sector.
- A line I often use with my staff is to say – skill shortages are front page news – there has never been a better time for us to be relevant – if we don't take the chance now there is no future for us!
- So what do I think we should be doing? There is limited time so I will keep it to five key points:

1. Build Partnerships

- We are a big organisation but a great way to build our capability is through partnerships. Not just client relationships but genuine win – win arrangements. This means a new way of thinking and a new way of doing business.
- One of our most successful partnerships is with a private provider with a much better offshore marketing capability than us. They have helped to significantly build our international student numbers in colleges we previously found difficult to market. But this partnership has also helped our staff to understand what it is to be really nimble and client focused.
- Partnerships with employers and group training organisations are also critical in developing workforce capability.

- We have also like other Institutes been working with Skills One to get a positive message out about the trades.
- Partnerships are also helping us to benchmark our performance as a business – we recently engaged in an wellness survey that benchmarked our workforce health and productivity with 22 other organisations nationally.

2. Products and services

- Another priority for TAFE institutes is to reposition their products and services to better meet client needs.
- It is quite clear now that standardised ‘courses’ are not what industry or individuals want – we need to be offering more RPL, more skills sets, more customised training programs.
- We also need to personalise our products and services and customise them to different market segments – some Institutes are doing this very successfully – I am aware of East Gippland TAFE’s offering customer learning plans
- Also need to offer more workforce development services – focus on existing worker market segment – no longer think of our students coming to us – more us bringing products and services to the market place.

3. Staff capability

- A major challenge for all TAFE institutes is changing workforce culture and building workforce capability
- This is not just about building a client focused and entrepreneurial culture
- Also need strong leadership capability and staff engagement strategies to support the new directions for TAFE
- Staff also need the skills to engage with industry and to deliver more responsive products and services.
- All staff need to better understand the complexity of our market, our customer needs and our performance in meeting those needs. We also need to know who our competitors are and how they are performing.

4. Business Systems

- Business systems are often seen as major barriers to customer responsiveness – can be an issue working within large organisations and a heavily regulated environment
- Another mantra I use at Sydney Institute is to constantly question how and why we do things.
- Many of our business systems were set up to achieve efficiencies working in large bureaucracies – while efficiencies are important
- We need to re-think the way we do business from a customer perspective.

5. Market positioning

- A final and critical element of repositioning TAFE is market positioning.
- Sydney Institute, like many other TAFE institutes is currently engaged in a major re-branding initiative.
- Our branding consultants – Frost Design - told us our course advertisements looked like funeral notices.
- They have really made us sit up and re-think all of our customer touch points and identify which areas are letting us down.
- A major learning for me has been the need to engage staff in the new brand and use the brand identity to change the culture of the organisation. This means challenging previous thinking and empowering front line staff.
- Our re-branding strategy has also taught me its ok to 'dare to be different' – not try to try to compete with the university sector. Be a bull brand – in the face of our competitors.

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