

# The Advertising War: Are the students paying any attention?

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## ABSTRACT

Tertiary education providers spend vast sums of money annually on student recruitment advertising. Falling IT enrolments across the New Zealand tertiary education sector has increased competition and bought courses and marketing under review and scrutiny. Our research asks the question “Are we promoting our courses in the right way at the right time?” Student surveys and focus groups aimed at level 4 and 5 current entrants at Wellington Institute of Technology were asked two critical questions: When did students make the decision to pursue a career in IT, and what marketing helped their decision to take one of our IT programmes? Some answers have emerged that will serve as valuable feedback when planning with our marketing department.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Each year the market research firm AC Nielsen compiles an estimate of the education sector’s student recruitment advertising spend. The figures are based on casual advertising rates across mainstream media (television, radio, magazines and cinema) and do not take into account any advertising media discounts.

In 2004, AC Nielsen estimated that public tertiary institutes spent a total of \$26 million on marketing (New Zealand University Student’s Association press release, 28 February 2005). A figure well up from \$12 million spent in 1999 and \$23 million spent in 2003.

In 2004, NZUSA Co-President Fleur Fitzsimons commented that, in spite of the fact that we are supposed to be in a more collaborative environment, evidence shows that advertising influences very few students. “It is time for this madness to end and for universities, polytechnics and colleges of education to stop wasting money on advertising.” (Association of University Staff Tertiary Update Vol 7 No 6, 4 March 2004).

In 2005 Camilla Belich, Co-President of the NZUSA, issued a similar statement: “Students are a lot more likely to be influenced by friends and family than advertising when choosing where to study, yet are still bombarded with multimillion dollar advertising campaigns including use-less pocket radios, jelly beans, yo-yos, caps and drink bottles in an irresponsible attempt to con prospective students.”

Tertiary providers have even stooped to enticing prospective students with free computers for enrolling on IT programmes.

Declining Information Technology (IT) enrolments across the sector has increased competition and bought courses under review and scrutiny. The National Business Review recently described activities in the education sector as a “feral-like” fight for survival (Gamlin, 2005).

Analysis of newspaper advertising in the Wellington region (The Hutt News, Upper Hutt Leader, Wellingtonian and Dominion Post) reveals that most of the media advertising by tertiary providers takes place between January through to March, with a short burst around the May and June period.

Our research set out to explore whether students are actually making decisions during these periods that would support the media spend and to find out whether advertising does influence and which information sources influence students in their computing education decision-making.

## 2. BACKGROUND AND MOTIVATION

The background for the research is a national decline in IT student entrants and Wellington Institute of Technology’s (WelTec) experience



of increased involvement in advising the marketing department on marketing activities for the School of IT courses. The aim of our research was to better understand our target audience and to evaluate the effectiveness and timing of marketing activities we engage in.

We were also interested in an article "Sales & Marketing" in The Sydney Morning Herald, (19/02/2005) where Adrienne Jeram, Director of marketing and student recruitment at the University of Sydney, described how the University has changed its marketing strategy and now focuses more on talking to the people who are interested, rather than on newspaper and radio advertising. They have developed a strong school liaison program and involve current students in their school visits. She boasts, "Now we do no paid advertising at all."

The marketing function of any business is often criticised. If the expected enrolments (sales) are not achieved, there is a tradition of blaming it on advertising and marketing. We know from discussions with our students that this is not the case.

Outside of the scope of this paper is the extent to which student debt or the perception that IT is a difficult subject affects a student decision to pursue an IT career and engage in full-time study.

A previous study commission by New Zealand Trade & Enterprise, 'Loose Connections' (Harris Management Solutions, 2003) focused on year 13 Physics students in Canterbury and Hawkes Bay and researched the reasons for the lack of New Zealand graduates completing technology related qualifications. The survey data indicated that the supply of graduates to technology industries is unlikely to increase with only 4% of the total group expressing an interest in technology related degrees, with a further 4% possibly considering this option at a later date. The key factor that emerged from the research is an overall lack of interest, awareness, sense of excitement about technology careers - a lack of connection between students and industry.

Important though it is to understand what attracts students to study IT, we decided to focus on our primary target audience: those who have decided they want to pursue a career in IT. Kathryn McEwen and Jacky Dakin (The Adelaide Advertiser) recently wrote "Stay at school, opt

for further studies or get a job? ...Making the right career choices takes into account not just intelligence but also specific aptitudes, interests, personality and values."

### 3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The data generated from this study allowed the researchers to critically assess the following:

- Do our students consider IT to be presented as an attractive, positive career option at school and in the general media?
- Does the age and environment in which the career decision is made affect the information sources and decision-making factors?
- What factors influence students in their choice of course and their choice of study institution?

### 4. METHODOLOGY

Research methods included analysis of data from WelTec's enrolment management system, analysis of marketing call centre reports (to evaluate call volume and track responses to newspaper advertising), two student surveys and discussion with WelTec School of IT students in a focus group forum.

The first survey was targeted at students who enrolled in IT papers and attended the School's February 2005 Orientation week activities. The second survey was distributed to students on 1st semester 2005 Level 4 and 5 courses. The second survey was a more detailed survey and aimed to clarify and expand on the results of the first survey.

Students were asked a range of questions about their career, course and tertiary education provider decision-making.

Six students from year 2 courses attended a focus group and were asked the same questions to establish whether there are any major differences between this year's intake and last years.

The survey sample size was 70 in the first survey and 56 in the second survey.

### 5. RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

The surveyed subjects were WelTec undergraduate IT students.

Demographics of the second survey were as follows:-

Gender: 82% of the respondents were male,

12.5% female and 5.5% did not state gender.

Age: 53% were under the age of 20, 23% were aged 20-24 and 24% were 25 and over.

Ethnicity: 58% were NZ European, 4% were Maori, 14% were Asian, 17% were Polynesian and 17% were Other

## 6. RESULTS

The enrolment management system indicates that on average 60-70% of enrolments are received in a 3 month time period (the month before, start month and month after a course commences).

There are no observable peaks in receipt of call centre requests for information about IT courses following newspaper advertisements for level 3 and above IT courses.

### 6.1. Results of Orientation Week Survey

Our orientation week survey told us that students are not making the decision to study in a recognisable pattern.

68% of respondents in the orientation week survey indicated that they felt that Information Technology is presented as an attractive, positive career option at school (or by career advisers).

86% of respondents felt that Information Technology is presented as an attractive, positive career option in the general media.

### 6.2. Results of Second Survey

Survey participants indicated the timing of the decision to pursue a career in IT as 88% indicated that career information about IT was available when they needed it.

65% of participants indicated that the most significant influence on their decision to pursue a career was their interest in the subject; they liked IT and knew they were good at it. 23% were attracted by job prospects and the potential income they see associated with the IT sector. 9% were influenced by the encouragement of a teacher, friend or Schools Careers Advisor. 3% were influenced by the media (newspaper or TV).

Respondents were asked to rate the importance of sources of career information. The rating in descending order of importance was:

- The Internet
- People working in the IT industry

**Table 1: Table1 Second Survey Results.**

Whilst at School	%
Third form or earlier	11
Fourth form	5
Fifth form	9
Sixth form	22
Seventh form	18
After leaving school	
Whist employed	21
Whilst unemployed	14

- Information brochures
- Careers Expos
- Polytechnic marketing teams
- Schools Careers Advisors
- Libraries
- Newspapers

Participants in the focus group confirmed their preference to access career information on the Internet, stating a desire to avoid human contact when making this decision. The newspaper was not considered as important as a source of career information because information tends to be of a more generic advertising nature. With the bombardment of information and the vast quantity of programmes offered, it is seen as 'overwhelming'.

Participants indicated the main influences behind the decision to get a qualification in IT. The influences in descending order of popularity were:

- To improve job prospects
- To Increase career choices
- Passion for subject
- To Increase income potential
- Personal Abilities
- To get a qualification required for a particular career
- Role Models

The survey asked participants to indicate the ways in which they initially found out about their course. The WelTec website was the most popular (30%), followed by the recommendation of friends (28%), the Prospectus (21%), School Career Advisor (18%) and Careers Expo (21%). Lower in the ratings was newspaper (14%), TV (11%) and Radio (3%).

Students who participated in the focus group said that newspaper advertising did not influence

them in their tertiary provider or course decision unless they were not aware that the provider offered IT courses. In these cases, this awareness through newspapers was seen as positive.

Participants were asked to indicate the importance of factors in their choice of where to study. Importance in descending order is as follows:

- Offer a particular qualification
- Modern and forward thinking
- Reputation (established and respected)
- Can meet entry requirements
- Campus facilities
- Smaller classes
- Close to home
- Interview with staff member impressed student
- Campus Life
- Attractive advertising
- Better parking
- Studied there previously
- Friends/Family study/studied there

## 7. CONCLUSION

Our research indicates that students are making decisions about pursuing a career in IT outside our traditional advertising envelope, which is normally the two months prior to the course commencing. Our students indicate that information about IT careers and institution courses is available when they need it.

With 65% of students making the decision whilst they are at school, the greatest utility for our marketing effort is to go into the schools with specialists from each discipline to promote careers and courses, and otherwise be involved in activities that create discussion. Our research indicates that the decision to pursue a career in IT can take place as early as third form and, if taken whilst at school, is most commonly taken in sixth form.

All surveyed students consider IT to be presented as an attractive, positive career option at school and in the general media.

With the exception of the involvement of career's advisors, the age and environment in which the career decision is made did not affect student's selection of information sources and other decision-making factors. The web site and role of friends was the highest scoring source of information for both those who had made their

choices whilst at school and those who made them after leaving school.

The main factor that influences students in their choice of course is the qualification and what they will actually learn. Interviews with the focus group indicated that this information must be reasonably detailed in order for them to make a decision.

It would be interesting to carry out further research to discover whether IT students are different from students in other disciplines: in particular whether the role of the web site is as important for other student disciplines.

Our research would indicate that newspaper advertising is almost of no real effect in attracting younger students who may only "pick up a newspaper once or twice a week, if they are lucky."

We see the role of the newspaper as a means for parents to influence young siblings into making a decision to pursue a future career in IT. This choice being highly respected out in the community and amongst their peers.

The area of parental influences on their child's future IT career also blends itself to further research and would make another interesting research focus topic.

The research has helped us to better understand our target audience and to evaluate the effectiveness and timing of our marketing activities. It confirms the importance of aligning marketing activities to student values. The collated data will lead to healthy dialogue between us and the marketing department and has helped us to refocus on when and how we spent our future marketing budget.

## REFERENCES

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