

Marketing Short Courses

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Abstract

Massachusetts Institute of Technology's (MIT) Professional Institute (PI) currently offers over 40 short courses in the summer on the MIT campus. Following a description of the organization, including its students, faculty and staff, a discussion of its marketing strategy, both traditional and electronic, is provided.

Professional Institute

The Professional Institute is a program within the School of Engineering (SOE), which is the largest school within MIT. Before discussing the marketing of PI programs, it would be best to set the stage by first describing the program itself and its history, faculty, staff and students. As is true for all of the programs within Professional Education Programs (PEP), the PI program is designed for working professionals, typically scientists and engineers who hold at least a bachelor's degree. Most PI courses are technical in nature, and PEP has no continuing education programs aimed at the undergraduate population.

PI Short Courses

PI offers approximately 30-40 short courses each summer on the MIT campus in Cambridge, MA. These courses are typically 1-6 days in length, with half of them being five days long. Courses cover such topics as energy, transportation, biopharma, computing, networks, communications, nanotechnology, systems engineering, tribology, mechanical engineering, Lean enterprise, data modeling and analysis, innovation, bioterrorism, leadership, lasers, astronomy and high speed imaging. In addition, PI also offers courses in marketing, supply chain and information quality management; these particular courses are data and model-driven. Executive education courses that focus on business and management are generally offered through MIT's Sloan Executive Education Programs.

Students

Prospective PI students must fill out an application that requests details on prior education, work experience and what the students hope to learn from the course. Although there are no general admission requirements, PI reserves the right to select applicants whose qualifications and experience suggest they will benefit from the courses for which they apply. In the past few years, 67-70% of applicants attended a PI course. For the year 2007, approximately 8 % of all applicants received partial tuition waivers, a decision that is wholly dependent upon course directors. With a few exceptions, PI students hold four-year college degrees and cite relevant work experience, and in 2005-2006, 6% were MIT graduates. The majority of students are domestic in origin, and during the past four years, 14% hailed from Massachusetts and 23% were international. Of our international students, half have been from Europe. PI students are highly motivated professionals whose tuitions are generally paid by employers. This is not surprising, given the courses PI offers and the expectation that students are learning from some of the world's leading experts and will bring actionable knowledge back to their workplace. Students receive Certificates of Completion and can receive Continuing Education Credits (CEUs).

Faculty

Faculty for PI courses are mostly from the School of Engineering, with a small number coming from the School of Science. Course directors can recruit faculty from industry or academia to assist in teaching. MIT does not have any adjunct faculty, and so PI cannot hire adjunct faculty to teach any course, thereby limiting the program to MIT faculty for course directors. This policy means that regardless of the level of interest potential students demonstrate in attending a course on a specific topic at MIT, if there is no available faculty (excluding faculty from the MIT Sloan School of Management) interested in teaching the subject matter, then PI cannot offer such a course. Obviously, faculty recruitment is critical in expanding our course portfolio. Because PI is supply-side driven, it is extremely important that our mission and activities are familiar to the broad MIT faculty and community. Communications to faculty and within the MIT community include a newly launched newsletter, attendance at academic departmental meetings, an MIT Spotlight on the MIT homepage and an annual call-for-programs letter.

Marketing

PI's marketing efforts target potential students both inside and outside of the MIT community. In addition, new activities to make MIT faculty aware of the opportunities for teaching within the PI program have recently been initiated with the goal of expanding course offerings. Traditional marketing activities include brochures, postcards and print ads in magazines and newspapers, some with global reach. Electronic marketing includes search engines, emails and listing on specific websites. With the exception of some electronic marketing, PI promotional activities involve the entire spectrum of courses or specific subsets of courses, and do not focus on individual courses.

Traditional Marketing

In terms of the marketing budget, the biggest expense is the creation, printing and mailing of the PI program brochure. Work on the brochure commences with the confirmation of course offerings in the fall, with completion of printing in December and mailing in early January. Courses are organized under a limited number of topic categories. Approximately 200,000 brochures are mailed out to people on in-house lists as well as purchased lists. Past PEP participants, information requesters, members of Industrial Liaison Program (ILP) and MIT alumni are also included. In addition, many different professional association lists are purchased. The selection of lists and specific selection criteria within a list are determined by the specific course offerings. For example, the biotechnology/pharmaceutical courses that are offered might benefit from the brochure being sent to members of the American Chemical Society and the American Association for Pharmaceutical Scientists. Computer courses would be of interest to members of the American Association for Computing Machinery or to subscribers whose contact information is contained within the IDG Computer Corporate list. Associations are selected on the basis of the interests of their members and also on input from PI students who are asked to list association memberships and how they learned of the course. One method of selecting recipients is on the basis of the state or country in which they reside. This decision may be based on historical data indicating the origin of past participants. As PI tuitions are typically paid by employers and courses are really targeted to working professionals, rather than students or retirees, another selection criteria, although indirect and far from perfect, can be age.

Work on topic-specific postcards commences while brochure activity is still ongoing. As mentioned earlier, courses are organized and listed under a number of topic categories. In this case, 8-12 categories are chosen to encompass all the courses to be offered. Generally, no more than six courses are listed in a specific category due to space limitations of the postcard.

Ideally, each postcard contains the courses in 1-2 related topic categories. In addition, if space permits, other relevant courses may be added. Each set of postcards is then sent to members of professional organizations who should be interested in the topic area. For example, a postcard containing courses on relativity and lasers was sent to members of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. The card listing energy and transportation courses was sent to various association members who listed energy as their industry or area of interest. As is the case for brochures, a decision can also be made as to recipient employment status and residence. Selection criteria can also include whether the professional is in industry, academia or government; job function or title is another possible criteria for selection. The overlap between the professionals who receive brochures and those who receive postcards has not been measured; there are some professionals who receive both, some who receive only one, and due to budget constraints, many who receive neither.

Print ads in magazines and newspapers are another avenue to promote PI courses. Because PI has a significant number of students from Massachusetts, print ads are run with Massachusetts High Tech. The International Herald Tribune is used to target international students. Technology Review ads reach the MIT community and subscribers interested in learning about research and happenings at MIT; this is a publication that goes out free to MIT alumni and can also be purchased on the newsstands or by subscription. These ads promote both individual programs as well as the range of PEP programs.

Recently, rather than promote all PEP or PI programs, some ads have targeted a very focused group of individuals for courses on a more specific topic area. For example, an ad was recently placed in a print publication of the International Council on Systems Engineering (INCOSE) to reach professionals in systems engineering. The aim was to promote the four systems engineering courses and two lean enterprise courses being offered by PI. Because PI has two new renewable energy courses, and interest in energy is at an all-time high, a decision was made recently to place an ad for energy courses in a special issue of the MRS Bulletin that will focus on Harnessing Materials for Energy. This publication contains the program for the 2008 annual meeting of the Materials Research Society for which an Energy Forum is planned. This Energy Forum features the course director of the new PI solar energy course.

Occasionally, a faculty member decides to spend some of their course revenues to run a print ad or to print a brochure or postcard that will promote their individual course. The costs for marketing individual courses can be quite high, and because of a limited budget for the PI program, course-specific marketing is not paid for out of the general marketing budget, but rather, must be covered by the individual course budget.

Conferences and Seminars

A new marketing initiative was undertaken to sponsor some local seminars. PI sponsored an energy presentation at a meeting of the MIT Club of Boston, and distributed literature from a table set up next to registration. A sponsorship with a local professional organization that featured a PI faculty speaker has the potential to develop into a long-term relationship that is a win-win situation for both organizations.

Due to the expense, a small amount of resources has been devoted to attending conferences. PI recently took advantage of the 2007 Bio International Convention and the annual meeting of the Association for the Advancement of Science, both of which were held in Boston. In the former case, PI helped staff a booth for another MIT organization and in the latter case, PEP had its own booth. For both conferences, contact was made with individuals who were not aware of PEP programs, and they were given brochures and literature. PI and PEP literature is also distributed at several conferences that are not attended by any PI staff.

Conferences and seminars differ tremendously in their subject matter and in the type of audience they attract. These can be very expensive opportunities and should be chosen very carefully with an eye towards the expertise of the audience, the demographics and their reasons

for attending an event. Some events draw many lifelong learners who are active in seeking out new information, but may not want to pay the premium tuitions that PI courses require. Other events may attract exactly the type of professional one is seeking. In addition to speaking with attendees at the booth, it is also valuable to visit other booths and make connections with organizations that may have employees who would benefit from the courses PI offers. And always remember that booth or exhibit placement is critical.

Co-Marketing

With just over 10,000 students and just under 1,000 faculty, MIT is a leading research university, and as such, is home to many programs and organizations that advance knowledge and education. PI co-markets its programs with some of these organizations. For example, the ILP, which promotes MIT/industry collaborations, sends out notices to its member companies about PI offerings. MIT World, which is a web site offering free streaming videos of speakers around the campus, electronically promotes all PEP programs. These co-marketing activities are not one-sided; PI registration packets include information about ILP. The PI booth at AAAS offered literature regarding executive education at the MIT Sloan School of Management. PI continues to work with other MIT organizations to develop appropriate new opportunities.

Electronic Marketing

PI engages in a wide variety of online promotional activities. These can range from email campaigns to search engine marketing to listings on specific websites. These promotion costs are much lower than those dedicated to print ads, brochures and postcards. The lead time on these activities is much shorter than for traditional marketing activities and when time is short, electronic marketing might be the only alternative.

Chief among our electronic marketing efforts are the PEP/PI web pages that describe the various programs: the Professional Institute, Midcareer Acceleration Program, the Advanced Study Program or Custom Programs. The PI web pages list the 40+ courses under specific topic areas and also by date of course offering. The information provided includes the course objectives, course content as well as short bios of the course faculty. In order to take advantage of search engine marketing, efforts are made to include relevant words and phrases. Due to changes from the faculty, these pages are always a work-in-progress. Although PI courses currently run only in the summer, the web pages receive 25% of their traffic from September through December. Traffic peaks in April-May while there is a lull in the summer.

Search engine marketing depends on the right choice of “keywords,” and works better for some courses and not too well for other courses. For example, at the time of this writing, using the Google search engine, and looking at organic result listings, “network coding short course” brought up a page where the PI course on network coding was the first listing. However, searching the phrase “leadership short course” resulted in PI’s leadership course at the bottom of the second page. Likewise, a Google search of “bioterrorism short course” resulted in PI’s course making an appearance on the bottom of the third page. The preferred result for search engine marketing is to have one’s site/course listed on the top of the first page of results. Depending on key words and what other usages or meanings they might have, it might be easier to market specific technical courses rather than general management courses using search engine marketing

PI’s email campaigns go out to former participants of all PEP programs as well as to information requesters who have visited the PEP website. In addition, if PI professors have an email list of contacts, then a message can be communicated to this group. Generally speaking, email lists are not available from professional organizations, and MIT organizations closely guard their email lists and make sure that any messages they send are providing information of interest and relevance to their members. For example, an MIT organization might not send out

a message with information about all PI courses, but if there were a discount applicable to their group or if there were new courses that might be of high interest to this group, the organization could agree to add this information in their next email. No group wants to send out too many emails, resulting in the recipients ignoring them or considering them to be spam, with the end result being devaluation of this important mode of communication to stakeholders.

In addition to email campaigns that are sent from PI and other MIT groups, PI also places ads in newsletters and emails that various groups send out to subscribers. These communications, as well as the print ads previously described, promote PI as well as the other programs within PEP. As is the case for purchase of lists, PI never views the actual names and contact information of individuals receiving brochure mailings or email.

Another electronic marketing activity is to place links to the PI website from other websites that potential students might be visiting. MIT faculty members have web pages that list their research interests, among other things. PI encourages faculty to put a link on these pages to their PI course pages. Professional associations, publications, conferences and trade groups all host websites that are visited by working professionals. Some sites do not charge for a posting of PI events, a.k.a. courses. Others charge fees, and decisions are then made as to whether the listing is worth a fee. For example, Bio IT World Events lists PI courses.

Viral Marketing

A number of courses at PI have been offered for many years and are well known in the appropriate industries. Word-of-mouth is extremely valuable for these courses. A recent issue of the PEP newsletter focused on a course on internal combustion engines that has routinely attracted calibration engineers in one automotive assembly plant in Mexico; it is now an obligatory course for all new calibration engineers at the site. PI's long-running biotechnology/pharmaceutical courses are also well known in certain biotechnology companies that routinely send students.

Conclusion

One question in engineering continuing education today is whether or not technical short courses are still relevant, and the experience at MIT's PI is that they are needed. However, despite the university reputation and because of course focus on very specific areas, they are not easy to market because these marketing efforts must reach many different niche audiences through a variety of channels in a cost-effective way. Professional societies are one way to accomplish this goal, and targeted electronic marketing is another. No one marketing effort stand alone, but in aggregate, they have helped enrollments grow steadily over the past four years.

References

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Curriculum Vitae

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