

Repackaging Physics.

Selling physics
to students:



guidance on
marketing
physics
degrees
in the 21st
century

IOP Institute of Physics





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Introduction

In 2008, the Institute of Physics commissioned market research from Hall and Partners Europe in order to better understand the current influences, perceptions and attitudes towards physics amongst young adults, and what factors affect their decision to study physics at university.



This research included an audit of the current marketing and outreach material produced by physics departments, in which two major problems were identified:

- most of the university material was unattractive, although there was evidence to suggest that only committed applicants took the trouble to read it anyway;
- the perception of physics is that there is a poor range of career opportunities available, and that only those interested in teaching and research should study it.

This guide has been produced to overcome these barriers and promote the benefits of studying physics in an interesting and innovative way. The guidance outlined in this document should allow physics departments to reach a less traditional cohort by developing effective strategies of marketing physics through prospectuses, outreach material and online content.

Understanding the audience

When developing any marketing material, it is important to have a clear idea of the aims of the document and the audience that you are likely to reach.



A prospectus will generally be read by a student who has made a decision to study physics, but is deciding which universities to apply to. A website is more likely to be used by a wider audience as a general browsing resource, and provides the opportunity to target a broader, harder-to-reach audience. So, although there will be some overlap, the focus of a website and prospectus should differ slightly.





A good prospectus should have a strong emphasis on innovative topics, student support and social activities. It should also reiterate that physics is a valuable and broad subject choice, by discussing careers, the possible financial rewards and transferable skills.



The website, on the other hand, should have a stronger emphasis on attracting students to the subject of physics generally - for example, by highlighting the wide range of career opportunities, modern day applications and the creative nature of physics.



When thinking about your target audience, have an understanding of the average tariff points of your cohort, as this may affect how you market your degree in terms of course content, research and further education opportunities. It may also be appropriate to direct your marketing material towards a non-UK audience by including any international recognition your course has.

Guidance for marketing material

The main points to consider when marketing a physics course are:



successfully promoting the content of the course;



adopting an accessible writing style;



laying out the page effectively;



using motivating and aspirational images;



promoting careers from physics;



tailoring the messages to the audience;



Content

✓ DO highlight the benefits of the transferable skills that can be gained from studying physics at university, i.e. the ability to grasp concepts quickly; determination to find coherent answers; aptitude for problem solving and analytical, mathematical and IT skills. Include quotes from employers highlighting that the skills they would be looking for could be gained from a degree in physics.

“ I think that physicists can do pretty much anything. Our training can be applied to almost any activity, and it allows us to see things in a way that might not be obvious to others. ”

Simon Singh, science writer and broadcaster.





mention an MPhys or other pathway option.



push these options to the detriment of the BSc – many students will be put off if they think the four-year course is being heavily pushed.

Example:

If you are intending to become a professional physicist, we do offer a four-year MPhys degree in addition to the more general three-year BSc. Don't worry if you've not yet decided on your future career path – the first two years of the MPhys and BSc are the same, giving you the option of transferring between courses in your second year.



X DON'T

down play the challenge of physics – prospective students will see through this.

✓ DO

approach the difficulty of the subject in a positive light. The attraction to physics should lie in its intellectual challenge.



Example:

You will encounter challenging topics during the course and with a greater challenge comes a greater sense of achievement once these topics are mastered. We provide the highest quality of teaching and student support to ensure that this sense of accomplishment is felt by all our students.

✓ DO

emphasise the creativity of physics and wide-ranging topics that can be studied. This will attract a less traditional cohort.



highlight the everyday applications of physics, such as mobile phones, computers and high speed trains.



highlight the benefits of free IOP membership. The benefits of IOP membership include trips, events, information on funding and careers and online access to Physics World.



Writing style



use a dynamic and approachable writing style to engage and enthuse prospective students.



make the text too long-winded or, conversely 'dumb down' information.

Example:

Physics strives to explain the fundamental laws of the universe; it is the extraordinary and the everyday.



exclusively include information that will be relevant to a prospective student.



include any unnecessary content or overload the page with text.

Example:

Briefly introducing exciting topics could enthuse a prospective student; a full break down of the curriculum, however, is not required in marketing information.



X DON'T

use economic analogies or a hard-sell approach.



Layout



clearly title the page with department, subject and course details. It is important to use a clear hierarchy when displaying key information. Headings, section titles and labelling should be easily differentiated from the main copy.



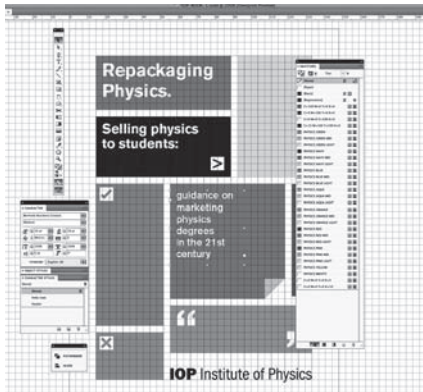
pull quotes out of the text. Engaging information that can be digested easily within seconds of glancing at the page, will draw the reader in to find out more.



colour each section differently to clearly separate them. Use a well considered colour palette that will bring the layout to life.



ask a member of staff to proof read your document and check that your material aligns with other departmental publications.



Images



include up to date images of engaged and enthused students working as part of a group, in modern settings.



aim to show a mix of gender and ethnicity in all images.



use images that show applications of student research.





X DON'T

use images of students taking part in individual work.
This will further the myth that physics is a solitary subject.



Careers



include brief descriptions of job profiles or quotes from former physics students, focussing on interesting, possibly atypical careers from physics. Career opportunities are at the forefront of students' minds when thinking about degree options, and it can be useful to include any links the department has with employers.

“ Physics impacts on every day of my working life; from the rocket technology that launches a weather satellite into a polar or geostationary orbit, to the telemetry that collates millions of weather observations each day. *Heather Reid, weather forecaster.* ”





make the financial benefits of studying a physics degree explicit. Use up-to-date statistics comparing graduates to non graduates, as well as physics graduates to other graduates.

Example:

Over a working lifetime, a physics graduate earns 30% more than someone just holding A-Levels. This exceeds the average for graduates in all subjects (23%).



Advice on designing websites



include easy to follow tabs to access applicable information.



take advantage of the benefits of the internet, by using interesting graphics, moving images and possibly even video footage and blogs.



link to external institutes with an interest in physics (e.g. IOP, NPL, NASA and Physics World).



update the website content regularly.





have clearly defined areas for different users (i.e. current students, staff and prospective students).



provide links to articles or broadcasts involving work from the department that has attracted media interest.



provide bespoke content. The website should not exclusively feature an electronic copy of the printed prospectus or departmental brochure.



allow site visitors to leave feedback so web content can be adjusted if a recurring problem is experienced.



make the website interactive.

Notes:



Institute of Physics
76 Portland Place
London, W1B 1NT

Tel: +44 (0)20 7470 4800
Fax: +44 (0)20 7470 4861

HESTEM@iop.org
www.iop.com



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