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PRESIDENTIAL PUBLIC RELATIONS: MAKING YOUR COLLEGE WELL KNOWN

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For many years, Scott has had a quote taped to his computer from a longtime, nationally prominent presidential colleague: "I want to have the most effective internal communications in higher education. If we can start with this assumption...that will provide the platform for our external strategy. This belief in effective communications must drive our planning."

Former Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill had it right: all politics is local. It follows, then, that successful public relations strategies start on campus. With most college CEOs spending more than two-thirds of their time on the road,

PRESIDENTIAL PUBLIC RELATIONS CONTINUED:

internal communications can be a challenge. External stakeholders increasingly tug presidents in many different directions, and, if anything, the challenge is becoming greater as institutions compete for students and funding. Compounding the problem is that heavy travel can prompt faculty and staff to view the president as an absentee leader. Nevertheless, it is vital that campus CEOs communicate that they are visible, responsive, and proactive when on campus—and that they stay on message, regardless of the audience.

Dr. James L. Fisher, president-emeritus of the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education (C.A.S.E.), states, “From the presidential platform, the college or university president has the ability to mold public opinion, influence key internal and external constituents, and place the institution as a key to the improvement of society.” We therefore offer these specific recommendations for college CEOs:

Internal stakeholders are your front line. Ignore them at your peril. Properly valued, informed, and motivated, they can be your best friends in a crisis, an “early-warning system.” Disregard them, and no amount of external goodwill matters. In addition, internal audiences are your best marketers if they understand and can convey your mission and objectives. We’ve also heard remarkable stories of internal constituents leading to major gifts and national recognition for a college or university. For example, there’s the modest grounds worker at a private college who made national news by leaving the bulk of his \$1.6M estate to his employer of 30 years.

Be visible on campus. In their eagerness to promote their colleges, new presidents may miss critical opportunities for visibility on their own campuses. In contrast is the new president who is quickly exhausted running to every sporting event, departmental get-together, or student meeting. To reach a happy medium, a former mentor and college president coined the term “tasteful fly-bys,” referring to his habit of attending as many on-campus events as possible, but not staying for the entire activity. By being neither the first to arrive, nor the last to leave, you will be noticed and visible without tempting burnout.

Manage your own identity. In their haste to make their mark off-campus, presidents may attempt to brand their institutions externally before establishing their own

personal “brand” internally. It’s true that presidents *are* the institution off campus. Donors, media, and opinion leaders gain their chief impression of the institution from its president. But it’s also important that you know who you are and how you want to be perceived on campus before becoming visible to external stakeholders. Internal and external identities should be complementary and consistent.

Here are some other recommendations for inspiring internal stakeholders and capturing external attention:

Be strategic. Three marketing objectives well executed are better than a dozen implemented haphazardly. Ask yourself, “What is the biggest single need in our marketplace?” Then, “What can our college do better than anyone else?” Marry the two and you have a recipe for success.

- **Repeat, repeat, repeat.** In real estate, it’s location, location, location. In marketing, repetition and consistency of message drive results. In his 2006 *Messages That Stick*, author Chip Heath emphasized that compelling messages withstanding the test of time are succinct, concise, and surprising.
- **The medium is the message.** How often and in what format do your key constituencies prefer to receive information?
- **Add value.** What activity or program, if enhanced by 20 percent, would increase results exponentially?
- **Know your institution.** It’s surprising that when we ask longtime employees to give a “business card” summary of their principal product or service, they can’t do it. If you cannot deliver a crisp, compelling, 30-second “elevator message” to key audiences, don’t think further about branding strategies until you can do so.

Do it first. The marketing adage “It’s more important to be the first to do it than do it the best” runs counter to campus tradition with its endless committees. We are often reluctant to roll out a new course, major, or service until it’s been talked to death. By then, the window of opportunity may have closed.

PRESIDENTIAL PUBLIC RELATIONS CONTINUED:

- **Strike quickly**, making necessary modifications and adaptations along the way.
- **Capitalize on institutional strengths.** Successful organizations and leaders build on their areas of strength. What is your strongest feature? It's often more effective to add value to it rather than trying to introduce a new one.
- **Seek synergistic opportunities.** In the new era of philanthropy, organizations hunt creative ways to deliver their messages. By partnering with other like-minded organizations, your institution will enhance its donor base.
- Above all, **keep it simple.** Good marketing need not be complicated to motivate its audience.

"He who molds the public sentiment, goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions," President Lincoln pronounced. Our 16th President knew the priceless value of positive messaging in effecting policy change. It helped him to preserve the Union; it will help you to build your institution.

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