

## Promoting Your Brand

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We have written in the past about the importance of institutional branding, a factor that is especially critical these days as enrollment markets continue on their most competitive and aggressive course in history. As colleges and universities seek to differentiate themselves from their competition, a carefully constructed brand is vital to recruiting students.

Even a strong brand, however, is only as good as its effective use in the right market, at the right time, with the right strategy behind it. We offer some advice on the effective use of branding—one of the most important tools for campus recruiters.

**Protect it at all costs.** Corporate history in America is full of stories about brand damage and recovery. From the tragic Tylenol poisoning incidents to Coke reversing course on "New Coke" to Martha Stewart's conviction, brand damage can come quickly—and take months or even years to recover fully. But your brand need not be globally famous to suffer. Especially with campus constituents, like parents, attention to details at all levels is vital. Train your staffs on effective customer service, follow-through on complaints (financial aid, residence halls are frequent targets of concern), and positive messaging internally and externally.

**Use the brand strategically.** Remember that more isn't always better, so make sure you're effectively reaching the right market with the right strategy. Today's "non-traditional" (older than age 25) students are fast becoming the "traditional" ones. Therefore, your messaging to each group should be adjusted accordingly. Similarly, promotional dollars are too precious to waste on advertising or publications that do not prompt the desired results from prospective students. Once, a college's brand was effectively displayed via printed view books. Now, everybody is online. Transfer the strength of your brand to newer, more popular platforms.

**Be authentic.** Audiences today, especially students and young alumni, believe in authenticity. If marketing strategies conflict with the mission or reputation of a brand, it will not be effective. The best marketing is synergistic with the goals and mission of an organization, product or service, as well as its brand, each reinforcing the other. For example, if your institution is known for being inclusive—a valued component of many colleges' brands—make sure your messaging illustrates how and why this is so to differentiate you from the competition.

**Get ahead of the curve.** Every brand reaches a point where it needs to change or be refreshed, or it will stagnate and eventually decline. Even the best organizations sometimes fail to be proactive, preferring to stay with the known rather than to risk change. In today's enrollment wars, however, complacency is not an option. Plan well in advance, and in detail, the rollout of new academic programs, facilities, or athletic teams. Don't wait for your competition to seize the marketing initiative.

**Beware of higher education espionage.** As in the corporate world, proprietary information at colleges and universities should be guarded at all costs. The good news about an institution's success can turn to bad once the competition jumps ahead of you with the same ideas or uses privileged information against you. For example, don't offer up your institution as a target with your competitors if you have challenges on your own campus. You may find that they will gleefully spread the word that you're in trouble. Likewise, a strong brand can usually withstand imitation, but that's where effective target marketing, seizing the initiative, and guarding trade secrets become critical. Staff and faculty should be taught to be circumspect about what kinds of information they share with colleagues at other institutions. The competition is always listening ....

We reiterate that while quality of educational services is always important, in marketing it's usually better to be first, rather than to introduce a finely honed program after it has already proven successful elsewhere. Protecting and promoting your brand effectively is equally critical for long-term success in today's supercharged enrollment markets.

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