

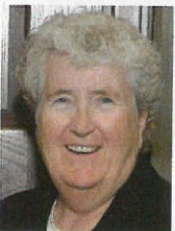
Protecting Your Brand

Make good choices to market your institution's brand.

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BUILDING AND SUSTAINING SUCCESSFUL BRANDS is getting tougher for institutions all the time: the average U.S. consumer is exposed to an estimated 5,000 messages a day, according to a recent survey by *Advertising Age*. Rising above the clutter without breaking the bank will require organizations to get smarter about branding — relying less on intuition and current assumptions, and more on hard data.



A “brand” encompasses everything about the institution’s public image, including graphic identity, logos and trademarks; taglines or mottos; team names and nick-

names, even the legal name of the institution itself. Confusion among institutions with the same or similar names in different locations can lead to confusion in the marketplace, with serious ramifications for a college or university. That’s why some presidents have gone to court to protect the good name of their brand. Savvy marketers also recognize several other things about a brand as they plan their marketing strategies and tactics:


More isn’t always better. Higher education marketers need to be increasingly savvy about putting their advertising dollars where they will produce optimal results. Too many promotional efforts are unfocused, which results in the brand failing to drive customer buying patterns. Also, too many organizations fail to get ahead of shifting customer preferences and evolving demographics. Success in today’s crowded marketplace requires a stepped-up focus on hard data, leading to an in-depth understanding of the needs of the target audiences. So, for example, if the greatest growth sector in the higher education market in the 21st century will be non-traditional students, why do most of our marketing and branding programs still target the traditional 18-year-old undergraduate, a declining demographic?

Add value. Price and value usually go hand-in-hand. In the perceptions of prospective students and families, high tuition often equates with “high value.” High-end retailers recognize this linkage and thus are willing to forego immediate revenues from discounted goods in favor of the overall reputation of the brand. Colleges and universities, likewise, recognize that excessive tuition discounting over the long term is not only fiscally unsustainable,

but also helps to weaken the image of the institution in the minds of consumers. The recent decline in the shareholder value of Facebook showcases the inherent risk of offering a valuable service or product below true market value, even if audiences are expanded in the process.

Be authentic. We’ve found that audiences today, especially students and young alumni, value authenticity. If marketing conflicts with the mission and/or reputation of a brand, it will not be believed. 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.

Be consistent. One of the biggest mistakes that marketers make is to repeatedly change tag lines, core messaging and especially the graphic identity of an organization when the initial campaign appears not to work. Repeated changes over time simply confuse the core audience. Stay with your brand long enough for it to be successful.

Get ahead of the curve. Every brand reaches a point where it needs to change, 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. Volvo, for example, lost millions in sales by failing to note changing consumer preferences, and waiting until 2003 to introduce an SUV. It’s critical for college and university presidents not only to anticipate trends but also to act on them in a timely manner. Remember that while quality of a product is very 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. 

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