

Brand U: Marketing the Alma Mater

For colleges, developing a brand strategy is one way to stand out in a competitive marketplace

By Jane Porter

August 5, 2008

You won't have to wait for college viewbooks filled with overgrown ivy and smiling students to make it to your doorstep next application season. Nowadays ads for schools are everywhere you look. For colleges and universities, there's no shame in playing the marketing game. That's what the University of California, Los Angeles made clear in its latest national marketing effort: "UCLA, Unabashed."

This past spring UCLA made its first major media buy when it began advertising the "UCLA, Unabashed" slogan. The campaign included full-page advertisements in The New York Times and Los Angeles Times, each featuring quotes from an influential alumnus or professor on what they think makes the school unique. The branding campaign was designed to highlight the school's specific strengths to help it stand out in an increasingly competitive market for top student applicants.

Two decades ago, the concept of developing a brand identity for a college was largely a foreign notion.

For a long time, "marketing" at colleges and universities consisted simply of replacing outdated photographs in the school catalog with new ones. But today the concept of university branding—long looked down on in the academy for its streamlining and simplifying business principles—is essential on college campuses. Consulting agencies have seen a rise in interest from college and university clients. Stamats, an Iowa-based higher education consulting firm, said school branding proposals doubled from 20 to 40 in the last year. "Fifteen years ago, you would never hear the word 'branding,' maybe at 1% of the campuses," says Jay Williams, president of Atlanta-based higher education marketing firm Stein Communications. "Today you hear it at 100% of them."

Funding Pinch

With the U.S. college-age population projected to decline sharply over the next 10 years, competition for students is steadily growing among the country's nearly 4,500 colleges and universities. Financially, the need for support from benefactors and alumni is increasingly important as states cut back on funding. Plus, attracting and retaining top faculty continues to be a challenge as schools poach professors from one another. All these pressures combined with the numerous ways in which schools can get their message out—from snail mail and online ads to Facebook and YouTube (GOOG)—mean schools are recognizing the need to take a more strategic approach to branding than ever before.

"The institution is not behind an ivy-covered wall any more. It has thousands of touch points available on the Internet to untold constituencies all of the time," says Kathleen

Dawley, president of Maguire Associates, a higher education research and consulting firm in Massachusetts. "It's more apparent that without some management and institutional command about their message, it's all over the place."

UCLA is a case in point. Stepping onto the campus four years ago, one could spot more than 100 different logos around the school and in publications sent out to students and applicants. The inconsistency came from a lack of schoolwide marketing efforts and it meant that every department more or less could do as they pleased when putting together their advertising materials. This resulted in confusion about what made UCLA any different from all the other public universities out there, says Don Popielarz, head of Highlands Strategic Planning Group, a New Jersey-based research marketing firm hired by UCLA to research its marketing efforts. "People know that it's a good school, but they have no specific ideas about what it does," Popielarz says.

After UCLA hired Popielarz in 2003, he interviewed 68 deans, faculty, and community leaders to gauge their perceptions of the school, and discovered arts and culture resources on campus were underappreciated. The school brought in advertising expert Paul Keye—who developed the iconic fried egg TV spot for the Partnership for Drug Free America—to create ads that were tested for effectiveness on 14 focus groups. Later when Popielarz reevaluated arts appreciation on campus, he saw an increase in the metric he was using. The advertising was working.

The school was also worried about the low number of African-Americans opting to enroll (just 100 entering students out of 4,809 in 2006) and the need to bring in funding for academic research. As a result, "UCLA, Unabashed" advertisements included African-American congresswoman Diane Watson talking about her alma mater as the new Ellis Island, and Nobel prize-winning chemistry professor Paul Boyer lauding the school's research efforts. Designed to give a look into specific strengths at the school rather than marrying a photo of the campus with a slogan, as college and university ads often do, "UCLA, Unabashed" is one way the school is aggressively targeting donors and prospective students on a shoestring budget of no more than \$200,000. "When push comes to shove for the very best candidates, we are competing with Stanford and Berkeley to attract them," says Lawrence Lokman, who oversees marketing at UCLA. "To break through the clutter takes more than just traditional marketing."

ASU's Image Change

Still, the sheer size and structural complexity of colleges and universities make for some serious marketing challenges. Nowhere is this more evident than at Arizona State University. With 64,000 students, 300,000 alumni, 22 colleges, and hundreds of programs and research centers, moving away from its party school image and defining a clear brand message was no easy task.

The first step in its marketing campaign came in 2002 when the school was branded the "New American University," with a new Web site, targeted mailings, and lots of video content streamed on its Web site to showcase students discussing their personal experiences at ASU. The videos give a face to an otherwise gargantuan enterprise. To standardize the school's message, ASU established a marketing council two years ago that meets monthly to discuss and approve promotional materials put together by the various departments. The council "put teeth behind the marketing enforcement," says its chair, Terri Shafer. Any department that prints something violating the brand is forced to get rid of the material and pay for reprints out of pocket. "It's not O.K. to produce

something that doesn't support the university brand portfolio," Shafer says. "One department can sabotage your brand if it doesn't look right."

Transcending Marketing

Codifying such branding is no simple task. In January, Boston University came out with a 67-page manual outlining a look, tone, and feel the school should exude in its marketing materials. The school called Toth Brand Imaging, a Cambridge (Mass.)-based branding agency, to put the guide together. For the first time, the manual set up standards for how the red Boston University logo could be used, with everything from font size to color grade. The guide compared the stiff corporate wording of an old-school brochure with new marketing copy that was more accessible. The branding effort, too new to have a measured effect on student yield and retention rates, has nonetheless begun to standardize what was a sprawling marketing mess in earlier days. "People can begin to really develop marketing programs where none existed before," says Stephen Burgay, BU's head of marketing, who comes from a business background as former marketing director at insurance firm John Hancock.

While schools are banking on attracting more students with their invested interest in branding efforts, many recognize it isn't the panacea to enrollment and fund-raising challenges. While more and more business practices are finding their way to campuses, the fundamental distinctions from business remain. Colleges and universities will always be sprawling, consensus-building organizations whose very decentralized model is what makes them successful academically. "What we are trying to do at a marketing level is simply represent a more consistent view of what we have to offer," says BU's Burgay. "Ultimately the final decision [on which school to choose] will rest on things that transcend the marketing."

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