

Ten Practical Questions About Branding

A roundtable of accomplished campus marketing professionals discusses what works—and how trustees can be certain of this.

NOT LONG AGO, “MARKETING” AND “BRANDING” were considered dirty words on most campuses. But several factors have helped turn the tide.

Faculty, staff, and board members who professed that their institution was “the best kept secret” began to appreciate the value of getting their message out and managing their reputation—especially in the face of growing competition from schools that had staked an earlier claim to a strong market position. In addition, declining enrollment at some institutions and flat giving at others created fiscal considerations that leaders could not ignore.

These days, it’s the rare college or university president who doesn’t recognize what corporate counterparts have long known: Marketing is a necessity, not a frill. The question isn’t so much *whether* to invest, but *when, how*, and most important, *what’s the return on investment?*

To probe these issues, we hosted a discussion in December 2003 among a group of campus-based marketing professionals. A number of questions emerged from that discussion for boards and senior administrators to consider as they monitor and guide their institution’s marketing efforts. Herewith a summary:

1. Are your marketing goals based on your strategic plan? Marketing is not an activity that happens in isolation, nor is it akin to “putting lipstick on a pig.” Pretty words don’t alter the institution’s underlying reality. Effective marketing must be based on understanding and bringing to life the actual, verifiable competitive advantages of each institution and making sure those advantages are connected to the vision.

“Marketing communication is a means of implementing the strategic plan,” said Mark Lindemood, vice chancellor for institutional advancement at Texas Tech University. “In the absence of strategic goals, efforts to gauge the effective-

• BY ROBERT M. MOORE AND JEANNE RATTENBURY •

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ness of marketing are meaningless.” Such goals should be supported by measurable enrollment objectives (the number of students that apply or the quality of student that enrolls), development objectives (the number of alumni participating in the annual fund or the capital campaign), or other specified goals and resource commitments.

2. Are mechanisms in place for tracking return on investment? The more expensive the investment—as with advertising in general and television advertising in particular—the greater the need for accountability. “Our advertising has clearly been effective,” said Adrian Kerrigan, vice president for university advancement at the University of Detroit Mercy. “We’d experienced over a decade of enrollment decline, and now freshman applications are up 61 percent over a two-year period, while total new full-time student enrollment has grown by 31 percent. We use our advertising to drive people to our Web site, and we use Web-tracking software to measure traffic the day and days after our advertising hits. Advancement support also has been notably up over the same period.”

Cynthia Hall, director of university marketing and advertising at Pennsylvania State University, said her operation does both qualitative and quantitative research to assess the impact of the university’s advertising. “For example, we just finished surveying 850 college-bound Pennsylvania high school seniors about Penn State and our ‘Teen Campaign,’ and the findings were strongly supportive, particularly on the cable TV advertising we do throughout the state,” Hall said. “Unfortunately, it’s a balancing act between how much money you put into evaluation and the media buy itself, because you’re pulling resources away from your advertising and communications efforts.”

3. Do you know what your audiences think? Perceptions influence action, and it’s unrealistic to expect your audience’s behavior to change—or to know how to approach your audience—if you don’t know what their attitudes are. “We did baseline research to point ourselves in the right direction, and in the process we discovered that the schools in our market that have made an investment in managing

their reputations are well thought of,” said Mary Stagaman, assistant vice president for community relations and marketing at the University of Cincinnati. “We learned that our image has been shaped by word of mouth and by people’s long-held assumptions, rather than what we are about today. They don’t necessarily think of us as the first choice, except for our design and music schools, and they don’t necessarily translate their perception of the quality of those colleges to the entire university. Knowing these things has driven our marketing strategy.”

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But it can be difficult to persuade leaders to invest in research. “People have such a strong sense of what needs to be done that they think research will only get in the way,” said Fred Volkmann, vice chancellor for public affairs at Washington University in St. Louis. “I always respond by saying, ‘You’ve got a 90 percent chance of being right, because I believe in intuition and experience, but it’s the unknown 10 percent that makes me nervous.’ I’d like to know what we might encounter as we pursue an activity—might it reverse some of the great progress we’ve made? It’s amazing how few institutions have done this kind of self-analysis.

“We make regular reports to the board about the activities of the public-affairs office, and we talk in terms not of ideas but of absolutes—that is, numbers,” Volkmann added. “We show them data that help them understand. Our trustees are excited by the idea that an institution that had been relatively unknown has risen successfully in the world of academe and in the perception of college-bound high school students.”

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Lindemood spent nine years at Kent State University in Ohio before joining Texas Tech. "At Kent State, we had a particular desire to influence corporate leaders on our research message, so we published a 12-page insert in a regional business publication and ran reprints," he said. "We did a baseline survey and then came back five years later and found significant movement in their perception of us. If there's a baseline, then it's easier to grapple with where marketing investments need to be—and what return to expect. If that research base is nonexistent, it can be very difficult to demonstrate the efficacy of the program."

4. Are you remembering the intangible benefits?

There's nothing better than concrete results, but it's important not to lose sight of marketing's intangible benefits. "We believe our advertising has had an impact not only on prospective students, but on alumni as well," said Doug McConkey, vice president for student affairs and enrollment management at Ball State University in Indiana. "Sometimes I refer to it as the pride factor: We were on TV before a lot of other people, and all of the sudden we had alumni telling us, 'Boy, it's great to see you out there.' "

Marketing also is a way of priming an audience for a positive future relationship with your institution. "The marketing effort is a prelude to when you've got them on campus—when they're still in high school coming to college or seniors in college coming to graduate school," McConkey continued. "You're sending out messages about who you are, what you expect, what the values of the institution are. Marketing in that sense is far more than advertising. It's the beginning of the orientation process. It's acculturating the person into the university community."

5. **Is an internal marketing effort in order?** Marketing is a means of building an institution's brand—its "promise" that it will meet the needs of its stakeholders, current and prospective. But communications with external audiences can be undermined if marketing messages are not in sync with those audiences' actual experiences. "We recognize that how students are received—how they are treated when they come on campus, how they develop rela-

tionships with faculty and staff—is ultimately the most critical factor," said Cincinnati's Stagaman. "If faculty and staff attitudes about the institution aren't all about a sense of accomplishment and pride, then none of those other things can happen."

Beyond this sense of institutional pride, the degree to which faculty and staff understand the strategic issues, marketing responses, and anticipated return on investment also can be critical to the initiative's success. In a survey Lipman Hearne has conducted for the past five years to gather information about higher education marketing practices, the factor that correlates most strongly with positive results is a "high commitment to internal communications." In other words, your own people have to know what you're doing, what their role is, and how they will benefit by becoming enthusiastic supporters. Then they can become an incredible asset to any marketing program.

6. **Have you gotten complacent?** When things are going well, it's tempting—but dangerous—to think you can put your marketing efforts on hold. "If you achieve success, it's easy to become too comfortable with an overinflated sense of where you are in the marketplace," said Ball State's McConkey. "A lot of our institutions occupy a fragile position, and aggressive new competitors or unforeseen circumstances could dislodge them from the stature they've gained. While this is less true for flagship institutions and very selective private schools, it's a constant fact of life for institutions that are only now in the process of building a quality reputation."

Hall added that Penn State's current investment is actually an investment in its future. "Our applications last year were at an all-time high, 86,000. That's up 9 percent over the previous year. In the face of that, you might be surprised that we would allocate funds to such projects, but we're looking to the future. Demographics turn against us in 2008, when the pool of high school graduates will begin to shrink. We're really just trying to underscore the strength of the Penn State brand name so that all 20 of our campuses remain strong."

7. **Have you protected your institution's marketing budget?** Because marketing expenditures are

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sometimes still thought of as less legitimate than other expenses, especially at public institutions, it's important to make the marketing budget untouchable. "We've been careful to pay for TV and radio and billboard advertising out of foundation funds," said Ball State's McConkey. "We've been careful not to use student-fee money or state money. But the need for investment doesn't go away when times are tough. In fact, it probably gets more intense."

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Added Detroit Mercy's Kerrigan: "We're in a position now where our leadership may say to us, 'Well, you've done well. Maybe we can scale back in tough economic times and maybe utilize those funds in other ways.' We've been real strong in segregating those marketing dollars and saying that the return on the investment has been so strong that it would be foolish to cut back. We should continue that investment—or even increase it—because that's the best return we're getting on a dollar. More strategic investment will bring greater visibility, greater reputation, greater support, and greater image growth for the institution."

8. Do you place too much stock in national press coverage? Most higher education leaders have a love-hate relationship with the *U.S. News & World Report* college rankings. But everybody agrees that the rankings—and the responses of prospective students, their parents, and alumni and supporters—can result in a misallocation of resources and a blurring of focus.

The same can hold for other press coverage. "If I put a clipping up on the screen from the *New York Times* that talks about us as the smartest basketball

power in America, everybody says, 'That's great PR,'" said Washington University's Volkmann. "Of course, no one has measured the impact. But people tend to ascribe more value to the carrier of the message than to its actual impact. A 'big wet kiss' article in the *New York Times* does not a success story make."

9. Are you comparing apples and oranges? Are you chagrined that your sports teams don't receive the same press coverage as the university's down the street or that billboards for another school dominate local roadways while your institution doesn't advertise at all? Your chagrin may be misplaced. "We get pressure sometimes to make news through our sports program, but we're in [NCAA athletics] Division III, not Division I," explained Volkmann of Washington University. "The beauty of this institution is that it is Division III by plan. We are national champions more than nearly any other Division III school, but we don't do it for public-relations purposes. We do it for internal pride. We do it because it builds a sense of who we are. We do it because it gives our students the opportunities to participate in what they treasure. We do it knowing that it won't make the national press—and that's just fine because it's consistent with our mission."

Washington University does not advertise because it draws students from a national base, whereas schools like University of Detroit Mercy and the University of Cincinnati—with a primarily local and regional base—advertise extensively. "We recruit much more from southeastern Michigan and Michigan in general as the largest and most comprehensive private university in the state," said Detroit Mercy's Kerrigan. "We do have professional schools—law, dentistry, and architecture—that recruit from a national base. But for these regional programs, we have targeted marketing campaigns that have had a huge impact as we track the Web hits and the enrollment statistics."

10. What should a good trustee do? The answer requires a delicate balance between hands-on and hands-off engagement with institutional leadership. "We have a public-relations council composed of powerful people in the corporate world, in marketing, public relations and advertising," said Washing-

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ton University's Volkmann. "It's a blue-ribbon group of people who really know what they are talking about. And when they sit down at the table and meet with the president or with key deans, you don't want to argue too vehemently with them because they tend to have the answers already—or at least they know what questions to ask. As a result, they've been extremely effective—their pro bono work has probably been worth millions."

At Ball State, McConkey has found trustee involvement to be a real asset. "Trustees should ask about what we're doing and how much it costs. They should ask what impact we anticipate. They need to be informed stakeholders."

Though no simple formula for effective trustee involvement exists, all agree that informed trustees

—those who are sensitive to the differences between their corporate settings and those of the colleges and universities they serve—can be a tremendous asset. They can help university officials learn how to understand the institution and its market environment, and ensure that adequate resources are earmarked for market research or outreach initiatives. And they can become advocates for an effective process. ♦

Robert M. Moore (rmoore@lipmanhearne.com) is managing partner and Jeanne Rattenbury (jrattenbury@lipmanhearne.com) is associate vice president of Chicago-based Lipman Hearne, Inc., a marketing communications firm for the nonprofit sector.