

Why Content Matters in College Branding

A White Paper

by
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Abstract

In a time of declining resources, many colleges¹ are revising their communications materials to present their institution more effectively to prospective students, alumni/ae, donors, government officials and the general public. In other words, they are revising their “brands.” This paper explains why the *content* of a college’s public communications materials should not be ignored in any effort to rebrand the institution. In other words, branding (making an institution distinctive and easily identifiable) should not be reduced merely to selecting a new logo, tagline, or graphic design; it must include a clearly written, consistent, and compelling message in all materials. Further, truly effective copy must employ the latest strategies, especially search engine optimization, for gaining attention and communicating on the internet. In order to generate effective content, communications staff must have the expertise and time to relate well to campus constituents such as faculty and students and to employ the latest strategies. Whenever current staff lack expertise or are overwhelmed, colleges should seek outside assistance.

¹ Although this white paper pertains primarily to institutions of higher learning, the principles discussed are applicable to all businesses or organizations that need to revise or enhance their brands in the marketplace.

Introduction

Ah, yes – “branding.” Long a useful term in business marketing circles, that word has brought trouble to many college communications directors and senior administrators who dare utter it. After all, argue many faculty, “We don’t want our college to be sold like toothpaste, beer, or something worse.” And they have a point. After all, education is not the same as ordinary consumer products; it is a highly complex endeavor with a long tradition that often seeks to achieve rather vague, esoteric goals. And yet, during the past 15 to 20 years, colleges have sought to create and deliver a unified message across diverse media to multiple constituencies that differentiates their institution from all others—in other words, they have sought to create a brand for their school. Indeed, this has been going on for a very long time insofar as all institutions of higher learning already have a brand, whether they acknowledge it or not. For example, one of the most successful brands in the United States is also one of the oldest: Harvard’s one-word motto, “*Veritas*.” Much of what is meant by a brand was expressed in earlier times by the term, “reputation.” Questions facing college leaders now include, “What is your institution’s brand (reputation, image, public perception)? Does it reflect the reality of your institution? Who knows about it?”

In these difficult economic times, the scramble for additional students by 95% of colleges and universities² has become more intense. Several factors—the rise of for-profit institutions, the burgeoning number of online courses, increasing ethnic and age diversity of students, attention to economic benefits of higher learning—have compounded the challenges facing college admissions officers, public relations or marketing directors, and senior administrators. As an official responsible for promoting your college in an ever more competitive environment, just how do you make your college stand out from the herd? In marketing terms, how do you “brand” your college most effectively? And, most important, as you seek to convey to prospective students the real value and advantages of your college, does the deeper content of your message matter? In today’s rapidly changing environment, colleges can no longer rely merely on distributing glitzy brochures or setting up slick websites showing smiling students sitting under campus trees. *Prospective students and their families must be assured that they will receive what they pay for.* Colleges today must compete for students by providing accurate information about their programs based on solid evidence of their effectiveness. Closer attention to the content of a college’s branding campaign is your most effective way to accomplish that objective.

² For the sake of brevity, the term “college” will refer all institutions of higher learning, including private and public colleges, universities, community colleges, and for-profit, private institutions. The reader should bear in mind that universities are comprised of individual colleges and other program units that often pursue their own marketing objectives in addition to those of their parent institution.

Present-Day Challenges Facing College Marketers

Except for highly selective colleges such as Ivy League institutions, attracting students is a matter of survival for most colleges today. Beginning every autumn and reaching into the spring, senior administrators and admissions officers try to read the recruitment tea leaves to learn whether they will meet their somewhat inflated enrollment projections to cover next year's budget. And just at the time when resources are becoming more scarce, the tea leaves are becoming harder to interpret due to the new factors that are affecting the recruiting environment.

The rapidly increasing strength of for-profit and online institutions is threatening to eclipse enrollments at some of the largest public university and community college systems. For example, in 2009 the University of Phoenix enrolled a whopping 455,600 students—a figure that made it the second largest institution of higher learning in the country and outstripping the combined enrollment of the Big Ten universities.³ Such burgeoning enrollments in the for-profit sector mean that these institutions are educating approximately 10% of all college students (Figure 1).⁴ On their way toward earning an estimated \$26-billion for their owners and shareholders, for-profit colleges use the latest online and telemarketing techniques to attract students who consider them for a variety of reasons: availability of courses (frequently online) at all times throughout the year, lower standards for admission, circumstances that prevent traveling to or living on campus, need for courses available at night and on weekends, and ease of completing courses and degrees for adult students.

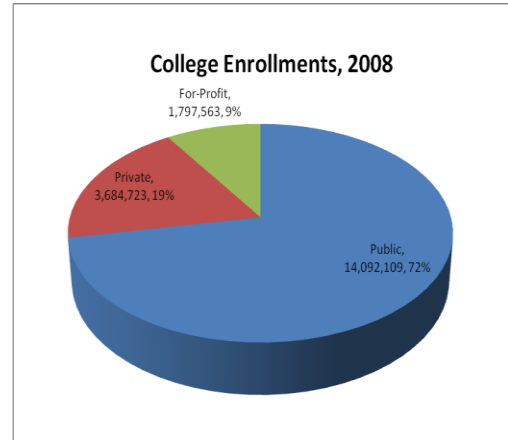


Figure 1.

The growth trend of for-profit institutions (Figure 2) is likely to continue (barring negative effects of pending changes in financial aid regulations). This is because they operate with lower costs (non-tenured, mostly part-time faculty; online instruction; technology-driven management systems; not having to support original research) than traditional public and private colleges can manage. Moreover, because of shrinking support from state governments, many public institutions are turning students away; many of these students then choose for-profit institutions as their only remaining option. Adult students who need online programs to accommodate their busy schedules also turn to for-profit outlets

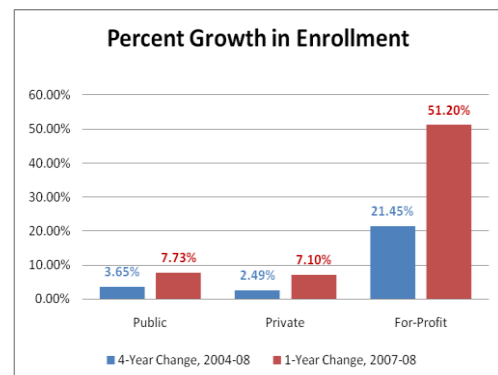


Figure 2.

³ Robin Wilson, "For-Profit Colleges Change Higher Education's Landscape," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 7, 2010 (<http://chronicle.com/article/For-Profit-Colleges-Change/64012/>; accessed 06/11/2010).

⁴ Data Source: "For-Profit Colleges Boom," *Inside Higher Ed*, April 7, 2010 (<http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2010/04/07/enroll>; accessed 06/14/2010)

because traditional public and private colleges often cannot offer a sufficient number of online courses. And finally, when community colleges and some private colleges can no longer devote sufficient resources to meet the needs of underprepared entering students, many of these students are granted admission to for-profit programs, often with disastrous results for themselves.

As a result of these factors, many prospective students are willing to pay a premium in order to participate in a program that will admit them, accommodate their scheduling and other needs, and offer the prospect of enhanced employment opportunities to those who earn degrees or complete certification programs in high-demand fields. Thus, traditional, non-for-profit public and private colleges face a challenge of increasing competition that compels a different marketing approach as well as changing educational practices. And for-profit institutions face a challenge of being able to demonstrate that they, in fact, provide high quality educational programs that match the quality of traditional colleges' programs and actually improve students' career opportunities. In sum, the changing situation is forcing stronger attention to actual student achievement for both traditional and for-profit institutions.

The Focus on Student Achievement

During the past 20 years or so, government agencies and regional accrediting associations have focused on what college students actually learn as measured by what has become known as "student outcomes assessment." Fueled by faculty opposition, some colleges today are just now developing comprehensive assessment programs. Nevertheless, most institutions have begun to see the wisdom of conducting outcomes assessment, chiefly to learn how to improve their educational programs. As faculty have become more positively engaged in assessment, colleges have begun to develop more sophisticated, valid measures of student learning.⁵

Now that the general public and government officials have begun to question strongly whether students are getting what they pay for, colleges are under increasing pressure to make assessment data generally available.⁶ Especially with regard to programs of study leading to professional certification (e.g., accounting, engineering, health professions, education), prospective students want assurances that they will actually acquire the information and skills that lead to gainful employment.⁷ In this atmosphere, it is time for colleges to use their outcomes results in a proactive way, to promote their distinctiveness, to brand themselves.

⁵ Programs in the forefront of assessing student learning include efforts at [Rutgers University](#), the [University of Michigan](#), [Canisius College](#), and [Tunxis Community College](#) (CT). It is also noteworthy that for-profit institutions have lagged significantly in the area of assessment of student learning.

⁶ Of course, federal and state law has required elementary and secondary schools for several years to make assessment (standardized test) data publicly available. Consequences for chronically underperforming schools can be severe. So far, colleges and universities have not been subjected to similar requirements.

⁷ The U.S. Department of Education has recommended applying stricter financial aid regulations mostly to for-profit institutions if they cannot demonstrate that a sufficient number of their graduates find gainful employment that allows them to repay their student loans.

Getting Faculty and Students on Board

In the past, faculty have strongly opposed both outcomes assessment and business-quality branding. In recent years, however, faculty have become much more engaged in assessing student learning beyond merely assigning grades, once they became convinced that such assessment was both necessary and useful to improving academic programs. In addition, budget crises of late have convinced many faculty that they need to take a more active role in how their college's advantages can be promoted. Just like everyone else, faculty like to get paid. Without a sufficient number of students (as well as other changes in college practices), their paychecks are threatened. This presents a golden opportunity for communication directors and administrators to enlist faculty in enriching the branding efforts of their institutions. Truly effective changes in the nature and use of a college's branding will not occur in any other way.

Perusal of hundreds of college websites reveals that many fail to differentiate themselves from their competitors effectively. How many colleges, for instance, tout their small class size, the number of Ph.D.s on their faculty, or the opportunity for students to conduct independent research? When so many colleges trumpet the same features in their marketing materials, they all begin to look the same. No wonder so many students fall back on purely emotional factors, such as the beauty of the campus or the lavish accommodations in residence halls, to make their decision about which college to attend! Of course, colleges want to promote themselves in the best light possible, but what will keep their carefully formulated taglines from being merely empty slogans, easily forgotten or even ridiculed?

The answer is "good content." Content-driven branding for colleges must draw upon the expertise of the faculty in describing the benefits and distinctiveness of academic programs. Prospective students who have already chosen a particular career path or field of study need to know in some detail just how Pine Tree College's programs will prepare them well to achieve their goals. This is especially true of adult students or students who are changing careers. Only the faculty can provide that information accurately and in depth.

This means that persons responsible for producing the content for a college's marketing materials, including especially the website, should interview key faculty members, glean the best information possible from them, and invite participating faculty to review the copy before it is published. Faculty members should not write the copy directly or have total editorial control, but they should provide the necessary information and expertise to make sure that the marketing materials accurately reflect what is actually happening in their academic programs.

Similarly, students should be surveyed and interviewed to learn what they find distinctive and most advantageous about their college. (A college can also learn much from negative student comments as well!) As any marketing professional knows, the most effective branding occurs via word of mouth. What are your students telling their friends back home? What do they say on Twitter or Facebook? What do they say to their counterparts at work or socially about their experience at your institution? Why not use what they think and say in your branding efforts? To do so will alert you to perceptions about your college that might otherwise be missed. And if you coordinate your marketing content somewhat with student opinion, you can be confident that

your content is not running against the grain of student experience. Indeed, student experience and the college's marketing can reinforce one another.

Using Assessment of Student Outcomes and Satisfaction

The greatest omission of most college's marketing efforts lies in their failure to interpret and use learning outcomes data and the results of student satisfaction surveys. To be sure, inclusion of raw data or heavily technical, finely nuanced interpretations of data would be counterproductive. Faculty might like to see that, but it won't sell. Nevertheless, brief accounts of assessment results and student satisfaction surveys in plain, simple language can put some real meat on the bones of an otherwise clever, but essentially empty marketing campaign. *Show* what's distinctive and advantageous about your college's programs; don't just try to tell people about your college with vague, general statements that every other college can mimic.

Using actual data effectively, therefore, means enlisting faculty expertise in interpreting the data and then having professionals write the content accordingly. And that means achieving a delicate balance between what faculty will regard as necessary precision and nuance, on the one hand, and words that will sell the programs effectively and motivate more prospective students to enroll. Your materials must avoid overpromising and underselling at the same time. To have someone who can relate to faculty and who also can translate what the faculty say into effective marketing content would be invaluable.

Revising the Content of Your Brand

Here are eleven steps to follow in revising the content of your college's brand.

1. Conduct a review of your current marketing materials, focusing on graphic design, copy content, and vehicles for dissemination. Survey students, faculty, alumni/ae, and others not associated with your institution for reaction.
2. Meet with program directors, department chairs, and other key faculty to ask what they are doing right in their programs, what they are thinking of changing, and what they hope to accomplish in the future. Don't talk, just listen.
3. Meet with selected students and recent alumni/ae to ask about their experiences of your institution. Focus their attention not only on student life, but also especially on their academic experience. Listen carefully between the lines for both the good and the bad.
4. Gather learning assessment and student satisfaction data from your office of institutional research and get their preliminary assistance in understanding the data. Then reapproach faculty representatives to learn what they think of the data. Their analysis at this stage will be crucial.

5. Identify those aspects of your program or institution that your previous analysis shows are successful. If you have market research indicating high demand for such qualities, so much the better. Remember, trying to highlight all aspects of your institution is likely to be counterproductive.
6. Revise the copy of your marketing materials according to professional copywriting standards as appropriate for each medium. Pay special attention to Search Engine Optimization (SEO) strategies for your institution's website, email messages, and social media outlets.
7. In all materials, focus as much as possible on *benefits*. Mention features only to support benefits. Most institutions list only features and hardly promote benefits at all. *Do not presume that prospective students or their families automatically understand the benefits of your institution's positive features.*
8. If necessary, redesign graphic elements of electronic and print materials to reflect the copy emphases identified in steps 1-7 above.
9. Test the new materials on faculty, current students, recent alumni/ae, donors, and others before publishing widely. Revise materials as necessary.
10. Conduct continuing analysis of effectiveness of materials, especially online materials. Are the keywords appropriate? Are they effective? Do all pages utilize SEO techniques? What are the response/conversion rates for all "calls to action" on each page or email message?
11. Continually update materials, build out online content, and hone SEO results according to analysis of effectiveness.

How to Select Professional Assistance

The above recommendations might be well advised, but in today's economic climate, many communications offices at colleges (and businesses) are understaffed. Even if colleges have not reduced the number of staff, more is expected by way of producing content for electronic media and in terms of the number of projects required. In addition to the usual print materials, continual updating of a college's website requires that new copy be written and published every day. Coordination with student recruitment offices, alumni/ae relations, and institutional advancement is a matter of high priority. It is difficult for most communications staff to find time to interact with faculty and students to ferret out their accomplishments and interests that can be used to convey the college's strengths to the world. And finally, commencement, as the most important publicity event of the year, often becomes a nightmare.

Given this situation, many communication offices find it necessary to reassess their staff's qualifications and experience in order to retrain existing staff, add new staff, or outsource certain projects or functions to professional freelancers. In deciding how to meet staffing needs, consider

the following points:

- Who handles graphic design of your print and, especially, online materials? Are they up-to-date and competent? To what extent is it necessary for your staff to interface with IT staff, and how is that working?
- Are your current staff good writers? Do they produce vibrant, enthusiastic, and correct copy that engages the hearts and minds of your various constituents?
- Are current staff trained in producing copy for your website and other online materials? Do they possess expertise in keyword analysis, SEO techniques, and marketing strategies? Do they have time to utilize such techniques?
- How well are your current staff able to produce or obtain video to be used in conjunction with other materials on your college's website or to be publicized via YouTube or other outlets? Can your staff get beyond the common "talking heads" approach to show effectively through video what is really happening at your institution?
- Given the rapid change occurring in electronic media, has your institution developed an appropriate policy for utilizing social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and others? How will your marketing and publicity strategies be altered to take advantage of these new outlets?
- How do you exercise consistent editorial control? That is, do all of your publications not only follow a consistent format, but does the copy across the institution deliver a consistent message? To what extent is editorial control exercised independently by other offices such as the president's office, the admissions office, or the development office?
- How well do your current publications and online content address the desires and needs of different segments, potential and actual, of your community? Is it easy for prospective student athletes or job-hunting alumni/ae to find the information they seek?
- How well do your current staff interact with various constituents at your institution? Are they respected by the faculty and academic administrators? Do they know how to interact with faculty? Are they knowledgeable about marketing strategies that are appropriate for student recruitment or fundraising? How well do they interact with IT staff? And how effective are they in relating to external media such as news outlets, TV, or radio?
- To what extent do you need to call upon outside sources, such as freelance copywriters or graphic designers, to acquire the expertise or time to accomplish all of your projects? Remember, it can be less costly to utilize outside experts for specific projects than to add regular staff positions.

Conclusion: The Next Step

At a time when the competition for students and resources is especially keen, your college's brand becomes more important than ever. Prospective students, their families, potential benefactors, government officials, alumni/ae, and the general public must be able to tell, quickly and decisively, what distinguishes your institution from its peers. And while many well-known factors such as the college logo, motto, website and print graphic designs shape that brand, the content of communications materials plays an absolutely crucial role in conveying a clear, consistent, and compelling message. The reason is simple: only through the power of words will prospective students and other constituents gain a precise, accurate understanding of what is truly admirable about your college or program, of what justifies their attention and, ultimately, their allegiance to your institution.

In order to provide a sound basis for others to know your college, you must provide the most clearly focused, emotionally compelling, attention-grabbing content possible. And today, that content must be presented in a web-savvy form, complete with search-engine optimized copy, in a variety of media, both online and in print. That is what will drive the success of your college's brand. By following the steps for revising your institution's brand or simply improving the way in which the message is delivered as outlined above, you will be well on the way to helping your institution stand out from the crowd. Finally, consider whether your current staff have both the expertise and the time to undertake the component projects necessary. If not, perhaps you need to outsource key portions of the project.⁸ Just remember, delay can be costly!

⁸ **Barnett Copywriting and Consulting** offers services designed to lead to success, including assistance with admissions materials, program brochures, email solicitations and responses, newsletters, case studies, website content (SEO formatted), and copy designed for use in social media marketing (Facebook and Twitter). William Barnett is a former faculty member and senior college administrator who also has a background in marketing and sales, allowing him to produce results respected by academic and marketing constituents. For more information, check out his website at <http://www.barnettwriter.com>. Or contact him at info@barnettwriter.com or by phone at 860-880-0311 to arrange for a consultation and project quote.