Integrated Marketing for Higher Education

Imperatives for Achieving Institutional Success

Integrated marketing communications is finally gaining traction as a professional discipline in higher education. Historically, public relations and event staff were perceived as order takers, charged with getting the word out about the institution’s latest event, major gift or achievement. Now, many universities and colleges are building internal central marketing departments and divisions, staffed by experienced Chief Marketing Officers (CMOs) or Vice Presidents of Marketing & Communications. Marketing budgets for U.S. colleges and universities are at an all-time high, especially in dedicated spending for television/cable and digital advertising (Brock, 2017).

While entire books have been written about how to successfully market colleges and universities, there are three imperatives I believe marketing professionals will agree are essential to laying a foundation for success in a competitive, fragmented, and fluid environment:

- Stand out in a crowded and competitive landscape.
- Secure institution-wide buy-in before launching a branding or marketing campaign.
- Prove to senior leaders that giving marketing “a seat at the table” helps the institution achieve its goals.

Imperative #1: Stand Out

Universities compete for students, charitable gifts, and research dollars. This competition intensifies in the context of negative attitudes about university costs and student debt, a declining pool of prospective students, and decreases in research funding. Such an environment places more pressure than ever on the central marketing team, not only to only generate visibility for their institution’s brand, but also to demonstrate its distinction, relevance, and value to its constituents. Here are some steps to getting there.

Internal and external research activities, such as an in-depth market analysis, are critical to creating the university’s brand position and understanding its customer’s mindset. Unfortunately, at many institutions, valuable data are housed within various organizational

Marilyn Rossa Kail

Marilyn has spent her career developing integrated marketing campaigns that build brand visibility, enhanced reputation, and business growth. She founded the Marketing and Communication Department at Carnegie Mellon University, which gained a reputation for innovative and holistic approaches to higher education marketing under her leadership, winning the American Marketing Association’s Pittsburgh Marketer of the Year Award. Marilyn is currently Director of Integrated Marketing Strategy at Rebel Fox Farm, a Pittsburgh-based marketing agency, and Principal of her own marketing communications firm. She holds an M.Ed. in Heath Education and Promotion from Penn State University and a B.A. in Journalism from Duquesne University.
“A brand is the set of expectations, memories, stories and relationships that, taken together, account for a consumer’s decision to choose one product or service over another.”

Seth Godin
This Is Marketing

“silos,” making it difficult to aggregate and analyze across a broader scope. This makes the process more challenging, but not impossible.

Begin by benchmarking your current brand messages against those of your major competitors. This will help carve out the brand territory your institution can own by identifying areas of overlap and those where it stands out. Once you have identified areas of differentiation, conduct a university-wide stakeholder survey and/or stakeholder sessions with representation from faculty, alumni, students (especially those for whom the university was their first choice), recent grads, new and seasoned staff, and corporate recruiters to understand their perception of what makes your university special. Enlist university partners to help identify and recruit them. Then, compare their beliefs, expectations, and experiences to the results of your benchmarking study. What findings have been confirmed, and which require addition or revision?

Combined with your external market research, this information will provide source material from which to draft a brand positioning statement. Underlying any positioning statement are the core values that support it, tie to your mission, and reflect the character and spirit of the organization. Such a statement should include key brand differentiators, known as “proof points,” that can be previewed by influencers who can provide valuable feedback before the public launch.

One example of a successful postsecondary branding campaign that achieved overall marketing goals is the WONK campaign, launched in 2011 by the central marketing team at American University (AU) in Washington, D.C. According to the brand manifesto (American University, 2020), WONK is “a simple, memorable, and uniquely Washington term that succinctly and uniquely expresses AU’s distinctive qualities. Describing experts, thought leaders, and Washington insiders, the word was a perfect match for the AU community—smart, passionate, focused, and engaged individuals who use their knowledge to effect meaningful change.” By capturing and highlighting the university’s distinctive character in a memorable manner, the WONK campaign has not only generated extensive publicity, but also resonated with primary audiences, thereby reinforcing existing relationships while simultaneously making new connections. This is a marketing campaign at its best.

**Imperative #2: Secure Buy-In**

Leading a comprehensive branding or communications campaign can be especially challenging in higher education. Failure to enlist stakeholders across the institution, gain an understanding of units’ business drivers, and recruit campus ambassadors who can build internal support for the campaign will undoubtedly result in an inability to meet marketing goals. Here are some recommendations for how to convince colleagues to partner with you to help launch a successful campaign.

Start by asking the right questions of the right people. Recruit a marketing advisory team to serve as a resource and sounding board. Enlist this core group as brand ambassadors who provide input and share information about the campaign with those they represent. Celebrate and showcase the success of early adopters, and regularly provide the team with updates on feedback received from internal and external audiences.

In higher education, it is important not only to prove you have the data to support the overall brand story, but also to encourage individual colleges, schools and institutes (the university’s sub-brands) to highlight their own distinct
history and successes within the framework of the brand platform. Make it easy for campus constituencies to find themselves within the larger brand story by providing a toolkit of content they can incorporate into their communications.

For example, at Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) in Pittsburgh, PA, stakeholder research uncovered that the CMU community believed that what distinguished their institution was its “secret sauce” of interdisciplinary collaboration, dedication to practical innovation, and the ability to solve real-world problems. In addition, institutional stakeholders believed their campus culture, coupled with outstanding and accessible faculty, motivated elite companies to recruit CMU students and even open outposts in Pittsburgh so they could be near the action on campus. Because these stakeholder insights aligned with the central marketing team’s previous research on external perceptions of academic prestige, a mini-campaign was launched to highlight CMU’s research with the tagline, “Ideas that Shape Your World Start Here.” To remind CMU marketers across all campuses to incorporate the tagline in their outreach, the central office provided small deskside message boards highlighting the tagline and three proof points resulting from the research: world renowned faculty, students employers want to hire, and research that solves real world problems. The tagline was embraced because its proof points provided universal messages that resonated across CMU, and each unit had its own stories validating the tagline’s brand claim.

**Imperative #3: Take a Seat**

Once you have done your homework—collected and analyzed the data, networked with successful peers in higher education, and built strong, reciprocal relationships across campus—you are ready for what Bill Campbell has called his “Jerry Maguire moment.” As Vice President of Marketing & Communications at Chatham University, in Pittsburgh, PA, Campbell conducted a rigorous marketing analysis to learn how to reverse declining undergraduate enrollment at his institution, which was founded as a women’s college in 1869.

For those unfamiliar with the 1996 movie, sports agent Jerry Maguire, played by actor Tom Cruise, believed that significant changes were needed to secure the future of his industry. Consequently, Maguire drafted a 25-page manifesto outlining his recommendations to improve the culture of his company and the lives of his clients. Campbell’s “Jerry Maguire moment” occurred in 2014 when 75% of Chatham’s enrollment was co-ed graduate students, yet its women’s undergraduate college enrollment had declined.

Broadening enrollment to include undergraduate men was a recurring discussion at Chatham over the years. However, it was Campbell who realized that at this juncture in the university’s history, Marketing & Communications must take the lead to learn if the time was right to become fully co-educational.

His in-depth marketing analysis illustrated several macro and micro market trends that needed be addressed before such a recommendation could be made, including changing consumer perceptions of women’s colleges, gender roles, and small liberal arts institutions. The final report recommended that a significant shift in mission and program offering was needed in order to address the market conditions and turn around the enrollment decline (Campbell, 2015). The university’s president, senior leadership, and governing board agreed, and a formal community-wide feedback period was initiated. As a result of the marketing office’s leadership, the Board of Trustees voted in May 2014 to accept men at the undergraduate level, beginning in Fall 2015.

“I believe I have something to say here.”
Tom Cruise
*Jerry Maguire*
Chatham Marketing & Communications also developed an integrated marketing plan to reposition the university in time for the next student recruitment season. The results were exceptional. Views of the university’s academics and admissions web pages increased 86%. Prospective student inquiries increased by 50%, campus visits increased by 91%, and applications increased 153% (W. Campbell, personal communication, December 8, 2019). The overall impact of Campbell's marketing research and analysis on the institution’s financial bottom line has been critical to its ongoing success. According to Campbell, “the trust and partnership Dr. Esther Barazzone [President of Chatham University, 1992-2016] extended to Marketing & Communications in order to make these historic mission- and program-redefining recommendations, as well as to implement them, is a model for the strategic role marketing can play in higher education today.”

**Perennial Skills for Shifting Landscapes**

The higher education landscape continues to evolve, as the traditional classroom is no longer the only model for higher education. There has been an “unbundling” of education delivery that is gaining momentum, with online classes and degree programs, certificate programs, micro courses and badges all on the rise. Corporate partners are looking for new hires ready to hit the ground running, and they are seeking partnerships that include curricula tailored for their employees. At the same time, Gen Z (age 16-21), an extremely diverse and laser-focused cohort, has arrived with a bang on campus, while Millennials (age 22-35) might be considering graduate school, and Gen Xers (age 36-54) are looking for ways to advance their careers. With such a diverse “customer base,” what tools will universities need to be successful?

Institutional leaders would be wise to look to integrated marketing communications for guidance and support. A recent report revealed that search engines and social media sites are hubs for Gen Z and Millennials doing product research, identifying preferred brands, and making purchasing decisions (Beer, 2018). The right tools will become even more important to generating university brand awareness and increasing enrollment. This includes updated technology for capturing, analyzing, and using data for strategic business decisions. Colleges and universities that invest in marketing professionals who know how to stand out in a crowded landscape, how to secure institution-wide buy-in for branding campaigns, and how to take their seat at the leadership table will be well positioned to successfully navigate the competitive waters for years to come.

**References**

American University (n.d.). “Know WONK.” Retrieved from [https://www.american.edu/ucm/wonk-campaign.cfm](https://www.american.edu/ucm/wonk-campaign.cfm)


For Further Reading

American Marketing Association (AMA), *Marketing for Higher Education Special Interest Group* (SIG): https://www.ama.org/about-marketing-for-higher-education-sig/


---

**ISSUES & INSIGHTS** is a publication of Duquesne University’s Master of Science in Higher Education Administration. This 30-credit, online program is designed to offer a broad, holistic, and integrated understanding of university structures and operational areas. For more information, please visit: [www.duq.edu/highered](http://www.duq.edu/highered)

If you are interested in learning more about postsecondary leadership that sees the whole picture, please contact the Director of the Master of Science Program in Higher Education Administration:

P. Jesse Rine, Ph.D.
(412) 396-2592
rinepj@duq.edu