

# cognitive marketing



## Brand & Fundraising

Why great brands raise more money

**We all know that in today's development arena, donors are overwhelmed with compelling appeals for their dollars.**

**Disaster relief agencies. Animal rescue societies. Children's hospitals – all working to lay claim to the same hearts and wallets your institution wants to win over.**

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*Brand & Fundraising: Why great brands raise more money* is based on a presentation given recently by Peter Holloran, President of Cognitive Marketing, to a chapter of the Association of Fundraising Professionals.

Today's donors almost certainly have deeper connections to more worthy organizations needing their financial support than did yesterday's donors. Giving to one's alma mater is a storied form of philanthropy; yet some institutions are finding growing resistance to their alumni appeals. Some of this is attributable to economic conditions; some to "the competition;" but another factor may be at play—the lack of a strong, relevant and compelling reason to give that's built into the fabric of a strong institutional brand identity.



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This paper is one of a series of briefings prepared by Cognitive Marketing based on our experience as consultants to educational institutions in the area of brand development and strategic marketing.

Consider for a moment the challenge of raising money:

- You have to raise your school above the level of a charitable commodity undifferentiated from the mass of other compelling causes and organizations

- You have to convince the convincible that a major donation to your institution represents the very best way for them to make a meaningful contribution to the world; short of that, you must at least convince them that it's *one* of the very best ways.

Your school probably does not house the homeless and may not be working on the cure for a disease, so can you possibly compete for the multi-million dollar gift? Definitely. But to do so with confidence and more routine success, your argument must be equipped with an emotional imperative. And the emotional imperative is generated by a strong brand.

Brand is essential to fundraising. Great brand schools are those who have ensured the formation of strong bonds throughout and between their stakeholder communities. They create an emotional connection to their audiences so compelling that the decision to give is almost not a decision at all. In the end, it is the strength of the brand that determines the number of zeroes on the check.

## Defining Brand

So just what is your brand? It's not the graphic identity system, or the tagline on the current cycle of admissions materials, or the team mascot, or the corporate name on the stadium. In reality, the brand is the essential truth of your institution — its declaration of intent. Your brand is the compelling argument for the support of your institution, and it's found where your school's real and distinguishing strengths meet your stakeholders deeply held beliefs and values.

A strong brand:

- provides a clear, unified "voice" for all institutional communications,
- provides a touchstone for all plans and activities that each department is undertaking,
- instills pride and encourages engagement of key stakeholders,
- solidifies and strengthens the institution's reputation,
- stirs interest, belief, and passion within and beyond the school,
- facilitates deeper conversations among stakeholders, and
- provides a strategic framework for fundraising success.

The value of a sustained commitment to brand building is that it can deliver your school's promise to the world, not only the world beyond the school, but the world within it. The "brand promise" should be much more than a compelling argument for a new gym or an improved position in the rankings. Your school's brand promise reveals the fundamental purpose of the institution. It articulates its essential reason to exist, its community's collective purpose.

Most important to the work of institutional advancement, the brand promise strengthens the emotional link between the institution and all its constituencies, including current and prospective donors. Brand will unite your institution's many constituencies with one another by raising awareness between and among them of the universality of the values and beliefs they each hold about the school.

## Your Brand School

We all know a strong brand school when we see one: Harvard and Yale; MIT and Cal Tech; Notre Dame and Michigan; Amherst and Williams. Among the features that these schools have in common are rich histories in which they take pride; strong traditions which they honor; alumni who remain engaged for life; and, above all, an institutional courage to be themselves.

Great brand schools welcome their first-year students not just as new members of the family, but as valued new contributors to their own unique histories. The admissions letter from a school without a strong brand is, essentially, a transactional invitation: "Come here and you'll get four years of fun and education." The admissions letter from a great brand school, on the other hand, is an offer of marriage—it's an invitation to a life-long, mutually-rewarding relationship.

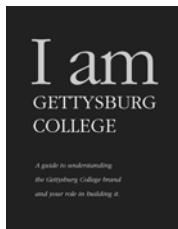
From a donor's perspective, if the school is a great brand, it offers him or her the opportunity to serve a larger purpose—the purpose the brand itself embodies. Great brand schools keep faith with their donors, always strengthening the trust between them—that implicit understanding that donor and institution are bound to one another in service to the same promise to the world—a promise unique to that institution.

Your school doesn't have to be in the Ivy League, or have a huge football program, or have a superstar faculty member, or even be "nationally" ranked in order to be a great brand. Take a look at how one regional comprehensive college, one nationally ranked liberal arts college, and one independent, N-12 school have each grabbed hold of their brands and made them work.



*The Heart of Excellence*

Nazareth College of Rochester, NY pledges that it is the best choice *for those who believe that the truest measure of excellence is a person's capacity to make a difference in the world.* This promise played out in a series of regional television ads designed to distinguish Nazareth as "*The Heart of Excellence*," a long-term positioning message that resonated strongly with alumni and had clearly measurable effects on fundraising. Eighteen months after the media campaign to position Nazareth commenced, a wealthy Rochesterian with no previous ties to the college, stopped declining the opportunity to support the school and made a \$5 million first-time gift to the college.



At the core of the Gettysburg College brand is the promise to *prepare students to lead energetic, engaged and enlightened lives.* Before embarking on its brand development initiative, Gettysburg typically appealed to prospective donors by arguing that their gifts would help the school maintain and advance its place in the national rankings. Once the brand promise was identified, however, the development office had a vital new tool with which to personalize its case for support. The brand offered the opportunity to communicate a much more emotionally synchronous message to alumni, whose personal feelings and passions for Gettysburg College had little to do with pride in the college's ascent up the rankings.



The Harley School promises that it is the *best choice for families who want for their children, above all else, the joy of a life fully awakened.* This became the essential language of the brand because it reflected the essential truth of the school. One of Harley's trustees—herself a fourth-generation Harley graduate and Harley parent—recounted her frustration that despite her deep passion for the institution, she had never been able to convince her friends of the worth of an investment in a Harley education. "Thanks to this (brand development process) I now have fresh, new language" with which to talk about this school I love so much," she said. We took it as a compliment.

## One Final Thought

Your school's brand is not *yet another thing*; it's *everything*. It's the representation of the character of your people, the codification of their collective accomplishment, and the expression of the essence of what defines their community. Identifying your brand and creating a culture that nurtures it is a process of discovery, motivation, and understanding. When it's done well, a foundation is formed upon which to build. When it's done well, it will provide context and guidance for making the most compelling "ask" of a donor. When it is done well, that donor will be predisposed to say "yes."



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