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*Panel discussion on brand development, marketing and philanthropy
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Institutional Self-Awareness, Brand Identity, and the Development of a Culture of Giving

Institutional Advancement is what all of us — communicators and development professionals alike — do for a living. *Advancing the institution in the broader sense of the term has always been about much more than just asking for money on its behalf. It's about moving the institution forward, however forward is defined by a given institution's leadership. Forward can be universally understood as movement towards a more complete fulfillment of the institution's mission; or as movement towards the accomplishment of specific strategic objectives; or, in some cases, as movement in the direction of becoming a different institution than it is today. However it is that your college or university defines forward, "advancing" it effectively is an institution-wide activity. Everyone has a role to play — from the groundskeeper to the Board Chair; from those who do the teaching to those who raise the funds. Everyone needs to know what the institution stands for, what makes it distinguished, and why that distinctiveness is important to the world. And everyone needs to be encouraged to both express and represent that distinctiveness — in other words, to be brand champions. A strong college or university brand can only develop from an academic community that has come to truly understand and appreciate itself.*

Institutional self-awareness is a prerequisite for institutional consistency of purpose and behavior, which, in turn, is critical to the task of helping others beyond the university's internal community to understand, to care, and to contribute.

Developing the Brand is Everyone's Responsibility

Too often the university or college "brand" is thought to be synonymous with the trappings of its external promotion — and that is in itself a trap. Real institutional brand building is a process, not a thing; it is the process by which the entire community of stakeholders develops an accurate and compelling understanding of the institution, and a willingness to share in common commitment to its purposes. Strong institutional brands reside in the hearts and minds of faculty and staff, the president and the Board, the students and the alumni, and the extended community of friends and supporters. *If the institutional brand only lives on billboards, a website, a few brochures, and a ready supply of lapel pins, but it cannot be found on the lips of the people of the institution, it is not yet a brand strong enough to really help you raise money.*

So, advancement officers — *make the institution's brand your business!* If your brand is narrow and your institution is wide, align them. If your brand does not precede you into the room, strengthen it. If your brand does not differentiate your school meaningfully from other educational institutions *and* other charitable enterprises, evolve it. And if the brand is not respected and appreciated internally, take seriously the need to do something about it.

Raising Money is a Critically Important Act of Advancing Brand

Asking for money for an honorable educational institution, regardless of its specific mission, is a responsibility of high moral purpose. To ask for money is to render a service — not just to the institution for which you are working — but to the donor whose philanthropic aspirations you are helping to focus, facilitate, and realize.

It's also the case that asking for money is a consummate act of branding. How you do it must be in lock-step with your institution's brand strategy. How you position the need, thank people for their support, plus keep your donors engaged and informed, must all be done with the thought in mind that your efforts will either contribute to strengthening — or weakening — the brand. For it to serve you well, you must serve it well.

The business of raising money is challenging work — regardless of the state of the economy. In good times and bad, your donors are overwhelmed with compelling appeals for support. Disaster relief agencies, animal rescue societies, children's hospitals, churches, a spouse's alma mater — each offer their own brand of philanthropic satisfaction; and each competes for the attention of your donors.

Your goal, of course, is to become and remain the philanthropic priority of your donors. It helps to be raising money for a strong and effective brand, one that communicates your school's real values and purposes, is true to your institution's actual practices and performance, and is alive in the people of the school. So every chance you get, make a contribution of your own to the strengthening of your school's brand.

Strong Brands are Courageous

They seek to stand alone — preferring to be a passionate choice of just the right “some” rather than an acceptable alternative for many. Strong brand schools become so because they have insisted on distinguishing themselves from *all* others. They are not content with a reputation built by comparison. Strong brand schools do not seek to be positioned in the consciousness of their publics and stakeholders in relation to peer schools, even those that are admired. A strong brand is in a category of one.

While the need to be truly distinguishing from peer institutions may seem most urgent in admissions work, where prospective students and parents (your future stakeholders) are struggling to discern meaningful difference between seemingly like institutions, it is equally critical that your brand of 501(c)3 be effectively and powerfully differentiated in your prospective donors’ minds in order for the school to become their passionate philanthropic priority.

The important point for advancement officers here is to remember to *work in sync with your brand*. What the school stands for must be what its stakeholders are convinced they are supporting. If you’re in sync with your brand, it will function as the superglue that bonds the donor and the institution together. Not even superglue, of course, bonds to absolutely every surface: some prospects will not identify with the brand and decide to invest elsewhere. That’s the time for courage, when it will be important to remember that those prospects who *do* identify with your clearly and compellingly communicated brand will more than compensate for the loss of those who don’t. They will be more dedicated, more proud, and more generous, because they will be more committed.

A Philanthropic Culture is a Brand Culture

It is much harder to develop a philanthropic culture if you don’t first develop a brand culture. Giving to a college or university is very much an act of brand loyalty — it’s an expression of belief in the institution’s distinct purpose, mission and vision. It’s difficult to engender brand loyalty for a university among prospective donors when that brand loyalty is not evident in the university community itself. Some academic cultures, rooted as they are in academic freedom and individual self-expression, still tend to value the parts more than the whole. They will celebrate the individual professor, or department, or professional school, while failing to celebrate the whole — the place where all this happens. Great brand schools, on the other hand, invariably have internal cultures which celebrate the shared enterprise.

Scott Bedbury, the well known brand developer of Nike and Starbucks, usefully reminds us that “a brand is a story never completely told.” Think about your institution’s brand as a continuing story that’s always unfolding, and of your donors and prospects as its loyal readers. Hold their attention. *Find the rich, human, and brand revealing stories that unfold throughout your institution and its extended community of committed investors every day. Tell them.*

Be your Institution's *Bard*

As an advancement professional, you are at the front lines of the business of building your university's brand, because you are in the perfect position to do two things that are vital to the cause: You can both collect stories, and tell them. Take that responsibility seriously — feed your brand management council, your communications department, your president, with ever-fresh and revealing stories — new reflections of the worth and values and purposes of your school as expressed by the stakeholders with whom you are in touch.

You never know for certain when a particular story will drive home the brand promise so powerfully that it compels a particular donor to add six zeros to his or her check. But when that check comes, you can be sure it will be the product of a strong, personal conviction, formed by the stories you've told of a brand of educational institution and charitable enterprise to which the donor deeply relate.

And when that happens, it will be a very good day at the office.

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Cognitive Marketing Inc. works with leaders of colleges and universities to design and build stronger institutional brands that better reveal the identity, character and promise of their institutions and the unique communities they represent.

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