

The Voice of an Institution



The brand is neither the logo nor the brochure, but the essential truth, an institution's declaration of intent, its promise—delivered in a clear, unwavering voice. Developing an institution's brand is a process of discovery, an exploration of hearts as well as minds.

The work of building brand reaches across an institution's community. It involves listening, analyzing, thinking, digging. The Cognitive Marketing team looks carefully to the past for heritage worthy of remembrance and tradition worthy of commemoration. We energetically engage the present—not just to get our facts right, but to fully appreciate the opportunities that lie ahead. We search throughout the institution for the defining words and singular ideas that reveal its character and spirit. And as we identify the language of the school, we capture it in a way that inspires faculty, students, alumni, staff, and trustees to celebrate their common identity and purpose. The purpose is worthy of the effort because only when an institution is united in one clear voice can it reach beyond its walls to stir those to whom its future must be entrusted.

Connecting People

How is the voice of the brand found? Will it resonate over time? The work of building brand must be built on core concepts in order for it to succeed.

- Great brands are deeply rooted in the personal. Great brands become such because they are personally experienced, personally consumed, and personally believed in by people who are willing to personally champion them. *Brand strategies that don't capture the personal cannot succeed.*
- Great brands are found in stories. At the heart of our work is the sifting of countless stories of an institution. We carefully read the history. We search for the stories, past and current, that have the power to reveal the distinctive nature of a school; to reach, motivate, capture, and convince those who are part of it, as well as those who have yet to discover it, of its essential truth, and its essential value. These are the stories that will combine to form a coherent whole, an anthology of brand. The stories will come from everywhere—from the classrooms, the laboratories, fields of play, the campus green, the reunion of alumni, the traditions, the conversations.
- Great brands are great because they serve as safe and affirming places. The brand must allow for all who are invested in the institution, from students to faculty to alumni to groundskeepers, to find their own memories, satisfactions, and affirmations. Each generation experiences the institution in different social, economic, cultural, and political contexts; the movement of generations and institutions that serve them is relentless and unstoppable. *Great brands, however, are built on elegant, simple, timeless ideas.* And great brands of educational institutions are such because they transcend the moment, they are a conversation between the first student granted a diploma and the one about to enroll.

Developing Brand

The heart of Cognitive Marketing's work—not its totality but its foundation—is our Market Voicingsm brand development process. We developed Market Voicing specifically to help institutions discover their most distinct, competitive, and differentiating institutional voices, and to use that voice to meet challenges, solve problems and advance across all fronts.

Market Voicing has as its end goal the perfection of an institution's ability to reach and compel its many constituents. We call it "voicing" because it is analogous to the voicing of a piano. "Tuning" a piano in itself is not enough; what enables the instrument to produce the best sound of which it is capable is the art and science of voicing it—carefully adjusting each hammer mechanism and preparing its surface until each strikes the strings assigned to it with perfect uniformity and tonal balance. Given two identical and well tuned Steinways, the well voiced instrument will be the one that is the more resonate, powerful, and compelling.

The work of voicing the brand is the work of creating and nurturing the ideal conditions in which to form strong, emotional bonds between the institution and its many constituencies. It's a disciplined, analytical and yet, ultimately, creative process. And it's one that must be approached with both energy and humility: energy because it's hard work; humility because success depends on the ability of the process and the people who lead it to encourage the genuine embrace of the effort by those who (be they staff or faculty, students or alumni, parents or citizens) are represented by the brand.

Scott Bedbury, who built two consumer brands of some note—Nike and Starbucks—has this humbling comment to make about branding:

A brand is the sum of the good, the bad, the ugly, and the off-strategy. It is defined by your best product as well as your worst product. It is defined by award-winning advertising as well as by the god-awful ads that somehow slipped through the cracks, got approved, and, not surprisingly, sank into oblivion. It is defined by the accomplishments of your best employee—the shining star in the company who can do no wrong—as well as by the mishaps of the worst hire that you ever made...For every grand and finely worded public statement by the CEO, the brand is also defined by derisory consumer comments overheard in the hallway or in a chat room on the Internet. Brands are sponges for content, for images, for fleeting feelings. They become psychological concepts held in the minds of the public, where they may stay forever. As such you can't entirely control a brand. At best you only guide it and influence it...Great brands do this around a core theme or idea and draw each new product or service into is narrative as another engaging, relevant, new chapter in a story that, like a great piece of mythology, can never be completely told. But they do all this with the customer, not the company, as the story's main protagonist. To do this requires that the company change the way it looks at the marketing universe.

In other words, the “brand” is not the next thing, it is everything.

Building Community

When we speak of “building brand,” we think first and foremost about the community of the school—that broad base of stakeholders—alumni/ae and students; parents and families; faculty and staff current and retired; guidance counselors in feeder schools and admissions officers in receiving schools. We think about how to percolate to the surface their collective understanding of an institution, so that we might gain the insight necessary in order to design a brand that will not only marshal their passions and energy into an organized, coherent and singular voice, but be something they fundamentally believe in. Brand building is community building.

It is disconcerting to note how easily the rich and multi-faceted industry of education falls into the trap of linear evaluation. At the collegiate level, for instance, almost every school we've encountered, from a State College to an Ivy League University, concerns itself with its place in the “rankings.” Intellectually, *US News & World Report* rankings are dismissed by educators as meaningless; but effectively, the rankings have become a constant cause of consternation (and sometimes false pride) among faculty, administrations and boards of trustees throughout the industry.

Brand building done well has the effect of breaking the stranglehold of linear evaluation. Its effect is to gather institutional energy around the institution's distinct qualities, and engender enthusiasm for its distinct contribution to education. Brand building done well emphasizes introspection, not calculation.

Renewing Spirit

Great brand schools have, in our experience, but four things in common with one another: they have *histories* (however long) *in which the school's community takes pride*; they have institutional traditions respected and observed in the present day; they have *alumni/ae who remain engaged* with the school throughout their lives; and most importantly, great brand schools have *the courage to be themselves*. Building powerful brands requires that each of these conditions be nurtured and strengthened. Ultimately, it is the heightened spirit of the community that defines the success of the hard work of building brand.

Cognitive Marketing Inc.

- Brand Discovery Process
- Communications Program Planning
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- Brand Consulting

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