

# COMMUNICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

# Thought

## BRANDING OVER BELIEVING

BY ALFRED KAHN

This is partly an issue of semantics, and I've occasionally been known to buy into the buzzwords myself — but I try to always keep in mind that success isn't about branding yourself, it's about being yourself. Today, many institutions seem to believe that branding means creating a “fresh” image of the institution to appeal to a wider or smarter or more upscale group of prospects. Generations of teachers, students and graduates, and an undeniable sense of place have already created your brand. Have faith in what is already there, then find better ways to reveal your institution to the kind of students you want. Of course correct misperceptions, revel in accomplishments, communicate changes — but always remember that your institution has a heart and a soul that must be honored. Leave behind who you are at the risk of forgetting where you are going.

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Brands are for products and cattle and not the institutions that shape the hearts, minds and future of our young men and women. As the ubiquity of “branding” hits its zenith, ad agencies and design firms that once re-branded themselves as branding agencies are now fleeing from this overused buzzword and retreating to more meaningful language.

I've never liked the B-word when it comes to education. Others may propose spending months and tens of thousands of dollars on research in search of your institution's brand, focus grouping students and parents around the country along the way, but not me. Call me contrarian or even old-fashioned - I'm going for a long walk on your campus in search of your school's soul.

I've yet to find the technology or buzzwords that can help.

### Research and the Law of Diminishing Returns

The research perspective is the Big Thing on Campus these days, no question about that. Admissions marketing firms and consultants all come at you with variations on a theme: everything, every decision and impulse and goal, should be driven by research. What do prospects want? What do parents want? What do people think of you? Who are you, what are you, where are you going? The answer is always the same: focus group!

Here's the thing: research is a helpful tool, but is too often used as a crutch. Let me put it another way: if you've worked at your current institution more than a month or so,

and you can't already answer those questions above with some degree of confidence...well, you need to get out on campus more. And the corollary: if you need a fat research study to justify your decisions to your bosses, then they need to get out on campus more.

I use selective research, on a fairly intimate and personal scale, to give my clients context, not content. Now, I should be as happy as the next businessperson to charge you \$100,000 for a big multi-state research project — it's very profitable work — but I don't think that's where my clients find value. Or inspiration.

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young men and women”

If you're thinking of spending that \$100,000, let me have a few days on your campus. I'll find out what you really need to know — and save you about 80 grand.

Bottom line, I urge you to keep research in its proper place. Don't buy into the current notion that more and more research will show you the path — it will only hint at the landscape. Sometimes you have to go with your gut. I suggest you look for the kind of people who want to go with you.