

# COMMUNICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

# Thought

## HIGHER EDUCATION MARKETING:

BY ALFRED KAHN

## TAPAS OR FULL-MEAL DEAL?

Should your institution's message reflect one grand vision or lots of tasty little morsels?

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Top-down or bottom-up? You hear a lot of talk about selling the essence — the core — of your institution to prospective students, but is that really the best way to go? Do you make every school and college on your campus fit one vision, or do you play up the unique nature of each one? One single brand or a “suite” of education choices? In other words: does it make more sense to design your recruitment marketing menu as tapas or the full-meal deal?

We've all heard our institutions described as “a collection of independent kingdoms joined by a heating plant,” and that's usually true. So what does that mean for you as an admissions marketer? In schools large and small, it often seems to mean that you spend a lot of time understanding, refining and communicating the unique soul of your school — then trying to answer “what's in it for me?” to the dean of engineering or architecture or the veterinary college! Eventually you find yourself resorting to something like, “Well, the president loves it!”

And speaking of the president, how do you convince him or her and all the various deans to sing the same song? And should they? Will you connect with more prospects by painting a big picture or by giving each school, college and/or department on campus its own image, voice and beating heart?

The answer, as you may have feared, is both. Hey — we didn't say it was going to be easy! Doing this thing right is like juggling while hula hooping while ice skating...which is why we are here to help. Let's look at some factors that are part of the mix, along with how some of the big marketers outside of higher ed play it.

### 1. The Human Nature Factor

There is no more defining paradox of being human than wanting to belong to a group

while still being recognized as an individual. (This explains many things, including most hairstyles and the chaos that characterizes the management of university websites!) Each of your various schools and colleges and departments wants it all: the glory of association with the history and reputation of the larger university and the freedom to express the individuality of their programs and faculty. How do you find a balance that gives both your internal constituency and your prospects the clear image of a lot of diverse, inspiring individuals choosing their own courses, but still somehow all moving in the same direction.

It can be done — it's the communications version of singing harmony, and you can be the Four Tops and the Beach Boys rolled into one if you remember the desires and emotions behind the dynamic. Don't think of it as friction between liberal arts and the business school, think of it as sibling rivalry. If you can raise kids, for heavens' sake, you can get a few Ph.D.s on the same page! Try bribing them with pizza, Oreos and a later bedtime, for example.

Slightly more seriously, show them how their individuality will be powerfully presented and staunchly protected in your overall message. Make them see that you see them.

## **2. The So-What-Do-They-Do? Factor**

Consumer-goods giant Proctor & Gamble goes bottom-up — little or no marketing resources are spent on the promotion of the P & G name to their customers. The perception of P&G is built on the backs of its product brands, each promoted independently with as much marketing latitude as their masters desire. General Electric, on the other hand, sees the light from the top-down, investing heavily in messaging around the GE brand. General Motors used to be very bottom-up, but now that times have turned troubling for the company, their marketing has turned more top-down.

What to take from this? The nation's top brand marketers seem to agree that either route — top-down or bottom-up — is a valid course.

## **3. The Middle-And-Moola Factor**

Higher education marketing falls somewhere in the middle. Huge surprise, right? But the real surprise is how many institutions take only the top-down path. While you are crafting your communication efforts to serenade the larger institution, don't fail to allow individual schools and faculties the freedom to trumpet their unique message within the whole. The appropriate level of freedom will differ from institution to institution and school to school, depending on many variables. Including, of course, money. As much as the deans of each of your colleges would like to have complete marketing freedom, in all but a few schools, financial realities preclude this. P&G spends around \$3 billion per

year on advertising and can therefore afford to build the parent brand by investing in the children. Most institutions of higher education have to find marketing synergies between multiple personalities and agendas. Your job is to discover the right blend of message and moola.

#### 4. The Tunnel Vision Factor

For a surprisingly large number of the internal questions you ponder long and hard as you try to shape your marketing, the appropriate response is: The kids don't care. Often it takes an outside party to turn a strategically blind eye to campus politics or accepted wis-

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dom. If the kids don't care, they don't care. An outside consultant, researcher or agency has a far better chance to transcend politics and facilitate a common vision. Sometimes the outsider is the only one who can claim to represent the student perspective. Now, if you are new in your position you may have the implied authority and fresh perspective to accomplish this as an insider, but beware: this “newness” is a rapidly perishable asset that will disappear completely within the first 12 months.

Only the students know which traditions, which strengths and weaknesses, which pieces of your institution's heart and soul truly resonate with them. A huge part of the balancing act is figuring out what matters as much to the kids today and tomorrow as it does to your administration. Keep the vision, lose the tunnel. Test, formally and informally, all of your assumptions, positions and certainties. Many will be A-OK. And many will be TKDC.

#### 5. The Go-With-Your-Strength Factor

This scenario is all-too-common: College of the Pine Needles is famous and respected for its School of Forestry, but its really-quite-good College of Humanities is largely unknown. The recently ensconced president wants to change this, so the resulting admissions marketing communications barely mention forestry, or worse, they make an inef-

fective attempt at something along the lines of “we’re not just a fine forestry school...” In either case, the power of recognition is dulled — remember that with marketing or cranky horses, it’s always easier (and safer) to pull than push.

If one or two areas of your institution are known and respected above all others, and your goal is to bring recognition for others schools and programs up to that level, remember to dance with the one who brung ya. In slightly more professional terms: don’t hesitate to let the recognition factor of your strong programs pull your lesser known programs to the top — rather than allowing an effort to promote lesser known programs dull the luster of your shining stars.

## 6. The Ed Sullivan Factor

You are probably much too young to remember — we know we are — the guy on the Ed Sullivan Show who would get all these plates spinning on top of long sticks, like 10 or 15 of them, and he’s running back and forth keeping them going. One would start to slow down and wobble and he sprint over there and get it spinning again, then the next would slow down and wobble...it was like the black-and-white TV version of your job description. It also demonstrates the secret to finding the balance between institutional vision and individual schools: keep moving. Don’t let one part of the message, or one particular dean, or one goal out of many bog you down. Keep the balance going, apply the energy where it’s needed, but remember that there are lots of plates and each one is important to a segment of your prospect pool. And it’s also a good thing to use unbreakable plates — meaning powerful communications that make a real connection so that each part of the message resonates.