

COMMUNICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

Thought

THE SEARCH FOR ORIGINALITY: IT BEGINS INSIDE

BY ALFRED KAHN

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What grabs college-bound students or their parents as they peruse the 150 or so college brochures that fill their mailboxes during the critical decision-making months? It's called "emotional symbolism", powerful visual communications that go far beyond the status quo and truly resonate with their target audience.

This type of communication can work for any college or university with the willingness to take a creative leap. That leap is based on knowing your missions and purpose — really knowing it, as it exists today, in the real world. It is also based on defining the unique qualities of your institution — honing in on the concept that will touch an emotional chord with your audience. If this sounds both elusive and logical to you, you may be on your way to creating marketing materials that spark results instead of a glazed-over look and a yawn.

1. Start By Being Honest

In our experience, many colleges and universities have more than a keen sense of who they are. They feel no need to cloak their image in vague allusions, or to resort to gimmicks. They are simply honest and straightforward, and it works. The other quality they have is a willingness to take risks, to break away from tradition... to go with a *concept*, rather than a tired and/or trite theme.

These qualities are not unique, but they do require an extra measure of confidence in your institution and your ability to present it in a realistic light. For instance, who

says you have to show the buildings on campus? Perpetuate an old logo that doesn't fit your current identity? Recycle previous year's formats? Use stiff, posed photographs? Use school color throughout? These and other comfortable traps will not only waste your hard-won budget, they will drain the energy from your presentation. There are no hard and fast rules. What counts in today's competitive marketplace is what *works*.

Successful marketers accept the fact that students don't read viewbooks from cover to cover, if at all. Rather, as we have learned in countless focus groups, many students decide within seconds whether it's even worth going beyond the cover. Like it or not, image is as important as substance, and complex ideas must be communicated at a glance.

2. The Elusive Concept And How To Pin It Down

In order to accomplish "communication at a glance", you need to create the visual "concept" — the big idea expressed on the cover of your printed piece. It must attract attention and its intention must be crystal clear. You are presenting a visual depiction of an idea, a thought, a mood, a word, or a feeling that identifies your institution. It may be best expressed with special-effect photography, or a dramatic, symbolic image. For example, an athletics department brochure might focus in on a variety of equipment, shot in an unconventional manner — or an action shot with its own drama. If you want to create a mood of contemplation for an arts brochure it can be done with light and shade, symbolic objects... the possibilities are limited only by the imagination.

Think of the types of covers you've seen on magazines such as *TIME* or *Newsweek*. Think "editorial visual" and you'll picture what many schools have accomplished.

But how to define that elusive concept? Use the insight that only you, as the admissions marketing professional, can bring to the table, and do some real soul searching. Rather than following the trend of looking outside and to the past, why not tap into what you and your students, administration, and faculty find when you turn *inside, right now*? Explore personal feelings and connection to the school, and lose your inhibitions when you express these feelings. Where is the passion in your

institution? Why are people there? What drew them to the place? What makes working there or being a student at your school a pleasure rather than a chore? Is it the caring? The diversity? The physical setting? The quiet, the excitement, the challenges? Your concept is in there somewhere, and only you can bring it to the surface.

Once you communicate these elements to the designer and writer creating the piece, you will be half-way there. If we do our job, a symbiotic relationship will blossom and we can transform those elements into a powerful image that will reach out and touch the students who are right for you.

“Emotional symbolism is a powerful visual communications tool that goes far beyond the status quo and truly resonates with your target audience.”

3. Design That Goes A Step Beyond

To make it all work, your concept must be communicated through sophisticated, knowledgeable design supported by quality production. The designer's ability to understand and listen to you is part of that design process. Then, your designers must go a step beyond. We must be willing to employ the unfashionable qualities of feeling and commitment if your materials are to outlast and outshine current trends and cookie-cutter styles.

Institutions whose publications make an impact do not allow murky color separations, inferior printing, or inappropriate paper to diminish their pieces. They care about leaving white space on the page, selecting the appropriate typeface, creating a balance that works on each spread. This may sound basic, but take a look at what's out there, and you may be surprised at the level of quality and the budgets wasted.

4. Along With The Concept: A Theme

Once you've done the work on the concept, you will want to tie it together with a visual theme. The look and feel should continue through all of your marketing communications, including departmental brochures. Posters can reinforce the themes and the image you want to project. By approaching the process with a "big idea", you will elevate the level of everything you produce.

In the final analysis, when any institution can articulate its mission and make it crystal clear, then the image and promotion become stronger and more believable, more real and therefore more likely to attract students.

We must no longer think of ourselves as simply conveying information. We must find sources of self-expression and meaning, as well as solve problems. In this way our designs and publications overall will be accessible and appropriate as well as truly new, interesting and meaningful.

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