

perspectives

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This issue of *Perspectives* focuses on brand and message development approaches, with specific references to the educational sector and its unique characteristics, challenges and strengths that influence how this kind of effort is successfully implemented.



finding your voice:

BRAND ARTICULATION BRINGS HARMONY WHEN CONSTITUENTS SING DIFFERENT TUNES

UNIQUE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

In today's global marketplace, where the world is growing smaller, faster and more competitive every day, corporations have long known that their success hinges on honing their identities, outshining their competitors and articulating their key strengths to their constituents clearly and concisely. It's no wonder the branding pro has had a seat at the corporate executive table for some time.

More recently, nonprofit organizations and higher education institutions have come to see the importance of strengthening their brands. In education, the need is manifested in the squeeze of increased competition for donor money,

top-notch staff and students, and competitor rankings, not to mention the significant growth of online programs that some consider as a transformational force in education.

Despite some typical spikes in enrollment, the economic recession has raised the volume of those challenging the price-to-value ratio, tainting the industry's typically positive image. Just last month, the *Chronicle of Higher Education's* headline, "Public Opinion of Higher Education Continues Downward Slide" announced results of a national survey that tracks public attitudes on higher education, reporting that six out of 10 Americans now say colleges today operate more like a business, focused

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Artemis Strategy Group provides motivation-based research and advice to identify, develop and apply transformative ideas that improve business decisions, grow brands, and advance policies. We provide you with ideas that make sense. PERSPECTIVES is designed to offer insight, a point of view and ideas to help organizations with brand and communications needs. Like our business, the topics often relate to the intersection of policy and marketing. If we stimulate your thinking, we appreciate hearing your views.

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more on the bottom line than on the educational experience of students. Further, the number of people who feel this way, according to survey findings, has increased by five percentage points in the last year alone, and is up by eight percentage points since 2007. Many institutions no doubt disagree with such findings and likely would like to dispel this perception.

THE INSIDERS: WHY BRANDING FOR A HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION DIFFERS FROM THAT OF ITS CORPORATE COUNTERPART

Vive la difference; educational institutions really are different from the corporate sector. Their priorities are different; their styles are different; even their language is different. One of the most common differences we've observed is the general aversion to the notion that an institution with such different goals would need to resort to a process—brand building. That is so *corporate*. So one distinction we find helpful is to use a different terminology for this critical and strategic activity. Rather than refer to the process as "branding," we have found it useful to approach this as an exercise in *finding our voice* or *of articulation*.

A second important distinction we find in the higher education brand format is the multitude of voices and directions. Aside from the variety of disciplines and units—one trait that *is* common to many corporations we might add—is that the function of institutions of higher learning is built very much around critical thinking, individual expression and respect—even fostering of—divergent views. How to reconcile that with the function of a great unified brand, which is to achieve focus, can present a challenge. Our discussion below about the first critical criterion a great brand must meet—credibility—offers a couple of approaches to this challenge.

A third aspect of educational institutions that stands out for us is the intimacy of constituency relationships. Educational institutions aren't like manufacturers or even significant service companies. For a short period of time, those "formative" and transformational years, they practically own the lives of their primary constituents: students. People form bonds that last their lifetimes. Many constituents define themselves in considerable part by the nature of that institutional affiliation.

Constituency research and resulting brand strategy are key to the overall success of any organization. It's the core idea that makes sense in branding.

Not only can their pride, but also their ire, be inspired by the acts and language of the organization. And this is true not simply of students and alumni, but of faculty, staff, community members, donors and a variety of other primary constituencies. In our minds, this shapes not only how we approach that critical task of defining and prioritizing constituencies, but also how we involve them in the process. It simply makes sense.

THREE CRITERIA ANY GREAT BRAND MUST MEET

In order to be effective, a brand articulation must meet three criteria:

- It must be credible: realistically capturing the essence, while allowing for the aspiration.
- It must be important: speaking to traits and feelings that will motivate behavior.
- It should differentiate: whether we define our fellow institutions as competitors, co-creators or colleagues, differentiation is meant to help constituents distinguish from the alternatives.

Brand specialists approach this task differently. Like others, we use constituency research as one of the tools for finding and defining the elements that

meet these criteria and for crafting the articulation. While some treat this process as merely a peremptory exercise to the all-important marketing campaign, we consider constituency research and resulting brand strategy an extremely powerful and long-lasting endeavor; in fact, absolutely foundational to the overall success of any organization. It's the core idea that makes sense in branding.

Below we highlight a couple of the specific research techniques we use to build powerful brand articulations, making note of how they apply uniquely in the academic setting.

GAINING CREDIBILITY: CREATING A CRITICAL ROLE FOR THE INSIDER PERSPECTIVE

The essence of this task is to identify and determine the views of key constituencies. There are various research and process approaches to this. We'll speak particularly to the research *approach* in our next section. The aspect we'd like to highlight here focuses on *purpose*. A brand articulation is not simply a tagline. Although the outcome is reflected in language, in reality, it is a process and framework of thinking about the essence of an organization. Because great brands are

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built on great ideas, a major purpose of the brand articulation is to help organizations deliver the message of the mission and vision in a clear and consistent fashion. Our characterization of this is that *a brand must always be in service to the mission, and vision, of the organization*. Surprisingly, many organizations struggle to make this connection. Mission reminds internal constituencies of their organization's main purpose and vision is a general aspiration.

In an educational environment, where the value of individual voices is high, and the ratio of internal-to-external constituents is equally high, wide participation of this internal constituency has to be a central aspect of the process. That participation needs to occur at several points: as part of the exercise of envisioning the future; in a consensus-building stage to assure that potential articulations not only capture the essence of the institution overall but also those unique aspects of individual emphases; and as the articulation is developed and communicated in order to assure that the many unique voices of the institution speak in ways that reinforce the whole. This last point is critical because in an educational environment, delivery of the message about persona is less about mass communications or advertising and more about the way

that friends and insiders speak about it. As described in the next section, the tools and techniques we use facilitate this participatory process and assures each constituency gets both the opportunity to be heard effectively and the reward of feedback on how their voice fits with the whole.

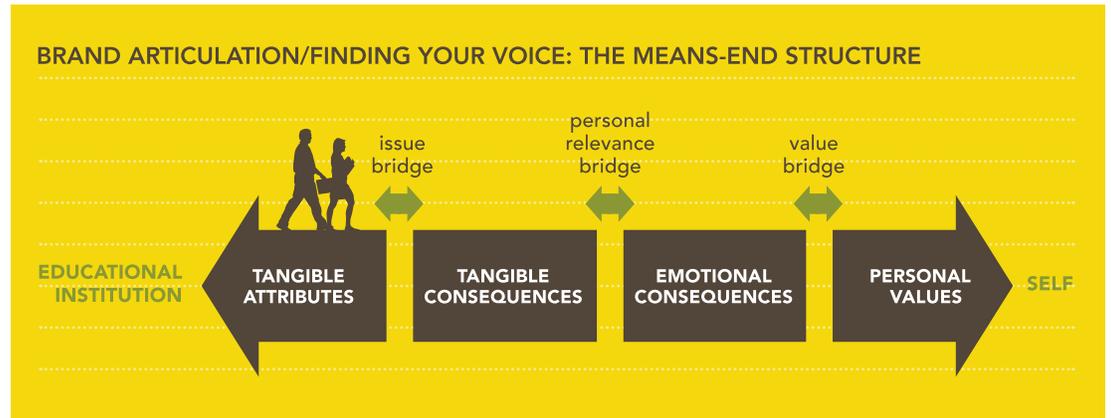
ARTICULATING WHAT'S IMPORTANT BY UNCOVERING MOTIVATIONS

Our approach to this task focuses on determining what strategies and messages are most likely to motivate constituencies to take desirable actions. For this, we use a means-end framework because of its power as a research tool and its effectiveness as a thinking tool. The means-end construct has been used to guide communications strategy (as well as other applications) for several decades. It is based on the notion that in order to be effective and motivate behavior, your communication—your branding strategy—needs to connect the tangible aspects of what your organization does with the emotional needs of your audience. This structure goes beyond a traditional attribute/benefit structure. We seek to understand the specific connections between what you do and what matters to your audiences.

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During the brand-building process, we evaluate the three Ls:

1. **LANGUAGE** of constituents, and the meanings attached to words.
2. **LINKAGES/** patterns between tangible and emotional elements.
3. **LEVERAGE** points/trans-formative ideas that illuminate paths of motivation.



As a research process, this approach relies on a proprietary interviewing technique, by which we seek to get our audience to define what is important, then probe in a systematic fashion to dig out the personal reasons why those traits are important. Our analysis of these patterns of connection allows us to construct diagrams, or maps, that elucidate specific traits that are viewed as the most important aspects of an organization—such as an educational institution—the rational/tangible benefits associated with those traits; the emotional responses that those tangible benefits evoke; and the deeper personal values that tend to be the most fundamental drivers of individual behavior.

A simple mnemonic device—the three “Ls”—summarizes the essence of what we do with these maps. The three “Ls” represent language, linkages and leverage.

First, since brands are built around language, we want to specify the exact language that key constituents use and the meanings they attach to specific words. This is a key strength in our approach, one that validates an investment in firsthand constituent research versus campaigns developed exclusively within creative marketing firms. Second, we look for the specific patterns of linkages between the different tangible/emotional elements. Careful examination of these linkages provides unique insights into the way groups of people think.

the humphrey institute: brand articulation takes top-notch school into a new era

The University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs has been experiencing a renaissance of late, with fresh ideas, a recent change of leadership and energy stirring at this public policy school that consistently receives top rankings according to *US News & World Report*. Recognizing that they are in a growing field of nearly 300 other public affairs programs, leaders in spring 2009 believed that for the continued success and vision of the Institute, they would need to sharpen the school's image and examine its brand.

When the Institute turned to Artemis Strategy Group for help with its brand articulation, we emphasized several of the process and outcome elements described in this paper, with particular emphasis on staying true to mission and providing a framework

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Finally, as we look at the whole picture, we seek leverage points: those ideas, concepts or visualizations that clearly illuminate paths of motivation. In fact, the totality of the experience is highly evocative and often results in (or creates) the brand pillars and messaging strategies.

DIFFERENTIATING: A LANDSCAPE ANALYSIS SHOWS WHAT MAKES YOU UNIQUE

In constituency research designed for brand building, it is beneficial to examine not only perceptions of what is important, but also how the institution, compared to the alternatives, is perceived. A virtue of the means-end framework in this context is that it is particularly well-suited for comparisons that allow us to gauge relative strengths and weaknesses on both rational and emotional dimensions. That is, how do other institutions stack up on the same scale of rational and emotional characteristics and perceptions? Can the organization leverage any one strength in the marketplace as a result of this comparison? Another exercise we've found useful is to compare how the specific language we use to describe an institution compares to the language used by competitors. The competitive review,

overlaid on the map of the educational landscape tool, often validates that leading organizations of all types typically speak in terms that evoke powerful rational-emotional connections. In other words, their brand strategy and messages correlate with the strategy we employ. More importantly, the competitive review overlaid on the landscape map:

- helps identify and crystallize an institution's uniqueness;
- can reveal "white space," ways of connecting common tangibles with uncommon emotional motivators;
- can show the elements that represent "greens fees" and those that are clear differentiators.

IS YOUR BRAND STRATEGY A SYMPHONY IN THE MAKING?

We've been talking about the challenges that higher education institutions face in developing a unified voice to communicate with, through and to their various constituents. By their very nature, such organizations represent constituencies whose relationships are more interconnected and interpersonal than those in the corporate world, yet more diverse in viewpoints. We see these characteristics

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that could be used by a broad range of advocates. This type of brand articulation approach—essentially employing and examining the elements of the three “Ls”—often highlights unique brand attributes that may have been understood across some constituencies but perhaps not always articulated or appreciated previously. One illustration of such an experience in this case was the concept of the soul of the institution, and its personification of the Humphrey legacy of public service orientation as more of a stand-out characteristic than previously recognized. As the school continues to embrace its vision and approaches upcoming historical milestones, it now has a brand articulation that will serve its higher mission.

as strengths, presenting unique opportunities for brand building. Here’s why.

We find that the means-end research approach we employ, coupled with the inclusive nature of the process, capitalizes on the key strengths of the organizations as articulated by the individuals most engaged and, thus, can only benefit from active involvement of such passionate participants. It’s our belief that in organizations

with such great numbers of internal constituents, the goal for effective branding should not be that of identifying a solo messenger determining or delivering a single tune for limited use in formal communications, but rather an orchestrated strategy that allows for the coordination and harmonizing of multiple voices that will ultimately leverage the multitude of ambassadors of the organization. Now *that’s* music to our ears.