

Launching a Branding Initiative

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In our session together, we covered the approach that the University of California, Davis, took to overcome a crisis, rebuild its internal culture, while also promoting itself and its strengths to external audiences. No matter where your institution currently stands, the same steps can be used when considering a wide-scale and new approach to branding. Here is an outline of some of the steps to developing a robust brand strategy.

I. Identity Research and Analysis

The first step in branding is knowing three elements about your institution:

- a. What do your target audiences already know and believe about you?
- b. What do you want them to know and believe about you?
- c. What is the gap in that understanding that the branding campaign needs to address?

Only after you have been thoughtful about each of these steps, can you start to use your research to build your platform. In this step, you can truth-test your perceptions about your institution with the most important people you want to engage. Doing this helps senior leaders fully see reputational gaps and why your targeting marketing and branding efforts will advance the university.

II. Define Marketing and Its ROI

After the first step, conversations with senior leaders, key champions and opinion leaders about what marketing is and is not able to achieve will help you manage expectations. In addition, this is the time to share the way you will measure the campaign's success and seek refined input into other goals key leaders may need to see from the branding. Until everyone is aligned around what marketing is able to achieve and what may fall into other buckets, it may be challenging to receive wide-spread support and resource investments.

III. Write Your Message Platform

Many institutions leap into creative before they refine how they will fill that gap they discovered in Step One. Each audience needs refined messages that help them understand the university's contemporary value. Remember that one of the most important audiences to influence through messaging is your alumni - who will perceive the institution as it was when they were students, and not necessarily how it is today. From the gap analysis, you will know how to position the institution to create a better reputational understanding from those you care about the most.

IV. Develop Your Creative with Authenticity and Flexibility

Creative that is tested among your audiences will be stronger and have better lasting potential. Take your concepts out to internal and external audiences for their reactions. Consider their responses carefully and incorporate appropriately. Brands that "breathe" allow for some small, flexible personalization that helps all sub-units see themselves in its design. There seems to be greater buy-in when the central office asks for much input from others

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who will be told or asked to implement the new approach. By sounding out how the overarching brand can be adopted by the other units, everyone can see themselves in the brand upon launch.

V. Before You Launch

So many of us are in a hurry to get the brand moving forward. But, a few simple steps before a public launch help ensure a brand that lasts over time.

a. Validate your approach internally before the launch.

Roll the brand out to key thought leaders on the faculty, staff, administration and within the current student body. You never want to startle anyone with a new brand. You want them to see it around campus for a few months before it leaves for public consumption. Brands that launch externally before inside buy-in often elicit criticism. If the new strategy is implemented first fully in-house, when those external audiences see it, the internal groups will be able to speak to it with some authority and positivism.

b. Teach the campus to use the brand.

Take the time to create a brand ambassador and training program for staff who will be asked to implement the new brand. This includes the creation of a marketing toolbox with downloadable files for posters, brochures, web pages, etc. Offering web-based courses or in-person training to anyone who wants to use the brand not only invites engagement with the new approach, but also creates a trained group of ambassadors who will immediately implement accurately and with some passion because they were part of the process early on. Don't forget to also allow access to the toolbox for your key vendors and licensing partners.

c. Have your president start to speak the brand.

Become friends with the president's staff and speechwriters and encourage them to incorporate the message platform and brand into the president's speeches even before launch. Make the words familiar to your audiences. And, give your top leader the ability to launch the brand in a personal, yet subtle way. When your senior leader speaks it, an authenticity is immediately attached to the brand.

d. Bring your volunteer leaders up to speed.

Your volunteer leaders will carry the water for the campaign in their circles if they are in the know about the new strategy before launch. Present it first to alumni and foundation boards, the president's boards and other key volunteer groups who are influencers in their own communities.

e. Start to test in social media.

It's easier to know how to use social media to launch a campaign. It is smarter to use it to inform your campaign. Use your social channels to post language that you will use in the platform. Tip the campaign to your audiences and ask for feedback. Solicit input slyly by posting surveys with swag prizes and have those surveys dive a little deeper on your understanding of the reputational gap.

f. University versus Fundraising Branding

Before the launch it is very important to know if the brand strategy will apply to the fundraising campaign. In the case of UC Davis, the approach was shared and that added some layers in testing and shared brainstorming. But, sometimes they are different and a planning session around how the two different campaigns will not conflict is needed.

VI. Launch on a Budget

As with UC Davis, you do not need a large budget for marketing if you understand the value of the tools we have at our fingertips. By launching first with the UC Davis Health System, our combined budgets stretched the campaign much further than anticipated. Partnering with other sub-units for the launch gives you a partner who models the brand execution at a different level and gives you both the ability to talk to more markets with your limited resources.

Never underestimate the power of social media. Use your tools to energize students and alumni and ask them to evangelize for you. Remember that social channels are best applied not as “push” tools, but also with “pull” strategies that create engagement.

Add brand messaging to your news release boilerplates. Maximize your alumni magazines to use the brand and tell its stories. Create posters and collateral that alumni affairs uses at all events and that speak to the new campaign. Transforming all of the tools we have in communications helps us create the perception that we have a large budget, when in fact, we are working with pennies.

VII. Report Back and Share Results

There is rarely a second marketing campaign if the first one fails to show its value. Throughout the duration, report back to the senior leadership, volunteer boards, faculty and staff and other key thought leaders. Share your metrics and its successes. Even share the failures and how you self-corrected within your plan to overcome that which did not work. Talking often to your team and administration, helps them continue to be engaged with supporting the brand and incorporating it into their own work and your future budget.