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STAMATS COMMUNICATIONS

Image is Everything:

Strategies for Measuring, Changing, and Maintaining Your Institution's Image

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SUBJECT HIGHLIGHTS:

Your institutional image is your most important asset. And like any asset, it must be managed carefully. This paper explores the critical role images play in the college choice process and outlines the characteristics of weak and strong institutional images. The paper concludes with a series of strategies for measuring, changing, and maintaining your institutional image.

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When it came down to it, I just couldn't attend that other school. Even though they offered me more aid, and even though it was in a more attractive location, the fact is that I really had not heard of it before they started sending me stuff in the mail. I decided to go to a college we knew — a college we had heard of.

*Quote from a focus group of high school seniors
Aurora, Illinois*

They all look good on paper and in the videos. But what do you believe? We tended to lean toward the schools with which we were already familiar. We wanted our daughter to go to a school our friends would recognize.

*Quote from a focus group of parents of college-bound students
Boston, Massachusetts*

Image. The very word conjures up fears of superficiality and lack of depth. But astute administrators have borrowed a page from business's playbook and learned that their institution's image or reputation is one of their most precious and powerful marketing tools.

To support this point, let me offer a few thoughts. First, it is well established that people are more influenced by prior knowledge than new knowledge. We interpret each day, and each day's messages, in light of the days and messages that have gone before. We see fractions of messages and flesh them out based on what we already know. Let me give you an illustration. A few months ago I had the opportunity to conduct a series of focus groups for a client on the West Coast. As part of this research, I asked groups of high school juniors to give their impressions of viewbook covers from eight different colleges.

In one group of covers, the names of the colleges were not masked. All of the students picked one well-known college as the most academic, prestigious, and the institution they would most like to attend. For the second group of students, I masked the names of the colleges. The students responded only to how the cover looked and were not biased by the institution's name. The viewbook that had fared so well with the first group was ignored by the second.

Second, image has a tremendous and often underappreciated effect on college choice. Each year, Stamats asks thousands of high school students and first-year college students why they chose the college they did. And just as routinely, they offer four reasons: image or reputation, location, cost, and the availability of a specific major. And when asked to choose among their top four reasons, they invariably choose image.

Third, institutions with strong images are able to recruit better faculty, and faculty are more likely to stay longer.

During the next decade, the crisis in faculty hiring will have a greater impact on lesser-known institutions as a declining faculty pool flock to institutions with strong names — names that will look better on their curriculum vitae and names that are often more able to offer the resources good faculty need.

Fourth, institutions with strong images tend to have a greater percentage of annual fund participation. According to *Voluntary Support of Education*, the national average for annual fund participation is 22 percent. However, institutions such as the University of Chicago or Boston University have an annual fund participation of 36 percent, a difference which translates into millions of dollars.

And finally, image building is seen as a legitimate prerecruiting function at a handful, but growing number, of market-oriented institutions.

Recently I had a conversation with a student interested in attending Yale. Now as you might be aware, Yale is located in a very tough city — New Haven. The student and her parents were very much aware of Yale's location. When I asked if they were concerned about the city, they said, "yes." But they also said while it was a concern, it wouldn't affect their final decision because, they said, "Yale is Yale." In other words, the image of Yale — that of a topflight academic institution — is more important than many other variables.

Understanding institutional images

An image is a set of attitudes or beliefs that a person or audience holds about an institution. An image is how you look, and an image is who you are. And while this may seem fairly straightforward, it is complicated by a few factors.

First, institutions have multiple images. Freshmen view the same institution differently than do seniors. Younger alumni view an institution one way, while older alumni often view it another. Tenured faculty look at a college one way, while untenured faculty look at it another. Everyone views the institution differently depending on their context and perspective.

It is also useful to know that images sometimes lag behind institutional reality, that images change over time, and that many images often are not particularly accurate. For example, if you were ever an all-women's school with a strong nursing program, you will always be known, in some quarters, as that type of institution, even though you are now coed and the nursing program was eliminated 10 years ago.

Third, while most impressions are built over time, they begin with a powerful first impression or encounter, an encounter upon which all future images are built. These first impressions, called "moments of truth," are so strong and powerful that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to change the direction of an image after a poor first impression.

Fourth, images are relational in two directions — vertical and horizontal. An image's verticality means that if a person encounters one small element of a college such as a poor publication or an obnoxious faculty member, he or she is very inclined to project that one small negative image to the entire college or university. At the same time, if he or she encounters a thoughtful publication that conveys its message well, then that same positive impression is transferred to the entire institution. One colleague says it best: "When they see our decal in the back window of a station wagon, the driver of that station wagon becomes the institution."

Images must also be considered in a horizontal context. In other words, people often compare one institution to another. Repeatedly we hear, "Yes, but it's not as good as ..." This implies a comparative relationship — the individual is comparing one institution, on a particular dimension, with another. This consideration is often overlooked. When colleges and universities develop an image strategy, they must clearly understand the image of the institutions with which they are most often compared. Images are seldom evaluated in a vacuum — they are best understood and improved in a context that includes your competition.

Characteristics of weak images

At a recent national AACRAO conference, I had an opportunity to make a presentation on images. During the session, I asked participants the following open-ended question: What are the characteristics of weak images? They responded with the following:

- No sense of direction
- Unfocused or dated curriculum
- Poor morale
- High faculty and administrative turnover
- Frequent job-related grievances and absenteeism
- Poor retention
- Difficulty in communicating a clear message
- Spend more to recruit a student
- Spend more to generate donations
- Low annual fund participation
- Lack of local/community support
- Vandalism

Truth vs. perception

There is one subtle aspect of image that must be explored further: the difference between truth and perception. One maxim of marketing is that perception is the ultimate reality. In other words, how people commonly perceive you is how, in their minds, hearts, and pocketbooks, you are. If they believe your academic programs are poor, then having the best academic programs in the country won't help.

It does little good to have solid programs, great faculty, outstanding students, and wonderful facilities if no one knows about them. Merely being good is not enough. People have to know you are good. Routinely, when I visit a campus, the president and I have a chance to chat by ourselves. Sometime during the conversation she or he invariably says somewhat proudly, "We are the best-kept secret east [or west] of the Mississippi [or Hudson or Kokosing or whatever]." My response, as diplomatically as I can make it, is that the president should consider replacing the director of public relations because the institution will not survive or will not flourish if it remains a secret. They must get their lamp out from under the bushel.

Al Cabbage, director of Marketing and Communications at Drake University, is well aware of the difference between perception and reality. Says Cabbage, "A few years ago Drake University, conducted focus groups among high school students in its main markets to learn how it was perceived. The difference in image from market to market was striking. In the Chicago area, Drake was considered a 'pretty good school,' one that was quite acceptable for good students to attend but not a top-rank institution. By contrast, students in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area viewed Drake as a 'prestige' institution, one that was difficult to get into and ranking just below Ivy League schools."

But which was correct? "Both," says Cabbage. "For the audience in each of these markets, the reality of Drake was how they perceived it. And Drake's success in attracting students in these markets depended to a great extent on meeting those perceptions."

A key underlying assumption

Because there is sometimes the temptation to overstate the power of strong image, it is important to present an important underlying assumption: A strong image will only persist if the institution is credible in an area valued by its clientele. For some, and perhaps most institutions, this will be academic quality. Other institutions, however, may offer a relationship to the church or be known as an athletic powerhouse. Institutions with strong images generally have something they are known and valued for.

Managing your institution's image

Strong images don't just happen. They require the commitment of top administrators. They require a clear understanding of who your audiences are and how you are currently perceived. They require detailed planning

and execution. And they require a long-term budgetary commitment. In short, images must be managed.

What is image management?

Image management begins by accepting the fact that an institution's most significant asset is its image. Image management recognizes that an institution's image must be continually built and maintained so that when people hear your institution's name, they immediately have a clear idea of who and what you are about. David Martin calls this aspect of image management "romancing the brand." In his book by the same title, he examines how businesses create brand loyalty in the hearts and minds of consumers. And while the book focuses almost exclusively on businesses and consumers, its application to student recruiting and institutional marketing is as obvious as it is crucial. He writes that "brand mystique accrues by projecting a consistent personality over time.... Your creative selling message must build awareness of the brand and of its special advantages over a period of time. It must sustain this awareness so that the brand will be remembered when the need arises."

Let me illustrate romancing the brand another way. A few years ago, when my son was attending preschool, he came home with a poster of the University of Iowa Hawkeye football team. I asked him about the poster, and he said that everyone in his school, not just his class, received the same poster that morning. The University of Iowa was building brand-name recognition and brand loyalty among a group of five-year-olds.

Image management as a long-term commitment

Image management is both proactive and aggressive. It presumes a commitment to your environment and audiences that may be more accurately measured in generations rather than years. It means sunk costs with a long-term payoff. It is management by the numbers and not by institutional wishes and admonitions. It is, in its most complete and full sense, management.

Image management is a never-ending commitment. Like the poor unfortunate who seeks to unravel the mobius strip, image management has a beginning, but it really has no end. It typically embraces the following steps, steps that will be examined in more detail later in this article:

- Begin with top-down buy-in
- Organize for action
- Demand accountability
- Define your audiences
- Evaluate your current image
- Clarify your goals
- Develop a plan
- Budget realistically
- Execute and evaluate

Consider the image formula

Image management acknowledges a fundamental image formula that may be expressed as follows:

Image Formula

Accuracy + Clarity + Consistency x Continuity

First, accuracy. Everything that you do, tell, and show about your institution must be accurate. There is a strong tendency toward hype in many recruiting materials, but if the college or university depicted in the video or publications is not the same college or university that students find when they arrive, they will leave, and all you have done is traded a recruiting problem for a retention problem. It is imperative that what you say about yourself be accurate and truthful and demonstrable.

Clarity has several dimensions. First, are your individual messages clear and understandable? Second, do people know why they are receiving the message? And third, after reading (or hearing or seeing or touching) them, do they know what they are expected to do next?

Clarity has a second dimension: the need for your messages to compete successfully at the mailbox. Too often publications and message strategies are designed in a vacuum. They do not understand that students will be receiving a multitude of publications from other institutions at the same time and that before your publications can be read, they must be opened, and before they are opened, they must be noticed.

The third critical component of a strong image is consistency. While this may seem obvious, few colleges and universities heed this bit of advice. Consistency means to say the same thing about yourself over and over and over. This means to settle on a logo and family look and stick to it.

This means to develop an annual institutional fact sheet so that you are consistently using the same facts and figures (number of majors, students, books in the library, distance from the airport) to describe yourself.

And this means using the same consistent look in advertising and campus signage and vehicle identification, and, well, you get the idea.

Perhaps the most important aspect of a strong image is continuity. Images can take years and years to fully develop. Accurate and clear and consistent themes and messages must be given time to work.

I know there is a strong, and even overwhelming, feeling on the part of many that the visual aspects of an image — publications and logos — should be dramatically revised every year or two. But remember, your audiences change constantly. The worst reason to change a logo or publication is because you are tired of it. A bigger and more significant question is, “Is it still working?” If so, don’t mess with it. Just because you don’t like a logo is not a good reason to change it. Often I counsel clients that it is far better to use an adequate logo wisely than to develop a new logo every couple of years.

It will take years and often hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of dollars to firmly establish a new look. Because of this, there are only two acceptable reasons for changing a logo or look. First, it is flat-out not

working because either the market has changed or you have changed, and you have legitimate research to support this conclusion. And second, you have vast dollar and time resources that cannot be spent in other areas more wisely.

Strong, well-conceived looks will evolve well. This may require investing more time and money at the concept stage, but the resulting look is something that will offer more long-term value. Institutions such as Beloit College, Cornell College, or Westmont College have been using the same basic look with great success for four or more years because these institutions spent a considerable amount of time at the concept stage. The challenge is to evolve the look, not constantly revolutionize it.

Begin with top-down buy-in

It is no coincidence that institutions with strong images almost always are institutions with strong leadership. This occurs for at least two reasons. First, because it takes a visionary who is willing to invest time and dollars and even a bit of themselves into building a strong image. And second, because the many variables that affect an institution’s image cross so many departmental and divisional lines, turf battles can only be avoided when the decision is made and enforced from “on high.”

There is a clear “cart before the horse” issue here. Did the president set about creating a strong image or did an already-strong image attract the president? Since most images take more than one president’s tenure to establish, it is unlikely that clear cause and effect will be established. Perhaps a strong president saw the need to begin building a strong image, and that emerging image attracted other strong presidents.

If image management doesn’t have the active and aggressive support of top management, it will become bogged down. Strategies will not be coordinated. Activities will not be sustained. And budgets will not be shared. Al Cabbage at Drake is quick to point out the need for top-down buy-in. “We’re fortunate at Drake to have a president and other key administrators who understand the need for good marketing and provide the support to do it right. We don’t spend much money on ‘image’ advertising; most of our efforts are aimed at eliciting a specific response. But we do spend money on making sure that all of our marketing efforts project a consistent image of our institution.”

Organize for action

Most institutions have their image-enhancement strategies far too decentralized. Publications report to one administrator, media relations to another, and advertising to a third. No one knows what the Alumni Office is up to, and athletics won’t attend any planning meetings. There is no sharing of goals. No internal coordination. No pooling of talent. Where there could be a symphony,

there is a cacophony.

Image policy committee

Seldom do all of the individuals involved in building an image report to a single policy manager. Instead, you must create an image policy committee that includes only the president and the chief academic, recruiting, development, and marketing officers. This is a policy-making board. It cannot be mired down with technocrats. It should be kept small. And members should share the same vision. George Keller, writing in *Academic Strategy*, notes that "... most of the key people need to be on board the strategy train when it leaves the station. Participation is imperative. There need not be full consensus. There seldom is. Dissent must be permitted, although sabotage should not be."

This board must be educated on the role and purpose of a strong image. They must become familiar with the tools, strategies, and mechanisms of image building. And they must have the same image goals.

The purpose of this board is to develop policy and allocate resources. The image components of each area, by mandate from the president, will fall under the responsibility of the chief marketing officer.

Much like the evolution of the admissions office to include recruiting, admissions, and retention under an enrollment management model, some institutions are developing an image management model that aligns the following functions under the chief marketing officer:

- Marketing
- Institutional research
- Public relations
- Media relations
- Advertising
- Publications
- Special events

In addition to the organizational change outlined above, the image-management model has one other important characteristic — the creation of soft alliances that allow regular, policy-making input not only at the board and cabinet level but oversight also at the program level.

Through regular interaction, the chief marketing officer must have policy input in academics, student recruiting, athletics, alumni, and other offices that are involved in building or projecting strong images.

The goal of this input is not to dictate policy but to educate policy makers on the image ramifications of their decisions. This soft alliance is a guiding and teaching relationship and not a controlling relationship. However, the chief marketing officer has a notable "big stick" — the image mandate from the president and the image policy committee.

Demand accountability

Organizing for action presupposes the creation of an image czar, a single person who is responsible for executing the institution's image-management strategies.

The idea of having a single person in charge is absolutely critical because the fact is, group accountability means no accountability.

As I write this article I am flying from Washington, D.C., to Chicago. On the seat next to me is an image-enhancement plan that a college president asked me to review. The plan is relatively well conceived. The goals are carefully defined and the budgets seem adequate and lots of people are involved. What is missing, however, is any sense of who will be in charge. No single person seems to be responsible for seeing that this plan is enacted.

A marketing champion

The idea of having a single person in charge is pivotal. But equally important is who that person is. She or he should be highly placed in the administration. That person must not only have the ear and trust of the president but of the larger campus community as well. And that person must have a clear understanding of marketing and its tools. Often we have seen a seasoned manager, a political insider, a trusted confidant, fail because that person knows nothing about marketing. I must be adamant at this point. Having a czar is one thing. Having a talented czar is quite another.

Define your audiences

Next you must bring order to your universe. Even a brief review of your market and environment will reveal dozens or perhaps hundreds of audiences that clamor for your attention. However, in an era of finite resources, it is impossible to meet the needs of everyone. The solution is to prioritize.

Though the list of potential audiences can be quite extensive, there is usually only a handful that directly impact an institution's future, and the composition of this handful is often dependent on the type of institution. Publics, for instance, are interested in how they are perceived by taxpayers, community leaders, and legislators. Privates, on the other hand, are keenly interested in how they are perceived by alumni and parents. Some privates are interested in how they are perceived by sponsoring denominations, while some publics need the support of regional employers. Both types of institutions are interested in how they are perceived by faculty, current students, and prospective students. Clearly, your institutional and environmental context plays a major role in defining what audiences are most significant to you.

Evaluate your current image

As part of managing your image, you must know how you are already perceived. This is critical. In their haste to set about improving their image, many institutions skip this important step.

Images are best evaluated along three dimensions. First, you must determine how the institution is perceived by the primary audiences (see above). Second, you must evaluate how the institution projects itself editorially and environmentally. And third, you must learn how your institution compares with its

cohort group.

Perception studies

Determining how you are perceived by key audiences is relatively straightforward. First you need to decide which of your many audiences are primary. And second, you need to conduct image and perception studies to ascertain how these important audiences perceive you.

A “rule-of-thumb” in image research is that you begin with the question to be answered. In other words, once you define the research question, you usually have a pretty good idea who has the answer. And once you know who has the answer, different research methods are usually a best “fit” for different types of audiences. For example, prospective students and parents may be reached through focus groups or mail or telephone surveys. Regional employers, on the other hand, are often best reached through personal or telephone interviews. Faculty often prefer the anonymity of a mail survey. State legislators will require a personal visit. And because alumni are dispersed, often the best way to reach them is through either a mail or telephone survey.

Your best bet is to reason from the audience to the methodology. It is also useful to keep in mind issues of anonymity, sensitivity, and complexity. If your audience might wish to remain anonymous, if the questions are sensitive, or if the questions are complex, then a written survey might be a wise choice.

Obviously these are guidelines. Successful research sometimes involves a little trial and error and the ability to learn from your mistakes. However, if you keep in mind that the question dictates the audience and audiences dictate the methodology, then things should proceed smoothly.

Determining how you are perceived by primary audiences is an important beginning. Next, you have to evaluate how you project yourself editorially and environmentally.

Evaluate yourself editorially

An editorial evaluation addresses your formal, written, image-building mechanisms. A realistic appraisal of your editorial mediums is extremely important because it is through these mechanisms that most institutions project their image. This involves evaluating not only the product of these mechanisms but the abilities and talents of those individuals charged with this responsibility as well.

An editorial evaluation of your image involves, not surprisingly, print. But it is more than that. It involves direct mail, advertising, video, audio, and all the mass mediums. It includes publications as well as media relations. It addresses not only what you say about yourself but how you say it. It evaluates how you allocate dollars and time. It looks at budgets and talent and where you direct your energies.

Evaluate yourself environmentally

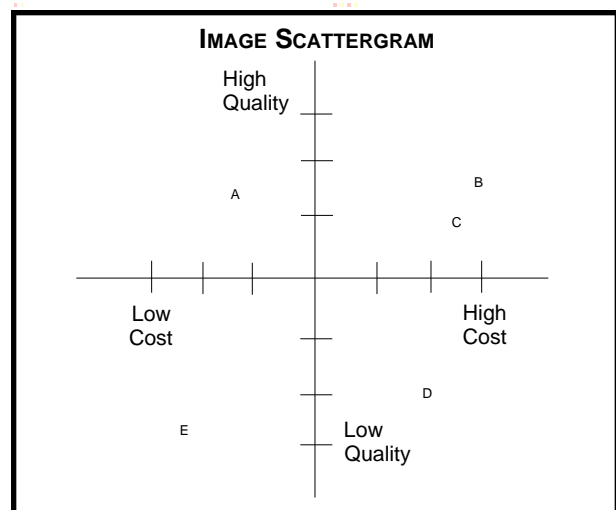
In addition to evaluating how you project yourself

editorially, you must evaluate how you project yourself environmentally. In other words, how does your campus look? I call this the brick-and-mortar syndrome. It works like this. If you look good, people will assume you are good. If your campus is well groomed, if your signage is clear and consistent, if your buildings and windows are clean, people will assume that your entire campus is well managed. But if you do not tend to your campus, people will wonder what else has been ignored. It is simply amazing how many institutions have forgotten how important it is to wash their windows and sweep their walks.

Comparative evaluation

The third element of image evaluation is comparative. In other words, while it is useful to know how you are perceived by key audiences and how you project yourself editorially and environmentally, it is also important to know how you compare with your cohort group.

A comparative evaluation is important because most students don't decide between attending your institution or not attending college at all. Rather, they decide between you and another institution. So understanding



who these other institutions might be and determining how they compare with you makes extraordinary sense.

To determine how you compare with competing institutions, you have to go back to the list of primary audiences. This entails asking, for example, prospective students, how you compare on different dimensions with another institution. Let me give you an example. Recently a client asked Stamats to complete a competitive-positioning study. They wanted to know how they compared with four other institutions on two dimensions — cost and quality.

Using a nine-point scale, we asked prospective students to evaluate the five institutions on these two scales. We then ran the mean of each response and prepared a scattergram-type graph. The result (see above) shows how the five institutions compared with one another on just these two dimensions. Comparative data such as this is extremely useful in helping to differenti-

Clarify your goals

Chances are your perceptual, editorial, environmental, and comparative research has uncovered a multitude of image problems and opportunities. Now comes a time of sifting and evaluating. In the rush to develop and execute strategies, institutions often overlook the need to establish clear image goals that meet the needs of your prioritized audiences.

As I work with clients to help write clear goals, I keep these basic rules in mind. First, prioritize your list of goals. Focus on the truly important. Don't be distracted by whim or politics.

Second, keep the prioritized list of goals as short as possible. It is deceptively easy to get bogged down.

Third, learn the difference between short-term goals and long-term goals. The short-term goals are those that must be accomplished immediately, while the long-term goals can wait. Or, as one wag says, achieving the short-term goals are what assures a long-term.

And finally, good goals are quantifiable. Goals such as "improve our image" or "increase our popularity" are problematic because they are vague and ill-defined. Instead, goals must be built on the baseline data created in the perceptual research, and they should be quantifiable. Rather than "improve our image," a better goal is "increase name recognition from 23 percent to 30 percent in the St. Louis metropolitan area during the next 12 months."

The above goal is built on research that established a baseline name recognition level of 23 percent. Furthermore, the goal focuses on St. Louis. And finally, the goal includes a time period. This is a well-articulated goal.

Develop a plan

By now you have prioritized your audiences, conducted the necessary research to identify image problems and opportunities, and articulated a series of concise image goals. Next, you must write the plan.

In its most simple form, the plan is the mechanism through which things get done. A plan addresses the who, what, when, and the how.

There is no magic to writing a good plan. But there are a couple of things to keep in mind. First, stay true to your goals. Every element of the plan must clearly support one or more image goals. If it doesn't, delete it.

Second, take advantage of the complete image mix. Earlier we quickly reviewed the many offices and individuals who have an impact on an institution's image. Effective plans take advantage of such mediums and activities as:

- Publications
- Direct mail
- Advertising
 - Positional
 - Promotional
- Special events
 - Partnerships with local schools

- Science fairs
- Talented-and-gifted-student gatherings
- Student leadership programs
- Issues conferences

- High school relations
- Public relations
- Community relations
- Media relations
 - General news releases
 - Hometown news releases
 - Wild art photo releases
 - Audio releases
 - Public service announcements
 - Pitch letters (ideas for feature stories pitched to media representatives)
 - Personal contact
 - Fax releases
 - Electronic news releases via autodial modem
 - Proactive speaker's bureau and expert's list
 - Faculty-penned columns
 - Talk shows
 - Tip sheets to local, regional, and select national media

Third, remember that the image management plan won't work unless it is founded on these four cornerstones.

Fourth, keep it simple. Most plans are far too complex.

And finally, give it time to work. Perhaps this is related to the need to keep it simple, but it is more than that. Even the most simple plans cannot be rushed. Images are notoriously nebulous and latent. It can take a great deal of time to change how people perceive you. Remember, neither Harvard nor McDonald's was built in a day.

Budget realistically

One of the most problematic aspects of image management is budgeting. Institutions often don't know how much to budget and, while there are no absolutes, there are some guidelines.

First, plan to spend about 1.5 percent of your annual operating budget on disposable image activities. This is the amount you will spend on programs and strategies, not people.

Second, consider the levels of image difficulty and budget accordingly. It is easiest and least expensive to maintain an already good image. It is more expensive to create a strong image. And it is most expensive to change a bad image. Adjust your budget accordingly.

Third, remember that as your image strategies begin to work, you can scale back their intensity. For example, where you might want to place a positional ad in each issue of a regional magazine for the first year, only place half that number of ads (every other issue) during the second year. Once the image is established, it takes less of an effort to maintain it. And once again, baseline data can be used to judge the effectiveness of your

campaign and guide the allocation of resources.

Fourth, hire good people. In an effort to save a few dollars, institutions sometimes hire young, often inexperienced people to execute their plan. This is false economy. While you may save on salaries, the mistakes, inexperience, missed deadlines, and lost opportunities will cost you dearly. My recommendation is to bite the budgetary bullet and hire people with experience. The knowledge and understanding of seasoned professionals will make these people a bargain.

Fifth, support your plan with an adequate budget. It is far better to do fewer things well than to try to do a multitude of things poorly. Rather than underfund high school visits so you can place limited advertising, it is probably better to halt the advertising and spend the money you need to visit the high schools you must.

Sixth, manage the plan. I recently heard of a college that overspent their video production budget by 50 percent. As a result, they had a wonderful video but no money to have it duplicated or distributed.

At a recent CASE meeting, I had a conversation with a woman from a small, relatively unknown college in the East. Her president had just asked her to develop an image-enhancement plan that would make their institution “a household word” in New England. She asked her president about additional staffing and funding. The president said that, as a professional, she should be able to manage the project within current resources. This president has no concept of the resources it takes to position an institution. It takes more than wishes and good intentions to improve an image, and, without funding, any plan they develop will be doomed.

Execute and evaluate

Now that the plan is written and funded, it is time to act. Implement your plan’s strategies and activities per the time line you have established. But as you implement the plan, you must be evaluating its effectiveness.

There are two basic reasons for evaluating a marketing program. First, to provide data for modifying and increasing the impact of programs in progress, in other words, to make midcourse corrections. And second, to evaluate the effectiveness of completed strategies so you can adjust ongoing plans.

The original research you conducted to help guide goal development will again prove invaluable because it contains baseline data against which you can evaluate your plan’s effectiveness.

Organizing the image-enhancement plan

Perhaps one of the best ways to organize the comprehensive image-enhancement plan is through the creation of smaller, more focused action plans.

Action plans describe, in detail, the individual activities that, when combined, encompass the entire image-enhancement plan. An action plan includes a name or title of the image-enhancement activity, a description of the activity, the overall image-enhancement goal or goals the activity will support, and the target audience at whom the activity is directed.

The action plan also contains the step-by-step procedures, assignments, and deadlines that comprise the activity and the begin and end date of the activity.

A well-written action plan also includes two other important components: the budget and an indication of where the dollars will come from and an indication of who is responsible for completing the activity.

And finally, as we have just discussed, the action plan contains how and when the activity will be evaluated.

Conclusion

Each day, thousands of high school students around the country choose a college. And, as the data suggests, most of these students make their decision based on their perception or image of the institution. The fact is, all educational institutions in the United States have an image. But is the image strong, weak, poor, or ambiguous? Is the image accurate? Is the image consistent? Is the image widespread? And perhaps most important, is the image valued by prospective students and parents?

Smart, aggressive, well-administered institutions don’t leave their image up to chance. They look at their image as their most significant asset, and they manage that asset carefully. They prioritize audiences. They conduct market research. They establish clear-cut goals. They write a plan. They support that plan with adequate resources. They do this because they have learned that perhaps image is everything.

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