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By Dr. Jacqueline Cooper

We Don't Speak Their Language: Radical Creativity with Branding

Recruiting season is an exciting time. Armed with at least one new outfit and the latest statistical data about geographical regions, schools and prospective students, undergraduate admission officers eagerly leave their offices. Admission officers also carry updated recruitment pieces including brochures, viewbooks, handouts and maybe a give-away ink pen or bookmark stamped with their university's latest slogan, tag line, motto or catch phrase.

The immediate goal of the recruitment material slogans, tag lines, mottos and catch phrases is to capture prospective students' and parents' attention. The intermediate goal is to entice campus visits and student applications. The ultimate goal is to move students from the prospective column to the admitted column in databases through the art of persuasion. (McCreery 2009).

In a survey of college admission officials conducted by the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Hoover reports that "on average, printed materials, such as viewbooks and brochures, account for 24 percent of admissions budgets" (2008, B4). From the choice of paper to the pictures showing smiling students enjoying campus on a bright sunny day, recruitment pieces, especially viewboks, have earned a solid place on admission officers' tables (Hartley & Morphew 2008).

Recruitment pieces are often part of a university's larger marketing effort or branding. (Weisbuch 2007; Shampeny 2003). O'Malley, as quoted in *University Business,* holds that, "institutional branding is meant to help propel an institution from its mission to its vision by creatively conveying the powerful strategy that will take it from where it is to where it wants to go" (2008, 45). With the assistance of consultants, admission officers conduct research and often know more about prospective students than students may know about themselves (Gose 1999). Why is it still difficult sometimes then to connect with high school juniors and seniors?

The Lunch Visit

I sat with all of my glossy brochures and viewbook staring at students who stared back at me. Only three students approached my table voluntarily. I moved the vast majority of my well-developed product and walked over to the students, literally inviting myself into their space. I wondered why the students did not approach my table? Did I appear unapproachable for whatever reason? Did my professional attire present an image of a world they did not see for themselves? Had they already disconnected from the idea of going to college? In the end, the real question for me became do we speak their language in our recruitment pieces? Did our recruitment pieces speak to them in that cool, laid back language that virtually all high school students seem to understand? Did the formal language of our viewbooks turn many students away?

Branding

Why do admission offices often have a difficult time reaching target audiences? Competition for students is strong, especially during recruitment season (Hartley & Morphew 2008; Shampeny 2003). Despite this competition, research also suggests that most university slogans play it too safe (Bartlett 2007). How, then, can universities break away from this "safe zone" and reach out to students progressively? To improve university tag lines, mottos and slogans other research suggests using humor (Lauer 2006, 26). Still others suggest

using music in ads, in particular hip-hop (Atkinson & Halliday 2003, 4; Briggs 2006). Pazzani (2006, 20) and Bessman (2003, 4) suggest that branding can be done through creating an audio identity. *University Business* (2008) suggests that universities should consider creating a visual identity by developing virtual viewbooks, virtual tours and student-developed commercials to name a few examples. It is possible that many universities may find some of these suggestions to be quite radical, especially student-developed commercials. This is the whole point. Since recruitment materials don't seem to speak the language of many in targeted audiences it is time to do something different. Why not engage in radical creativity? On *University Business'* list of 50 best branding ideas no less than 11 of the 50 ideas specifically involved universities changing their perspectives about their Web site. Other ideas *University Business* listed included universities using product placement in commercials or other ads and colleges/universities participating in reality TV shows. Many times admission officers, in collaboration with university marketing departments, worked for days or even weeks to develop a tag line only to see the message fall flat with prospective students and parents. It has happened enough times to now consider radical creativity with branding.

Radical Creativity Ideas
Slogans
Consider using colloquial language. This suggestion may go against every fiber of formal training for wordsmiths on branding teams. In exploring the concept of persuasion, McCreery holds that he learned several things about language while working in marketing and advertising. One of the things he learned was, "we must use the client's language the way the client uses it (2009, 165). "Play with words," adds *University Business* (2009, 46). How often do university marketing teams actually study the language and speech patterns of high school juniors and seniors or ask their team members to take a ride on its university's campus bus transportation system to hear how undergraduate students interact and talk to each other? Since universities want to present a strong academic image, using colloquial language may be a hard sell. However, it is worth changing the tone and words used so that the message sounds like it is coming from an insider. Imagine this: A print ad or a handout has two cell phones displayed. The text message on one cell phone asks, "where u goin?" The text message on another cell phone reads, "accepted! goin' to (insert the name of your university here!)" Not only are you speaking students' language, you are reflecting and respecting the use of one of their most common communicative tools: text messages and cell

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phones. The ad design can be developed further to represent a tag line or branding message. It would be easy to develop more ads using cell phone lingo because the cellular world has its own vibrant jargon. When universities use text lingo and cell phones in branding, they are tapping into a cultural phenomenon of their target audience. The possibilities are endless.

Humor
The use of humor remains high in advertising. However, it is not always easy to use (Weinberger & Gulas 1992). Humor can work very well in a live action ad using real people. Ads with children and animals can get message or brand across in a comical way (Lauer 2006). One needs look no further than TV to see a toddler sitting at his computer buying stocks while using his cell phone or the cavemen series of insurance commercials. Imagine this: A baby is sitting in a car seat ready for a road trip. Her parent asks, "Are you ready to go to college?" The baby gets excited, claps her hands and squeals with joy. Her parent then asks, "Do you want your stuffed toy?" More squeals from the baby. Her parent gives her a ball. The baby responds with her most unhappy face. Her parent gives her a stuffed animal representing (insert the name of your university here) mascot. A happier baby has never been seen! Squeals of joy all around! Her parent says, "OK, let's go visit campus!" Humor helps people relate to your message, especially the college-aged target audience.

Hip-hop and audio identity

Hip-hop music has been around for more than 20 years. As a result, the current generation of high school juniors, seniors and most undergraduate students came of age in a culture driven by the beat of hip-hop and rap music. Hip-hop culture and music transcends gender, geography, social-economic status, and ethnicity (Sullivan 2003). A driving hip-hop beat behind audio messages can catch the attention of target audiences long enough to get the message across. The message is presented in the language prospective students are used to hearing, so they want to pay attention. Universities can create an audio identity by using podcasts on their Web sites to tell success stories, talk about their academic reputation, or talk about the university's interests in diversity and sustainability all over a driving hip-hop beat. Outreach can be done with prospective students by inviting them to visit the Web sites to listen to podcasts. Prospective students can get any branding message a university wishes to send. Other students can see an "invitation to listen" while browsing a university's site. Audio identities created through podcasts can also be produced to engage currently enrolled students. Keeping currently enrolled students tuned into the university's message can also have a positive effect on retention efforts. Prospective and currently enrolled students can become engaged in yet another exciting way using two more of their most cherished personal items: their iPod or any other mp3 player, and their music.

Further research in music and advertising holds that music has the ability to tap into emotions (Altshuler 2007, 23; Sturgess 2007, 22-23; Pazzani 2006, 20 and McCreery 2001), thus establishing or enhancing a relationship between the listener (prospective students and parents) and the university. Emotions can help bond prospective students with a university during the recruitment phase. Again recognizing the power of music in advertising, Rabinowitz, as quoted by Altshuler in *Advertising Age,* states that, "music is the only byproduct of what is achieved in advertising that crosses all language barriers" (2007, 23). Sturgess added, "we are only at the very beginning of understanding how sound can be deployed as a brand-worthy effort" (22).

If hip-hop is not the music of choice for a particular university's branding effort in creating its audio identity, Pazzani (2006) holds that original music can be composed by experts. Consult with members of a university's music department or local bands to help develop a musical brand that will be synonymous with your university.

Conclusion

These examples only scratch the surface as to what fun, creative and engaging recruitment pieces can be radically created. Universities and colleges have long since adopted the language of the business community such as referring to students and parents as customers. It is time for colleges and universities to look seriously again to the business community to see how effectively it uses branding and marketing with language and music. It is time to look and listen to learn how to effectively engage the attention of prospective students and parents in different and more interactive ways. It is also time to engage currently enrolled students in more interesting ways. Colleges and universities can do so by connecting with students through their music and by speaking their language.

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