

Portland State University Marketing and Communication Operations Audit Executive Summary

Consultants Kelli L. Horst, APR and Larry D. Lauer conducted an audit of Portland State University's marketing and communication operation at the request of Cassie McVeety, vice president for university relations. The goals for this audit are to assess the current marketing structure and its effectiveness, and to assist Portland State better organize for effective, brand-oriented marketing.

This executive summary identifies key strategic issues, major recommendations and next steps related to implementing strategic marketing and communication processes at Portland State. Our findings are based on personal interviews with more than 70 administrators, faculty, staff and students, and a review of recently produced marketing materials from across the institution. A broader analysis of the issues related to marketing at Portland State is part of the overall final report.

Overview

In the past, many traditional academics have seen marketing as "too commercial" and "superficial promotion," and considered it inappropriate for the academy. They assumed it was all based on giving the customer what he or she wants in a situation where teachers and scholars know better from study and experience. The concept of "marketing as a way of thinking," as a professional practice committed only to academic quality, and as having nothing to do with commercialization, is a relatively new idea for many faculty and administrators.

"Marketing" does not refer only to the activities and talent of an existing office. It refers to the concept of a central intelligence function for the university that has the authority and credibility to guide the strategic implementation of brand identity and reinforcement. This central marketing function also should influence through cooperative processes the three major competitive initiatives key to an institution's success – student recruitment, fund raising and alumni relations, and reputation building. This is the philosophy we endorse for Portland State.

First, the good news. There is so little collaboration and brand clarity on campus at this point that we are starting with a blank slate in terms of creating effective processes. Now, the bad. People are used to their autonomy and won't relinquish willingly resources or authority to an unproven strategy, especially when the commitment of university leadership to such an initiative is in doubt. It will take a mandate and proof of investment to convince the campus community that this process is for keeps and has the support to succeed.

Like many campuses, Portland State is one that likes committees and advisory boards. There is lots of discussion about what should and needs to be done. But action must follow words, and now is the time to begin. The detailed analysis of integrated marketing topics contains dozens of recommendations, but they can be boiled down into a few key categories related to integrated processes, staff organization and authority, leadership support, and goals and planning.

The bottom line here is simple – clarify the brand message, make the case for the value of smarter marketing, empower a body on campus with the authority and mandate to manage brand standards, and invest in the resources necessary to enable brand marketing to support university goals.

Major Recommendations

A. Define the central marketing unit at Portland State as a **central intelligence function** that drives brand management and informs university decision-making. The unit's primary role is as brand manager, providing strategy and support for four major areas of activity – student recruitment, fund raising/alumni relations, reputation building, and internal marketing and communication – and working with schools and colleges to develop plans and ensure key brand messages are reflected in their marketing efforts.

B. Clarify **the university brand** so as to get all campus marketers on the same page with respect to mission, competitive advantage, graphic standards, images, key messages and language.

C. Make immediate resource **investments in staffing and research**. Reorganize the offices of marketing & communications and publications to form an office of brand marketing, led by an assistant vice president for brand marketing who reports to the vice president for university relations. Reporting functions include strategic communication (media relations, internal communications, community relations, media planning), web communication, publications (graphic design and photography), editorial services (copywriting and university magazine) and advancement communication, plus a dotted-line relationship to a marketing position in admissions. Image research will inform the development of a strategic, university-wide marketing plan.

D. Implement **key integrated processes** to foster campus support for brand marketing and begin to coordinate messages and activities. The president's task force on integrated marketing should have action-oriented sub-groups in admissions, reputation, sub-brands (units) and internal marketing. Participants will come from many areas of campus, including brand marketing, development, alumni relations, admissions, faculty, athletics, government relations, student affairs, human resources, graduate and extended studies, and the colleges and schools. An editorial priorities committee will search out the reputation-defining stories of the university and map out a strategic plan for telling them.

Strategic Issues

A. **Mission and vision.** Key tenets of the mission and vision are causing tension in many areas of campus ... access and community connectedness vs. a stronger research orientation; the push for more traditional students vs. a limited traditional campus experience and support system; “urban” and “large” as accurate depictions of the university’s competitive advantage. Changing the mission is not the answer; developing a consensus as to the common definitions of these themes is.

B. **Goals and planning.** Successful marketing is accountable to university goals, which either don’t exist or are not well known. Make the university goal-setting and planning process more transparent to the university community. Make communicating goals and vision a priority so everyone sees how their work contributes to the overall advancement of the university. The vice presidents must take ownership of this process.

C. **Authority and investment.** The president and administrative leadership must lay to rest a sweeping campus concern about this process being just one more new initiative devoid of resources or support. The president must offer tangible proof of investment, mandate participation and cooperation from all campus units, and bestow authority in a central brand marketing function.

Next steps

- Develop a Portland State “message on a page” with clear branding and graphics guidelines.
- Conduct image research to assess current perceptions among key audiences.
- Put the entire university relations staff, as well as academic and administrative leadership, through a master class in integrated marketing that includes a briefing on these audit suggestions.
- Hold separate training for the integrated task force and its action subgroups to prepare them to meet their charge.
- Develop an umbrella strategic marketing and communication plan for advancing the brand that can embrace specific plans for admissions, fund raising, alumni support, internal communication and marketing, as well as selected academic and other programs.