

your college, you can't control every interaction that might influence a consumer's perception of your college. But you can influence your college's brand by defining a brand strategy, producing visual materials that reflect that strategy, launching the brand and managing your visual identity over time to ensure consistency.

Steps to Creating Your Brand Strategy

Any branding effort or brand transformation starts with defining your strategic process. These five steps are surprisingly simple – you'll have to fill in the details, but this overview should help you start thinking about your college's overall brand strategy.

1 Do the Research

Before anything else, you need to understand your brand history. Look back at how the college has presented itself over the years. What worked, and what didn't? Has your image progressed?

While studying your brand history, look closely at how the college communicates. Is the language used still relevant? Is it time to shed old ideas and buzzwords?

In this process, convince the marketing team to forget all assumptions and stereotypes about the consumer. Holding onto assumptions can make it hard to consider new ways to reach consumers. Then try to gain a real understanding of the consumer through surveys and by observation. You can also interview the college's front-line employees to determine their own perceptions of the brand in place and how they think consumers perceive it.

2 Refine Your Brand Strategy and Get Buy-In

The next step, obviously, is to analyze the information gathered in your research to see what goals begin to emerge. You can then refine the goals for your brand strategy and start thinking about getting buy-in. Write branding briefs to present to school employees; use internal presentations to help everyone understand your brand. Teamwork is important.

At this point, you can also develop cost-benefit analysis briefs to show how branding efforts can actually lead to cost savings. For example, consistency in presenting your brand often means you can consolidate vendors for printing and other services.

3 Consider the Visual Identity of Your Brand

This is where logos and colors and taglines come in – where the focus is on the brand's visual identity. Create your new logo and tagline; choose the color palette and typography; determine how you are going to deliver this new cohesive "look" to current students, prospective students and the community at large. Everything your college produces for the consumer must reflect the brand, from online materials, to billboards, to TV spots and other promotional items.

And don't forget to make sure you've gotten upper-level administrators to sign off on everything.

4 Launch Your Brand

With all the foundational legwork completed, it's time to think about how you want to launch your brand, both internally and externally. The overall goal is to develop a strategy that will create excitement about your new identity. As part of this step, it's especially important to design branding toolkits and guidelines for college employees so they understand how they can help build brand recognition.

5 Manage Your Brand

Long-term brand success requires constant monitoring to be sure your college is staying true to its brand. This means engaging employees and external stakeholders while remaining connected to your customers. Again, teamwork is key. Remember, everything you do, everything you say, impacts your brand. And if your brand stays strong, it can make the difference between a student choosing your college as the "right" one – or not.

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