

BRAND IS THE RHETORIC OF YOUR SCHOOL'S IDENTITY. WHEN IS IT TIME FOR A REFRESH?

by Dan Kennedy, Kumveka

"Rhetoric is the skill of persuading," opened Andrew Smith, upper school humanities teacher at a recent parent event at Veritas School-Richmond. If this is true and your school seeks to persuade new families to enroll, donors to give, or recruits to join your team, you are practicing "institutional rhetoric." Let us borrow the industry term for expressing the identity and message of an institution: brand. In this way, branding is the rhetoric of your school's identity.

HOW SHALL WE DEFINE BRAND?

As 10 marketing professionals tend to offer 11 definitions of brand, allow me this working definition: brand is a set of expectations. These expectations live in the mind of your audience and are influenced by your means of communications: websites, interactions with parents, social media, teacher newsletters, your facilities, yes—everything. When I say "Starbucks," it brings to mind a set of expectations. Those expectations vary by person, from "A great spot to meet a friend" to "burnt and bitter" to "amazing venti caramel mochas!"—and everything in between. Starbucks literally spends

millions of dollars managing those expectations to achieve their goals.

Your school also has a brand. It exists whether you manage it, grow it, or ignore it.

WHY SHOULD YOU CARE ABOUT THIS?

Your school cannot be successful over the long-term without intentional development, execution, and ongoing investment in your brand. Sometimes this means just a refresh. Sometimes this requires a complete overhaul to work done long ago. This article provides a primer to the world of brand as you consider the opportunity to use this tool of persuasion to communicate what your school has to offer to your many audiences.

For classical, Christian schools, **we should first assume that persuasion is done in the context of virtue.** The opposite would be manipulation (again, credit Smith). As we know, any tool can be used for good or evil, whether that tool is best practiced in academia (i.e., signposting speeches) or in industry (i.e., developing an on-mission, audience-centric brand

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strategy). Within the context of virtue, a school should therefore seek to understand both the goals and mission of the institution and the needs of the intended audience. Successful persuasion that promotes an academic environment of “truth, beauty, and goodness” must mean a win for all parties.

Second, successful branding assumes your goals are clearly defined. This concerns both defining the outcomes of your mission and vision (a school’s “Portrait of the Graduate” is a great example) and your financial model (i.e., clear targets for the number of qualified applicants needed each academic year to hit enrollment goals, Annual Fund giving).

Third, successful branding assumes you understand the needs and perceptions of your target audiences. This understanding should be data based and shared by key decision-makers, including your administrative team and the board of directors. This would include understanding the motivations, real or perceived barriers, your market competitors, and how your audiences see and share your value equation. It means understanding your brand as it exists in the minds of your audiences—their expectations for your school.

Last, this assumes you have done the hard work of codifying your brand strategy and executing against it. While this begins with your Vision/Mission/Values Statement, your brand strategy should identify your key audiences, what you are promising these audiences, how you can prove these promises, and the personality of how you will communicate.

The brand strategy is then brought to life in the form of professional visual and messaging tools. This includes a pinwheel of expressions such as your logo, tagline, typography, color palette, photography style, and layout approach. This is carried out across every communication tool from websites to social media to banners to open house invites to donor case statements. At every touchpoint, audiences should experience your carefully considered and well-executed brand.

When is it time to examine this?

Given the assumptions above, you can ask yourself the following questions:

Is there alignment between your brand strategy and

1. . . . how your brand is EXPRESSED?

This can be uncovered through a communications audit. This process examines all materials that bear your identity—every web page, brochure, donor letter, social media post, etc. Misalignment is often characterized by an objective evaluation stating: “What you meant is not what you are saying.”

2. . . . how your brand is PERCEIVED?

This can be uncovered through audience research. It is said that, “It’s not what you say, it’s what they hear.” As such, this process—performed qualitatively and/or quantitatively—uncovers what is on the mind of the people you are trying to reach (and serve). Misalignment is often characterized by an objective evaluation stating: “What you meant is not what they heard or think.”

3. . . . how your brand is ACTED UPON?

This can be uncovered through establishing key metrics that define success. When I worked at Procter & Gamble—where billions are spent on advertising—the joke was: “We know half of ad dollars are wasted, we just don’t know which half.” Most schools don’t have that luxury. The discipline here is often characterized by routinely and intentionally examining existing metrics that are causal to delivering your financial model. These are best captured in a simple monthly report, often called a dashboard, used by leadership. Misalignment is often characterized by an objective evaluation stating: “What you meant is not happening.”

If the answer to any of these questions is “no” or “I don’t know,” take action.

WHAT’S NEXT?

If you are serious about addressing the distance between your current brand and your expected results, my recommendation is to seek outside counsel. Peer reviews can only take you so far. Find a qualified, compassionate truth-teller who will not grade your institution’s rhetoric on the proverbial curve.

How do you find this person or group? Start with your immediate network for recommendations, especially your board of directors. It is critical that the individual or group is not only trusted, but brings both best practices and a knowledge of the independent education space.

Additional articles on this topic can be found at

kumveka.org/blog including:

1. What questions should we ask our audience?
2. Why use an agency?
3. How do you choose an agency?
4. How do I navigate a big change?
5. How can brand architecture be a leadership tool?

Closing

Let’s return to Andrew Smith’s discussion on rhetoric. In a recent speech on the verbal arts, he argued for the logos, ethos, and pathos of effective, virtuous persuasion. As audiences interact with our school brands, we want to effectively communicate the truth, goodness, and beauty of our offerings. Good rhetoric—and good brands—“move the audience to action.” Thoughtful work on branding will do just that.



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