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This Week's Issue

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Today's homework: Build your college brand



**ROB
DIGISI**

While they shy away from labels such as "marketers," colleges and universities engage in a variety of marketing efforts throughout their organizations. Admissions, development, athlete recruiting, and even promotion of on-campus cultural events all require sophisticated communication techniques. Athletic directors employ professional sports

marketers to sell tickets, create sponsorship programs, coordinate broadcasts and generate donations.

Frequently, however, each program is conducted in isolation without regard for a unified brand strategy.

The college experience is a marketer's dream: Four years of social and intellectual interaction that is the source of so many significant memories. The product is education and human development, and the overall experience creates an affinity that lasts a lifetime. Even if graduate school comes later, the undergrad years are forever ingrained into a person's life story.

Each year, traditional consumer marketers spend billions to establish some form of a relationship with customers and create brand loyalty. Colleges and universities enjoy a natural affinity and loyalty that if carefully managed, can play a vital role in achieving broad-reaching brand development goals and even

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[More News From This Dep](#)

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NBA All-Star spots going fo

[More News From This Dep](#)

E-Sports

SBJ Archives

Table of Contents

Sports Spots

This Week's Issue

Company Index

One-on-One

SBJ In-Depth

Opinion

Coast to Coast

Research



result in incremental revenue generation.

The marketing revolution for colleges and universities can begin with a more effective licensed merchandise program. Insignia merchandise provides a tangible means for a school's constituents to participate in the college experience throughout their lifetimes. Today most licensing programs are fragmented with separate and often independent entities handling product development and distribution. Licensing administration is either managed internally or outsourced to either Collegiate Licensing Co. or the Licensing Resource Group. Distribution is primarily through internally managed bookstores or through contract retail managers such as Follett or Barnes & Noble. Obviously, bookstores are a necessity providing textbooks and stocking a reasonable selection of insignia merchandise should someone visit campus or navigate the university Web site.

Retail operators and licensing agents perform their functions well, but neither group is in the position to lead a coordinated marketing strategy that meets university-wide goals. Agencies focus on marrying licensees with licensors, trademark protection and royalty collection. Bookstores generally rely on location-based marketing. Both solutions yield only adequate results — not just in terms of royalties and bookstore profits but also in terms of communicating a message and effectively to key market segments.

Universities have the opportunity to use insignia merchandise to increase alumni involvement, heighten excitement among prospective students and strengthen the bond with other community members. Each alumnus and constituent is a brand ambassador, eager to express a part of his life story by proudly displaying his or her alma mater.

According to Brad Drexler, vice president for university relations at Lehigh University, "Licensing and trademark management are frequently overlooked in brand strategy development on many campuses. How your trademarks are applied and how your licenses are managed play a big role in reinforcing consistent brand imagery, building brand equity and reinforcing

The college experience is a marketer's dream: four years of building memories. But few colleges take full advantage.

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how your brand is perceived. All should be done in a consistent manner to reinforce your brand strategy. If it's done well, not only will it help you build your brand, it can have a positive impact on revenue generation through enhanced licensed merchandise sales."

For perennial BCS and Final Four contenders, generating sales for their insignia products requires little beyond national TV exposure. The dynamic is similar to the one in professional sports as specialty and even national retailers often jump on board.

At the other 4,500 colleges and universities in the United States, alumni, students and other core constituents have the same degree of passion for their school regardless of a major bowl berth or a spot in the Sweet 16. At these other schools, success in sports does not provide "automatic marketing" for building brand equity. While the local media may highlight a school's triumphs, several problems keep a school from benefiting from athletic success and translating it into sustainable brand growth. Consumer demand is often too dispersed among the population to warrant retail or sponsor programs. As the message is based on athletics, academic, social and cultural qualities are rarely considered or highlighted.

To complement the diverse and unique qualities of a school, leadership must adopt a written marketing plan that defines broad-reaching objectives and identifies all communication vehicles. Incredible opportunities will be missed if licensed products are not a key component of that plan.

Initiatives of the marketing plan include the forging of a direct marketing and merchandising partnership to send targeted messages and deliver unique products. Tennis team alumni, Greek organizations and music program veterans will finally have the chance to express their specific college experience through customized licensed merchandise.

The bookstore is more than a trading post and should be regarded as a communications forum to highlight the unique features of a school. Universities should manage licensees or licensing agents to develop products that are innovative and that generate a buzz around campus. Students will want to repeatedly check out the bookstore to see what is new and exciting.

Athletics is obviously very important and its visibility should be used to highlight the rich heritage embraced by almost every school. A consistent team-outfitting program is vital in enhancing brand equity and for developing an effective retail program as an extension of the athletics program. Licensed product can also be the focal point for other integrated programs that elevate the university's profile or promote a certain communications initiative.

A marketing-driven licensed merchandise program is not the sole solution in creating a cohesive and efficient brand strategy. It is, however, one of the most actionable means to engage your core consumers with your brand. Facilitating involvement with this loyal group will result in higher volunteerism, participation and event attendance. In addition to increased licensing royalties and bookstore profits, charitable giving is likely to rise. Students, their parents and alumni will have more opportunities to display their pride, thereby elevating the school's profile and generating positive word-of-mouth.

Universities have the enviable advantage of an inherent and natural passion associated with the college experience. Leveraging that power with a more effective licensed merchandise program is the ideal way to stay close to your core constituent base and enjoy far-reaching benefits.

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IT'S YOUR TURN TO SPEAK OUT

Guest columns may be sent to Street & Smith's SportsBusiness Journal, 120 W. Morehead St., Suite 310, Charlotte, NC 28202. By fax: (704) 973-1401. For further information, please contact **Dewey Knudson** at (704) 973-1436.

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