

THE COLUMBUS STATE UNIVERSITY BRAND
A REPORT ON BRANDING, MARKETING, OPERATIONS & COMMUNICATIONS

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MARKET RESEARCH

Process Overview

The goal at the outset of this project was to conduct 25-30 interviews with people representing key audiences for Columbus State University. Those audiences include faculty and staff, alumni, community leaders, and current or prospective students.

In all, I spoke individually or collectively to some 50 people, one-half representing Columbus State University students and the other half comprising faculty and staff, community leaders, and University alumni. The process took considerably longer than normal for this type of targeted group. It began with a personalized letter from President Mescon to 32 faculty and staff, alumni, and community leaders. I then followed up with an e-mail to each person mentioning the President's invitation to participate and requesting no more than 30 minutes of their time for a phone or in-person interview. I assured each participant that, while I would provide a detailed report on collective responses, that no individual would be credited with any comments—positive or negative.

Faculty and staff interviews went very smoothly with only three of the 12 not participating (with faculty far more eager to participate than staff). We achieved a 100 percent response rate from our 10 targeted community leaders and six out of nine respondents from CSU alumni. For all but the students, the vast majority of the market research interviews were roughly 30-minute phone interviews responding to a standard set of questions, albeit tailored to reach the unique perspectives of each major group.

Students were a considerably different story. While we achieved a larger number of student participants than the rest of the key groups, all but a handful of the students participated through classroom focus groups during Freshmen Seminar classes on campus. We tried for more than two months to engage students who had expressed an interest in Columbus State but ultimately decided not to attend, as well as current members of the student body. Despite sending out more than 200 individualized e-mails to both student groups, we had only four responses total—one politely declined and the other three agreed to phone interviews. No response whatsoever would seem to indicate a certain amount of apathy or disinterest and the consistency of the silence (one would expect at least a handful of angry responses asking that they not be contacted, along with a handful of positive responses) would seem to support such an explanation. Regardless, we did manage to fully engage with two Freshmen Seminars, with roughly 20 students in each class and almost every single student participating to some extent.

Key Findings

Despite a few challenges in assembling a reasonably-sized sampling from a variety of audiences, this research should prove very valuable for the University. One of the main reasons for such confidence is the relatively high degree of consistency found in responses across most audience groups. Part of that can be attributed to the use of a pool list provided by the University. Part of it is also attributable to the relatively homogenous demographics of the respondents (with the exception of students). Nonetheless, the findings reveal an unusually consistent set of attributes for the University. Below, is an explanation of the most consistent characteristics of the University as seen by its key publics.

High degree of familiarity and awareness.

Given the level of involvement that many respondents had with the University, it should come as no surprise that they are familiar with the events and developments around it. But even by those standards, the alumni and community leaders seemed to have an unusually high degree of familiarity with the school. For instance, almost everyone interviewed was able to cite the recent record enrollment achieved

by the University and the rolling out of the first doctorate program at CSU. In varying degrees of awareness, people cited the construction of the student recreation center, the kick-off of the inaugural club football season and the problems associated with continued state budget reductions as developments of note.

Strong sense of affiliation & investment

With the exception of the student sampling, the other key audiences interviewed showed a high degree of identification with Columbus State University. A good many of the respondents attended the school in the very formative years of Columbus College. “It’s (CSU education) something I’m proud of; absolutely it is,” said one alumnus. “I think that there is a time now where people very proudly say, ‘I went to CSU,’” said another—a feeling, this person observed—that has changed over the years.

A handful never attended CSU at all. Some faculty and staff were enthusiastic supporters of the Administration on its direction. Others were considerably more reserved in their excitement. But no matter their backgrounds, people seem to identify strongly with the University. They view it as an important and vibrant component of the community and an institution that shapes the region in a very positive fashion. “It’s an intimate part of the Columbus community and region,” observed one community leader. “It’s made an incredible impact on the professional aspect of this community.” Said a third, “CSU does a really, really good job of presenting their product to the community and reaching out with a spirit of inclusion. It’s not just with people who have direct ties to the University. They’ve got a good product and consistently present themselves in a quality fashion.”

The most commonly cited benefits were:

- workforce development and enhancement, particularly TSYs and Aflac technology workers
- student retention and economic impact
- cultural arts
- teacher, nursing, and business executive placement and development
- servant leadership

A few respondents, especially students, felt that the locals may take CSU somewhat for granted not fully appreciating what’s in their own back yard. But from playing a vital role in training a technologically astute workforce for the local corporate elite, to the production of teachers who educate the region’s K-12 students, to the cultural vibrancy that the University affords the Columbus area through music and the arts, there is a sense that CSU is one of the key institutions in the entire region now and well into the future.

Quality Communications Materials

Many of the people interviewed, especially alumni and community leaders, receive a steady stream of materials from Columbus State. Almost to a person, they found the materials to be of very high quality, an unusual response for people who receive high volumes of similar materials. “I think they’re excellent,” said one community leader. “I’m very impressed with what they turn out.” Another businessperson, who receives materials from multiple organizations throughout the region, said that CSU “leads the pack”, in terms of the quality of materials distributed, and another gave the University “a 10 out of 10,” in the quality of materials received.

While many acknowledged the rather high volume of materials they receive, few complained about it. Most read what they can and don’t concern themselves with what they can’t. Others made a point of saving materials (especially the alumni magazine) and reading them en masse when the opportunity presented itself. Almost everyone seemed pleased to be kept abreast of CSU happenings, but a few did suggest varying the outputs to include shorter, e-mail blasts, and other variations. The only other

suggestion heard for improvement was to send out calendar information a bit earlier so that people and reporters may plan attendance accordingly.

Interestingly, few of the students remembered receiving anything from Columbus State during the recruiting process. They seem to have made their decision to apply and enroll quite apart from any active recruitment process.

On a somewhat related note, a number of people decried the poor signage and CSU branding throughout the Downtown. “It’s the worst branded entity in town,” noted one businessperson.

High Quality Academics--Leading academic programs: music, education, business, nursing
Quality was a word heard again and again as a CSU descriptor from all key audiences. Alumni felt that they received an affordable, high quality education--especially because of the continuous interaction they enjoyed with faculty. “I received a great education with more time and attention (than I would have received elsewhere),” said one alumnus. “Its uniqueness is that it’s affordable higher education with a great spirit and heart,” observed another. “In certain disciplines, you can study here at a level you’d find nowhere else in the country.” Another alumnus has taken courses from Auburn, the University of Georgia and Georgia State University, and “the education I got from Columbus State was equal to, if not better than, any of those schools because of the smaller class sizes.”

Faculty--as at many schools--are fiercely proud of the quality of their teaching. But unlike their peers at larger research institutions, they seem quite comfortable with—and proud of—the primary emphasis Columbus State places on teaching. While many acknowledge that it’s time for CSU to begin to focus on enhancing its research prowess, they see teaching as their most important role at Columbus State.

Fortunately, the students concur. The unanimity of praise heard about faculty teaching and interaction was highly unusual in a survey of this nature. No one related even a single instance of negative student/faculty interaction and even those who intend to transfer to another school, had praise for the intimacy of their classes and availability of faculty. “The faculty truly believe in the value of teaching,” observed one faculty member. “They really believe that teaching class is extremely important and that it’s not OK to be average. Everybody values that.”

Overall, the general consensus is that university marketing should focus on its qualitative difference and intimate relationship between faculty and students.

Strong Town/Gown Relationship

“One of the biggest strengths I see is the commitment that the community and business partners in Columbus having for this university,” said one faculty member. Such a relationship is more common between private colleges and towns. It’s unusual for a public university. “This is a university that was built by the community. It’s not a community college, but a university built by the community,” said another faculty member.

No matter who we talked to, the message was very clear: Columbus State University has shaped the Columbus region for the better. “(CSU is) the hub of Columbus,” said another business leader “It touches more lives than any other single institution in the area.”

Perhaps nothing is more symbolic of that mutually beneficial relationship than the major University investment in Downtown Columbus. While students and faculty who don’t work or live there were less enthusiastic, alumni and business leaders believe it to be one of CSU’s most valuable contributions to the area. Many believe that CSU has been a savior of the downtown, and that the look and feel of the downtown area enhances the CSU artistic imprint as well.

Beloved presidents: right personalities at the right time

Similarly, key audience members (with a few exceptions) believe that the leadership exhibited by past and present Columbus State presidents has had an immensely positive impact on the University. Many described Drs. Brown and Mescon as totally divergent, yet highly appropriate, leaders for their respective times. Dr. Brown exhibited a steady hand, an inclusive approach, and a community spirit—just the thing for a nascent school in need of credibility and core values. He is widely credited for establishing excellent town/gown relations with the community and for being a successful fundraiser.

Dr. Mescon's strengths are his vision, his energy, and his broad academic experience—essential ingredients for a university on the rise. “He is the complete antithesis of Frank's personality,” observed one community leader. “But he's a wonderful gift for CSU. People feel very good about the investment they're making in the school.” The world is your oyster with Dr. Mescon,” said another. “Just being in the room with him, it's like...golly Moses!” “Tim has a burr in his saddle to raise the standards at CSU,” warmly opined a business leader. While not all faculty are enamored with some of the changes taking place at CSU, even Dr. Mescon's skeptics, seem willing to give him the benefit of the doubt and applaud some—if not all—of his initiatives.

Not top-tier; but at or near the top of the next tier...and improving rapidly

There was widespread agreement on CSU's place in the higher education pecking order of Georgia. No one put it on par with the University of Georgia, Georgia Tech or Emory, all seen as top-tier Georgia schools. Most put Kennesaw State and (to a lesser extent) Georgia State University ahead of Columbus State as well. But the majority of those interviewed put CSU and the University of West Georgia right behind KSU and GSU. As with any university, individual programs were often cited as more or less competitive compared to the whole, with Music frequently mentioned as a program that could compete with anyone (even the Juilliard, according to one alumnus). Those most cited as peer institutions include the University of West Georgia, Valdosta State, and Clayton State University.

Growth v quality concerns

A persistent concern we heard from every audience except students is a caution for Columbus State not to grow for the sake of growth. Generally, people believe that growth is appropriate for Columbus State. Not a single person said that CSU is the perfect size and that it should not seek to grow. But for those who voiced a concern, it was a consistent concern that the growth goal seemed to exist independent of any other factors. “They've not tried to be big, they've tried to be good,” observed one community leader. “Now, we're trying to get bigger.” “The President's description of the future is a mixed bag,” said another. “Growth is a theme that stands out, but bigger is not always better. Success will be determined by how the growth occurs. If they maintain strengths, it's a good thing. If they grow simply to grow, it won't be.” This person is taking a wait-and-see approach to the issue.

People are especially concerned about growth in a time of significant state budget cuts. They fear that many of the traits that distinguish CSU—faculty availability, student/teacher ratio, and personalized attention—could diminish with rapid growth. They fear that more students and fewer resources could cause a notable erosion of quality—something very difficult to reverse once it begins.

Future Finances

A complementary concern to growth for growth sake was a strong current of concern (especially by alumni and the community) about funding for higher education in Georgia. They feel that state support is eroding; presenting a real challenge to funding the status quo, let alone higher aspirations. They are very pleased that the University is taking a more aggressive approach to the Legislature and the Board of Regents. But optimism is not high, given the State's fiscal situation. That concern is coupled with what they see as a strong desire of growth and quality expansion at Columbus State. While no one is

suggesting that the University lower its ambitions, there is a concern that those ambitions not outpace fiscal reality.

Personality

Most felt that Columbus State has a personality, but there was almost no consensus on what it is. A slim majority felt that the school's personality is embodied by the person who holds the presidency. Others used previously discussed characteristics--quality, community-oriented, the downtown campus--to describe CSU's personality. Interestingly, a number of alumni and business leaders felt that the new Campus Recreation Center may provide the school with more personality. That line of reasoning focused on the Center's potential for increasing the residential nature of the CSU campus. It is seen as an anchor for students and a possible community asset as well. Most agreed that with the increase of students, especially residential students, that CSU would develop a personality.

Interestingly, others described what they didn't see as the personality of Columbus State--that of a stereotypical, ivory tower research university aloof from its students and community.

One person perhaps summed it up best. "What we've been, we don't want to be anymore and what we're becoming we're not yet sure."

Icons and symbols

The CSU Clock Tower was the almost universal top-of-mind answer to the question of what icons or symbols people associate with Columbus State University. Enthusiasm for the Clock Tower ranged from quite strong...

- "It's hard to think of Columbus State without thinking of the Clock Tower."
- "The students naturally gravitate there."
- "I think it's a good one and I don't see any reason to change it."

...to tepid (especially among faculty).

- "I can't think of anything better."
- "It's known to us and that's it. Every university has a clock tower."

The cougar was cited by many as well, but for most it had little emotional appeal. Many saw it as a symbol of the sports program.

The Downtown Campus was also seen as symbolic or iconic. "The Performing Arts Center," said one community leader. "There's nothing about it that doesn't exude quality. Unlike the Clock Tower, the community actually uses the Performing Arts Center." Others pointed to other buildings and almost all agreed that it would be difficult to translate the Downtown Campus in iconic fashion.

Strategic Planning Research

As part of the development of the University Strategic Plan, CSU conducted a survey of its key audiences in the fall of 2008. Almost 2,500 people responded to the quantitative survey, representing 45 percent of faculty and staff; almost one-third of the Athletic Board Fund; and more than 25 percent of alumni. For purposes of this report, there are two results worth repeating.

Under the heading, "Feelings about CSU" were phrases:

- Optimistic and Encouraging
- Thoughtful and Well-intentioned
- Professional and Responsible
- Insightful and Creative

- Future-focused
- Growth-oriented
- Success-oriented

Under the heading of “Core Values” appeared words like:

- Excellence
- Diversity
- Passion
- Concern
- Innovation
- Professionalism
- Civility
- Trust
- Effectiveness
- Efficiency
- Responsiveness
- Nurturing
- Academics
- Integrity
- Respect
- Responsibility
- Engagement
- Partnership
- Servant Leadership
- Service
- Ethical
- Sustainability
- Encouragement
- Curiosity
- Inclusive

The most notable overlapping traits as perceived by key stakeholders in these quantitative and qualitative surveys are:

- Growth-oriented
- Success-oriented
- Excellence/Quality
- Diversity
- Engagement
- Partnership
- Academics

BRANDING AND MARKETING

The Importance of Brand

Especially in the world of higher education, brand is an exceptionally valuable asset. One needs only to see what's happening in China, India, and the Middle East to see how valuable an academic brand can be. It's no accident that schools like Harvard, MIT, Stanford, and other name brand universities being approached by governments in those regions to open "franchises" of those colleges and universities in Beijing, Abu Dhabi, or Bangalore. They have strong, distinctive, and highly respected brands and because of that, they are in high demand.

Establishing or revising a brand is no small feat. It requires considerable self-analysis and market testing and demands that you drill down to the core of the audience experience to develop a brand that resonates with your key constituents. Your brand is:

- synonymous with your reputation
- your major differentiator in the competitive marketplace
- what tells people who/what you are and why they should care

An effective brand is consistent; it resonates with its key audiences, and is synonymous with the overall experiences of the publics that consume it.

The most common branding mistakes are:

- trying to be all things to all people
- promises \neq reality
- lack of presence among key audiences
- lack of consistency in content and presentation
- a profusion of sub-brands without strategic import

Another common misperception is that brands are the same as logos. At Columbus State, there is a profusion of logos for almost every entity on campus. In the six months during which we conducted our assessment, we have seen no fewer than 25 requests for the creation or revision of a logo for any number of departments or organizations.

But brand goes beyond a logo and the profusion of logos tends to diminish the broad University brand. If done properly, logos become part of the visual manifestation of the brand and reflect marketplace perception. Consistency and congruence are imperative and logo usage should be closely guarded to prevent the diminishment of the CSU brand. When it comes to brands and logos—less is more.

With logos, the most important question to consider is, "How do you craft a logo that personifies some or all of our brand attributes?" In the case of Columbus State, it's important to approach the new logo design and selection process first from a strategic perspective and then from a design perspective.

To do this, first answer these important questions:

- Do any of these concepts (and they are just concepts in their current form) express community relevance or leadership?
- Do they personify quality?
- Do they express the characteristics of a university on the rise?
- Is it meaningful to/symbolic of alumni and community pride?

Once you've agreed upon an image that exhibits some or all of these attributes, then and only then, should there be detailed discussions on the nuances of the actual design.

The development of the new CSU logos largely reflects this approach and the results will strongly represent the brand to internal and external audiences.

What is Columbus State University?

Sadly, many university brands are less than the sum of their parts. For every Harvard, Stanford or MIT, there are hundreds of colleges and universities lacking any semblance of a broadly recognized academic brand. What comes to mind when you think of Seton Hall, Portland State, UTEP, or the University of Charlotte? Much of that is because even the most informed public has limited capacity to recognize and retain brand information. But some of it is due to the vast fractionalization of university brands.

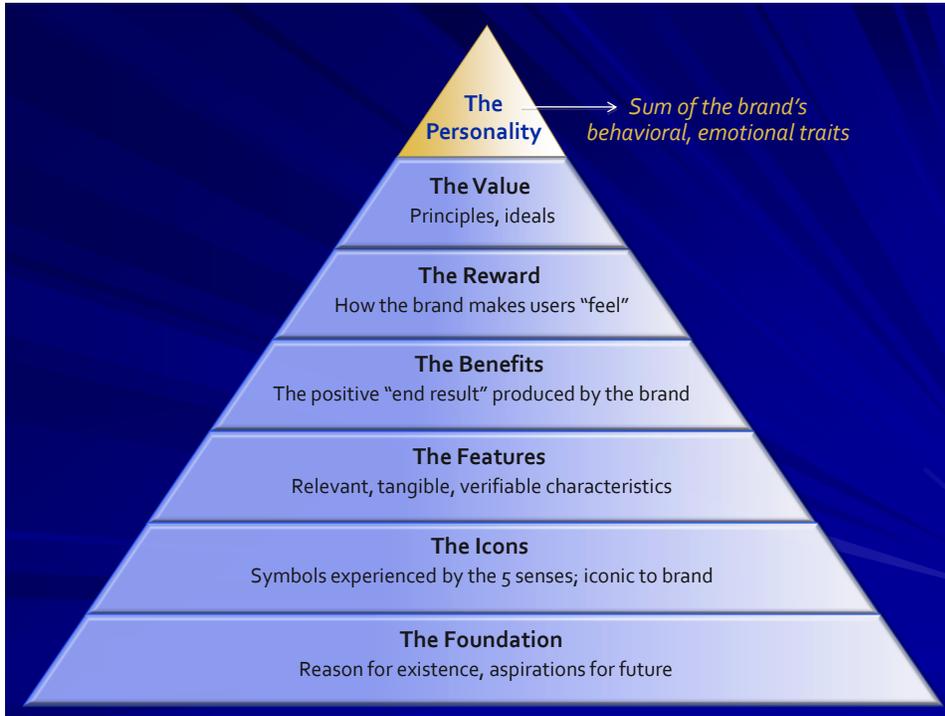
Columbus State University is no difference. Is it:

- Columbus State?
- CSU?
- Schwob School of Music?
- Columbus College?
- D. Abbott Turner College of Business and Computer Science?
- Command College?
- TSYS School of Computer Science?
- Coca-Cola Space Science Center
- Oxbow Meadows?
- The Cougars?

The answer, of course, is that Columbus State University is all of the above. The challenge, then, is to brand the University in a cohesive and meaningful fashion, while simultaneously showcasing its varied and robust components.

The Brand Pyramid

A classic brand development tool is the Brand Pyramid, in use for decades as a tool for creating a brand roadmap. While there are numerous variations on the Pyramid, the example below is an excellent illustration of this classic template.



Based upon the market research and numerous meetings with key internal audiences, we have developed the Columbus State University Brand Pyramid as follows:

The Foundation: Mission statement; the fundamental reason this organization exists and its aspirations for the future

The Icons: Symbols that can be felt by the five senses that are iconic to the brand, should not be violated, and that should be consistently applied in all settings

The Features: Relevant, tangible, and verifiable characteristics associated with the brand. Includes metrics for competitive comparison, the reasons to believe, and behaviors that customers would associate with it.

The Benefits: The functional benefit(s) the brand provides and the end result the brand produces.

The Reward: How the brand makes users feel. Why do people use this brand?

The Value: The principals and ideals that guide the thoughts and actions of the brand. A succinct statement of what the brand stands for and how its people behave.

The Personality: The totality of the brand's behavioral and emotional characteristics

The Columbus State Brand

This research paints a very positive image of Columbus State University. Few universities can boast a perceived combination of academic and athletic quality, confidence in senior leadership, powerful community relationships, solid communications, and a strong sense of affiliation. There are two notable areas of improvement: establishing a stronger sense of community and tradition at CSU and concerns about future growth and resource issues.

Based upon this review, it's possible to characterize the Columbus State University brand by these key concepts:

- Educational quality and accessibility
- Personal attention in a diverse environment
- Career preparation & enhancement
- Small town cohesiveness; big city benefits
- Community impact/relevance
- Creative, aspirational environment
- Growth
- Strong, passionate leadership and a university on the rise

But the CSU brand goes beyond simple catch phrases. It is the totality of the emotional experience people associate with you.

- It's the feeling of pride in holding a degree from Columbus State University
- It's the energy of the President
- It's the site of cranes rising over campus as new facilities come on line
- It's the beauty of a performance or exhibition
- It's seeing fellow alums across the table at important business meetings or cultural events
- It's the energy you feel as you walk across campus
- It's the "aha moment" a student feels as she talks to a professor during office hours

So the challenge CSU faces is in capturing those moments, those feelings, in a way that is true to the essence of Columbus State University. It must be:

- Distinctive
- Credible
- Relevant
- Consistent
- Achievable

You will have succeeded in crafting a brand when you hold it up to your key audiences and they see themselves in it. That is the essence of successful branding.

Overview of the CSU Strategic Plan

It's essential that marketing communications is seen as playing a critical role in the strategic aspirations of the University. Too often, communication is seen as something apart from the core mission. When presidents and CEO's discuss the metrics of success, they tend to focus on traditional benchmarks such as sales/enrollments, revenues, administrative costs, stock prices/rankings, and the like. Communication is often relegated to its own category and summarized in terms of clips, mentions, and qualitative variables such as the re-design of a Web presence or a copy of the most recent alumni magazine or corporate report.

But marketing communications should play an essential strategic role in the success of any organization. Marketing/PR should be closely aligned with the strategic goals of the organization and focus on supporting the President and key operational units in the achievement of strategic objectives. It should also be readily capable of producing metrics to illustrate success, or lack thereof, in pursuit of those objectives.

Metrics for success should capture long-term and tangible improvements in areas of strategic import, such as:

- more and better qualified applicants
- enhanced faculty credentials and applications
- more external mentions in traditional and social media
- an increase in external funds raised (from tuition and personal donations to corporate underwriting and government grants)
- rankings improvements

The following is an overview of the strategic goals of the Office of Public Relations at Columbus State University as they relate to the University's Strategic Plan. Included with each is a series of suggestions for how to measure progress towards those goals. Given the paucity of existing data, it is advisable to start small and build a culture of measurement and assessment into all future communications initiatives.

OBJECTIVE: Increase external funding and recognition.

The Office of Public Relations can support this goal by establishing and maintaining relationships with audiences that are crucial to the future of Columbus State University. The most effective communications programs establish a dialogue between the institution and its key publics. Currently, the Office of Public Relations focuses on communicating internally to faculty, staff and students; and externally, through the mass media, recruiting communications and direct communications with (especially) alumni.

The Office should establish more avenues of direct communications (more on this later in the report) in order to broaden the dialogue with CSU's key publics. They should also sharpen their media focus by looking beyond daily newspapers to more specialized media who focus on CSU strengths like music and performing arts, nursing and allied health care, criminal justice, etc.

Suggested metrics for determining success include:

- Create benchmarks for all current information distribution lists and track increases/decreases over time. Mandatory communications lists (like emergency notification) don't apply. But track anything that is a voluntary listing.
- Working in conjunction with Development, track and promote private fundraising progress such as # of donors, average gift/donor, etc.
- Subscribe to a media monitoring service and track mentions of Columbus State University in all media—including social media.

- Create a media pitching database to determine who utilizes your press material and develop “hit ratios” for each story pitch (the # of pitches divided by the # of placements). Over time those ratios will help determine the types of stories that meet with the most placement success.
- # of Facebook Friends
- # of Dr. Mescon’s Twitter followers
- # of main Web page hits
- Customer satisfaction surveys for subscribers/recipients/followers of all CSU media (even those not produced by Public Relations, if possible).

Goal: Create a cohesive and modular Strategic Branding Approach

The Columbus State University brand is—by far—its most valuable asset. Buildings, endowment, and revenue all pale in comparison to the value of the brand. Given this, it’s imperative that the University embark upon a conscious effort to establish a meaningful brand (as discussed above) and nurture and protect it to the greatest extent possible. In many ways, the brand is the fulcrum of the University’s relationship with all of its key audiences.

Refining and enhancing the Columbus State University brand is an all-encompassing process. It requires consistency and discipline. Cavelle Consulting and the Office of Public Relations have already completed a number of important steps in furtherance of this objective.

- Approval of short-term and long-term marketing plans
- Changing the University’s URL (www.ColumbusState.edu) and assisting the campus in making that change
- Approving revised academic and athletic logos.
- Development of Brand Identity Guidelines to create understanding of and compliance with the University’s brand.

Goal: Create a marketing plan that combines a new branding initiative and the goals of student recruitment

- See below

Goal: Advertise effectively in support of Enrollment Services’ strategic and tactical goals

Perhaps no demographic is more brand conscious than 14-17 year-olds. They are the “Holy Grail” for advertisers ranging from Hollywood studios to corporate boardrooms. They are also the pipeline to the future for Columbus State University. Prospective students become current students; become alumni; become donors; become employers; and so on.

As such, it’s imperative that the PR Office and Enrollment Services present the CSU brand to this audience in a sincere and effective fashion. They are savvy consumers and often choose to be bombarded with messages from panoply of sources. But they are a highly discerning group--quick to turn negative and demanding the genuine.

CSU should pursue a marketing communications/advertising approach that increases name recognition and establishes the CSU brand with this young audience. It should be done through traditional advertising, social media word-of-mouth marketing, and internal marketing to ensure that current students, faculty and staff become brand ambassadors for the University. Marketing to this audience should focus on the distinctive elements of the CSU brand (personalized education, career enhancement, Columbus community benefits, diversity, etc.) and promote them in a variety of ways, through a variety of media.

Suggested metrics include:

- # of messages disseminated
- Response rates for each major communications initiative
- # of attendees at recruiting events
- # of contacts by recruiter
- Annual advertising budget
- Annual production costs for recruiting materials
- Cost/student applied
- Cost/student enrolled
- # of students taking campus tours
- # of applications
- Admission rate
- Quality of incoming freshmen class
- Overall enrollment #'s

Goal: Increase the awareness of Columbus State University in Atlanta

This is highly complementary to the previous goal. In many ways, the Office of Public Relations can provide critical “air support” to Enrollment Services’ “ground forces” recruiting in Atlanta. There is almost nothing more effective than face-to-face communication regarding the opportunities and benefits afforded by a Columbus State University education. But by increasing awareness and enhancing the prestige of Columbus State through advertising, earned media, social media and other opportunities, the Public Relations Office can greatly enhance the effectiveness of Atlanta student recruiters.

Suggested metrics include:

- Periodic market research among Atlanta high school students and parents to measure name recognition and brand awareness
- Anecdotal reports of awareness from field staff
- # of applicants from Metro Atlanta
- # of admissions from Metro Atlanta
- Ticket purchasers (sports, arts, etc.) from Metro Atlanta
- Donors from Metro Atlanta
- Media placements in Atlanta media

Goal: Develop a strategy with academic affairs to improve Columbus State University’s ranking on the U.S. News & World Report list of Master’s Universities (South)

Columbus State University is currently listed as a “Tier 4” institution, well behind such peers as North Georgia College and State University and Georgia College and State University--both of which rank in the top 25 of that group.

Improvements in institutional data reporting could make a difference. But public relations should develop a strategy for “influencing the Influencers”. By increasing awareness and seeking more national and regional publicity for the university, CSU stands a far better chance of being “top (or closer to the top)-of-mind among peer reviewers.

As part of the marketing plan, the Office of Public Relations will include a peer component focused on making faculty and senior academic leaders in the South more aware of the CSU brand.

Peer communications

- US News influencers
- Conference presentations

Suggested metrics include:

- U.S. News Rankings
- Other rankings such as Princeton Review, Money Magazine, Fortune, etc.

Goal: Achieve awareness of Columbus State University, and our priorities, with state and local legislators who can help the university

While the University System has a consistent presence at the Capitol, nothing can replace individualized, in-person communications with those who tax and spend. Such a group includes key players in the budget process, senior leadership in both caucuses, and local representatives. President Mescon is the logical focal point for CSU's legislative work. In support of his efforts, the Office of Public Relations should:

- Develop of communications materials specific to the political environment
- Leverage work done by the President to deepen our relationships with key elected officials
- Register John Lester as a lobbyist
- Make at least three trips annually to Atlanta during the session to meet with legislators and staffers to push our agenda

Suggested metrics include:

- # of legislative meetings attended
- Feedback on communications materials developed for elected officials
- # of legislators visiting Columbus State
- Success rate of the CSU legislative agenda
- Trends in state budget appropriations

Goal: Upgrade Columbus State University's Web presence and capabilities

There seems no limit to the variety of communication channels exploding to the fore. Columbus State University has become more proactive in adopting technologies like Facebook. But the CSU Web presence will continue to be an invaluable information platform for communicating with key constituents. From emergency campus announcements to posting the latest student photo and video accomplishments, the CSU Web site provides a consistent, centralized, and convenient means of reaching a wide audience. The Web affords Columbus State an excellent opportunity to integrate a huge variety of information and re-purpose a host of other materials (news clippings, internally-produced video and photo content, social media opportunities, etc.).

The Office of Public Relations has already undertaken a substantial overhaul of the top layers of the CSU Web presence, in conjunction with these branding recommendations. Ongoing objectives for the Web presence include:

- The use of more dynamic information content in a variety of media
- More social media technology, such as Twitter and YouTube
- Increase staffing to augment content generation

Suggested metrics include:

- # of hits
- Time spent/visit
- # of links hit/visit
- Increase in Web hits from materials that drive people to the Web
- Market research inquiries around how people discover/learn more about CSU
- Search Engine Optimization (SEO) data

- # of links to CSU

The Marketing Plan

With a stronger sense of the Columbus State University brand, it's now possible to outline a marketing approach that will translate that brand into meaningful dialogue and relationships with your key audiences. We have outlined a good portion of this above in the context of supporting the University's Strategic Plan.

Whether making the commitment to enroll, contribute, attend an event, or publicize a University development, this proposed marketing framework is intended to spur action from key CSU publics. Especially at a time of shrinking state resources, it is imperative that the University focus on initiatives that engage and "move the needle" for your publics. All too often, however, those proactive imperatives lose out to reactive realities.

The focus for this plan is the Office of Public Relations at CSU. This office is the "Brand Champion" for Columbus State University and should work very closely with the Office of the President to ensure consistency and effectiveness with the brand. Fortunately, the University has a highly capable advocate in John Lester, someone who understands marketing and communications and excels at establishing cooperative working relationships with a diverse campus community. His is not an easy task. His staff is small and his demands are many. Further, he is one of the few people on campus structurally responsible for the overall CSU brand. As such, his is a sometimes lonely task, carefully fostering initiative while maintaining a strong University brand. As it is at so many institutions, everyone wants to be a part of the university, but only on their terms.

The first step in this plan is to review the current materials being produced by that office and recommend enhancements to those efforts. As revealed in the market research, most of CSU's key publics give very high marks to the University's communications materials. They are aware of CSU in the local news. They read alumni materials. They pay close attention to announcements and University e-mails. In short, they are a well-informed constituency. The notable exception is CSU students, who seem to remember little of any recruiting materials they may or may not have received in their college search process.

Therein is the primary focus and that process is well underway. The translation of the new CSU brand—a deeply personal and relevant experience—into effective recruiting materials should yield considerable benefits over time. Progress will not occur overnight, especially in the essentially brand new Atlanta market. But a consistent and persistent blend of integrating marketing communications and in-person contact will bear fruit over the course of the next few years.

Media Materials

The Office of Public Relations produces high quality news releases, event calendars and other outreach materials. They know how to craft effective and compelling copy and communicate with the media on a systematic basis.

A snapshot of their outreach reveals important data. In a five month period from September, 2009 to February, 2010 CSU distributed 57 news releases distributed. Of that number:

- 40 were events
- 6 were about University accomplishments or awards
- 3 were human interest stories about CSU students
- 3 were about new hires at CSU
- 2 were about University ties to developments around the earthquake in Haiti
- 3 were miscellaneous releases on various topics

As is obvious from the breakdown, 70 percent of the media outreach in that five-month timeframe was event related. From the Coca-Cola Space Center to a plethora of performing arts opportunities, the Office of Public Relations keeps the local community well informed of events on and off campus.

Compiling that information and sharing it on a weekly basis is time-consuming work. Further, it tightly focuses media relations on reacting to what information comes to them and not actively searching for stories and developments across campus that illustrate the CSU brand.

A more efficient approach would be to automate as much of this work as possible through the use of a universal campus calendar and content management system. Social media tools like Facebook and Twitter are also highly effective for disseminating this type of information. Focusing more on developing stories that reflect the University brand and doing so in a personalized fashion, will create content that will carry greater impact for your key audiences. Types of stories to consider include:

- highlighting faculty who have won teaching awards or honors by describing them through the eyes of their students
- human interest stories on students who have relocated to Columbus (especially from Atlanta) to attend CSU and their experiences in doing so
- alumni success stories underscoring the value of a CSU education
- “testimonials” from community leaders on the impact of the University on the economic, cultural and professional characteristics of the region

Stories like these humanize Columbus State. They are also stories that can be pitched to the media and re-purposed for direct communications--highlighted on the home page; e-mailed to major donors; pitched to trade media; and promoted through Facebook and Twitter postings. Some should be produced as short video segments, which can also be pitched to traditional media; disseminated through social media like YouTube; e-mailed to major donors and board participants; and viewed at college recruiting fairs and related events.

Take a more proactive approach to building the CSU brand. The use and re-use of content created through this office can have a major impact on how Columbus State University is perceived in the marketplace.

Student Recruiting

From all appearances, the student recruiting efforts are moving very much in the right direction. CSU enjoys excellent leadership recruiting leadership with Chip Reese and Kristin Bagley. There is a highly effective working relationship between Enrollment Services and Public Relations. And this is all complemented by Becker and Becker an excellent advertising firm in Columbus. The pieces are certainly in place for recruiting success.

The approach currently being taken is solid and it would not make sense to deviate from that in the near future. Increasing awareness in a new market like Atlanta takes time and systematic penetration is important. It will also be important to introduce new branding concepts into all collateral and advertising materials as is currently underway. Throughout, the focus should be on the characteristics of the brand discussed throughout this document, but particularly those that influence college choice. They include:

- educational quality
- personal attention from faculty
- student diversity
- career advancement
- dynamic, creative learning environment
- degree-specific advantages, especially in music, education, nursing and business

- Columbus region lifestyle and professional advantages

All recruiting materials in any form--print, Web, social media, advertising, etc.—should focus on these distinctive attributes. The more personal the medium, the more student-centric the focus should be. CSU should also tap into its student and faculty base for quotes, testimonials, video clips and print features. These features and current CSU students can become a powerful combination for recruiting students (especially) outside of the Columbus region. Given the enrollment targets for 2011 and beyond, recruiting those students will be crucial to the University's larger objectives.

Currently, the student recruiters are focusing on the northern areas of Metro Atlanta with a well-coordinated blend of face-to-face visits and targeted media buys. The north metro area of Atlanta is where the highest concentration of quality high schools resides. Schools like Walton, Alpharetta, Pope, Chattahoochee, Roswell, Lassiter and Milton are just a few of the most highly-regarded schools in Georgia. CSU should certainly make a strong push to reach out to those students, teachers, counselors and parents in that area to increase awareness.

But there is an interesting dynamic in this discussion that deserves mention--racial diversity. CSU is a uniquely diverse university with a strong balance of Caucasian and African-American students. Diversity spontaneously arose as a topic in interviews with recruiters and students. For African-American students, it is seen as a positive. But it was apparent in a number of discussions that it was not a universally appreciated characteristic. One recruiter told me that since more African-American students live near campus (rather than commuting); it gives the impression that CSU has a predominantly African-American student body, especially during late afternoon and evening hours. Others told me that African-American students tend to be more involved in student activities. Finally, one student interviewed in the research asked whether I wanted to hear, "...the other side of the story (i.e. the white perspective)" on the topic of diversity at CSU.

Race is sadly a volatile and potentially divisive issue. For students, parents, teachers and counselors, it can be a factor—for better or worse—in making a college selection. It's apparent that CSU's diversity is seen as a positive attribute among African-American students. It is not universally seen as such among majority students. It may make considerably more sense for CSU to focus Metro Atlanta recruiting efforts on high schools that have a more diverse student body, such as Grady in Midtown Atlanta,

The following is a list of Metro Atlanta High Schools with minority populations in the 35-65 percent range. These are somewhat arbitrary percentages to utilize. But they connote a somewhat racially-balanced student population and one potentially more receptive to a similar racial make-up in their college selection.

Sandy Creek High School
North Springs High School
Fayette County High School
Norcross High School
Youth Villages at Inner Harbour
Challenge Charter Academy
Devereux Ackerman Academy
Druid Hills High School
Luella High School
Johnson High School
Independence Alternative School
Griffin High School
Heritage High School

Manchester High School
Woodland High School
East Hall High School
Archer High School
Oakland Meadow School
Alcovy High School
Putnam County High School
Dacula High School
Wheeler High School
Lanier Career Academy
Duluth High School
Decatur High School
Dunwoody High School
North Cobb High School
Riverwood International Charter School
Lakeside High School
Mountain View High School
KidsPeace
Hiram High School
Lamar County Comprehensive High School
Monroe Area High School
Grayson High School
West Hall High School
Project Adventure, Inc.
Collins Hill High School
Centennial High School
Villa Rica High School
Eastside High School
Spalding High School
Paulding County High School
Sprayberry High School
Jasper County High School
Parkview High School
TEACH Charter High School
Hillgrove High School
Chestatee High School
Jackson High School
Peachtree Ridge High School
East Coweta High School
Newnan High School

High School Advisory Board

There is little question that parents, teachers and counselors exercise the greatest influence over student decisions on college selection. As such, it makes sense to target communications efforts to those important groups. One way to engage those communities and create a healthy and informative dialogue with them is to form CSU advisory boards comprised of members from these important demographics. The first steps would be to recruit a group of high school guidance counselors and teachers from the Columbus and Atlanta regions to comprise a counselor advisory board for the University. Suggested guidelines for the advisory board include:

- Focus on recruiting teachers who teach subjects that reflect CSU's core strengths—the arts, business, allied health, etc.
- Meet twice annually.
- If possible, offer a per diem payment to offset the costs of travel and overnight stays (if necessary). If people do stay over, try to engage them in a social function that showcases the City and the University.
- Have a clear purpose for each meeting and ensure that students are always involved—preferably students from their high schools.
- Make sure that you balance informative presentations with opportunities for extended feedback. Treat these sessions as ongoing focus groups in your market research efforts.

One Voice

Business as usual will not help to realize the lofty ambitions of this University. The status quo has commendably gotten CSU to where it is now. But to climb higher in awareness and prestige, Columbus State will need to become smarter, more efficient, and more effective in its marketing. The Office of Public Relations is already taking important steps in that direction through the creation of new logos, the establishment of the new URL, and the extension of their nascent efforts in Metro Atlanta student recruitment. All of that should continue.

But that office--and other communications-related offices across campus—should be turned loose on more proactive work on behalf of the University. Its ambitions cannot be met through event publicity. They will be met only by creating a very real perception of the University's ethos in the minds of its key audience. That deeply personal and relevant brand holds considerable potential. It will be important to develop that message in University publications, on the Web, in social media, in the mass and trade media, among bloggers and other influences, in video, and anywhere else the CSU name is invoked. There will never be enough money to buy that impression, so it's imperative that all of the University's PR and marketing efforts focus on crafting it.

That's not only the job of central public relations. It's the job of the entire university community. The Office of Public Relations should focus on developing the core content for the brand and individual units should draw from that content to establish the university brand in a fashion that makes sense for each individual unit. *Deeply personal and relevant* is a concept that can be beautifully and effectively woven into outreach for the performing arts and the business school; criminal justice and human biology; servant leadership and continuing education. In short, the brand is a large tent within which any individual unit should be able to find space.

The central PR office should craft and accumulate narrative, photos, graphics, and video content that embody the brand. In the process, they should consider the opportunity to re-purpose everything they do to reach all of CSU's key audiences. Compelling photography is important for the main Web page, alumni publications, student recruiting materials, and social media news releases. Effective video is appropriate for Facebook and YouTube, the Web presence, alumni presentations, and student recruiting efforts.

Individual units should contribute to and draw from this reservoir of content to capture the notion of *deeply personal and relevant* in their own unique way. Doing so is both strategically and fiscally smart, building the brand of both the University and the individual unit.

But some or many will undoubtedly balk. It is the very DNA of higher education. The Administration should support these efforts to the greatest extent possible, using the power of the purse, moral suasion,

the personnel review process, and other tools as carrots and sticks. But even that will not result in universal agreement and acceptance.

One way to enhance University-wide partnership is to create a standing committee of marketing and communications professionals from across campus. This group should meet three to four times annually and as needed to discuss data, direction, best practices, strategic priorities, and tactical successes and failures. John Lester convened a group like this to review the initial report from this research and to generate discussion on new logos and the URL. The meeting was highly productive with excellent discussion and so it makes sense to keep that framework and that momentum moving forward. The group should be chaired by John and the President should address the inaugural meeting, to emphasize the collective importance that these people have on the future success of the University.

Lead the willing. Document and measure successes and failures. Compare the effectiveness of University-aligned marketing efforts with their less strategic counterparts. Ultimately, the marketplace will determine success and increased student quality, donor contributions, name recognition, and other benchmarks will assess the efficacy of differing methods.

The Role of the President—Thought Leadership

There is no more important ambassador for any university than the president. The president is both the face and the personality of the school. The president can gain entrée where others cannot. The president is undoubtedly the most important proponent and CSU enjoys the benefits of having a president who understands and excels at marketing.

President Mescon has had a compelling and contemptuous presidency. He is a lightning rod of opinion for some on faculty and staff. But he is very highly regarded among many of CSU's key audiences and he is a strong asset that needs greater exposure. Consider this paragraph in a pithy blog (Richard Hyatt's Columbus) about Dr. Mescon's presidency:

*Mescon is at times so cocky and elite that he doesn't feel compelled to tell his own story. **Mirabeau** finally saw a list of the president's impressive accomplishments in 20 short months late last week. Why did it take so long, **Mirabeau** wonders, for CSU to tell the community about these things? **Mirabeau** might also ask why the local media hasn't been reporting these changes?*

He is an experienced academic with an authoritative business pedigree, something that gives him immediate credibility among media in business-oriented cities like Columbus and Atlanta. He should be meeting at least twice a year with the Columbus Ledger Inquirer and at least annually with the editorial board at the Atlanta Journal Constitution. He should also be pitched as a management and entrepreneur expert to the Atlanta Business Chronicle.

The President should also be maximizing his social media presence. He deserves credit for engaging in timely blogs with 11 posts thus far in 2010. That is an appropriate volume for a president with a great deal on his plate. The content and tone could use some work, however. While we expect a president to be enthusiastic about his school, an excessive use of superlatives can diminish effectiveness and sincerity. Words and phrases like "spectacular", "exceptional", "outstanding", "incredibly exciting", and "extraordinary" pepper the vocabulary. There is, however, little insight. The most successful social media sites are engaging and popular because they offer something more than corporate-speak. A bit more insight, introspection, and opinion would make Dr. Mescon's blog considerably more compelling and increase his effectiveness as the main face of the University.

It would also make sense for the President to have a Twitter account and engage the entire internal and external community through it. Suggested tweet content could include artistic, academic and athletic

events; short thoughts on notable events; listings of his appearances; and thoughts on life at Columbus State. The account would be yet another link for the University to a younger, dynamic audience.

Finally, mixing photography and video into the written narrative mix will increase the relevance and popularity of this social media content. Especially with social media, such content needn't be perfect. Nor does it require expensive equipment to execute. Indeed, with social media, less polished visual content is often seen as more sincere and effective, especially with younger audiences.

To accomplish all of this, it will be important for the President's Office and the Office of Public Relations to establish a much closer working relationship. Such a relationship would benefit both offices and the University as a whole. It will increase the amount of quality information coming out of the University; focus CSU's content on core themes and messages; increase visibility for both the University and Dr. Mescon; and ensure that the President is actively engaged in constructive, ongoing dialogues with CSU's key audiences. The latter benefit should be a primary for everything the University does with its internal and external marketing. It is those engagements, those dialogues that link an institution to the people who sustain it.

MISCELLANEOUS RECOMMENDATIONS

There are two additional recommendations that don't fall neatly into any of the above categories, so we are outlining them here for consideration.

The first is improving CSU's signage in Downtown Columbus—a task frustratingly high on John Lester's list of things to do. Despite the massive investment that Columbus State has made in the Downtown area, CSU has an underwhelming visual presence. With such a unique academic and civic partnership, it seems unfortunate that Columbus State does not enjoy a much more significant visual presence in a charming and vital city. John has been thwarted by the local signage commission in his efforts to raise the CSU profile downtown. It may be time to leverage CSU's deep community contacts for the benefit of the University. Reasoned pleas from influential friends and alumni could turn a stalled, reasonable request into concrete action. A greater Downtown presence is important for ongoing community relations, student recruiting, and internal campus pride.

A second recommendation is that the University increases its marketing efforts in the arts by possibly designating a resource specifically to that. CSU's arts programs are the most widely regarded source of excellence on the campus. Every external audience queried in the market research effort mentioned the arts and Music in particular, as a program capable of competing with any of its kind in the nation.

That kind of excellence deserves greater marketing muscle. While the University does a good job of publicizing individual events, the overall program would benefit from greater strategic and tactical marketing. That marketing should include student recruitment, outreach to the mass and trade media (especially the Atlanta Journal Constitution and other regional media outlets), thought leadership work by CSU's arts leaders; and much more robust usage of visual communications in social media environments.

CONCLUSION

This is an important time in the history of Columbus State University. It is a school with a short but solid history, one deeply rooted in its community and with high aspirations for the future. It is hoping to expand its research base, broaden its recruitment of undergraduate and graduate students, and enhance its campus life efforts as it becomes an increasingly residential community of students.

In order to realize its lofty ambitions, it will be important to sharply refine its outreach efforts. Especially in an era of fiscal limitations, merely doing the same things with either fewer or nominally similar

resources will not be sufficient. It is time to shake the status quo and become more focused and more effective in pursuit of its objectives.

Through this study and other efforts, the University is already on its way. A new, far more dynamic Web presence; a new URL that better reflects the brand; and dynamic new logos that capture the power and potential of Columbus State University are already in place. Each, in their own way, represents notable accomplishments.

Maintain the momentum while picking up the pace. Doing that requires a more integrated marketing approach, one that focuses on the most important strategic goals and re-allocates resources in support of them. Take the new CSU brand of deeply personal and relevant and express it in a multitude of ways across the campus, the region and the state.

We hope that this report provides relevant and useful ideas on how to accomplish this. It has been a pleasure researching, assessing, and compiling it. We look forward to providing whatever additional guidance and execution is necessary to make it a reality.