

## Is Image Everything?

Build and manage a strong image for your institution.

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**C**HARACTER, IT'S OFTEN BEEN said, is what you are; reputation consists of what others think you are. Likewise, institutional image represents the sum total of perceptions, which may be frequently incorrect, about the university — its educational quality, mission, value, brand, athletic teams, student life and more.



As with all products and services, perception is reality in the minds of consumers. Here are observations based on our experience that new CEOs need to factor into their decision-making and strategic planning.

### Know your institutional image.

Is it what you say it is, what donors say it is or what students, faculty, alumni and/or prospects say it is? Do your mutual perceptions agree? If not, you may be making one of the most common mistakes of decision makers: acting on incorrect or outdated assumptions. The only way to make sure that your marketing strategy and tactics are in sync with external perceptions is research. Before communicating their messages, institutions should evaluate how key stakeholders perceive them. Focus groups, exit interviews with departing staff and transferring students, alumni surveys, campaign feasibility studies and other vehicles offer ways to test and validate assumptions about the strength of the institutional image.

For new presidents, we strongly recommend comprehensive institutional reviews at the outset as a solid foundation for a strategic, long-term master plan. It's money well spent.


**Old perceptions die hard.** If your university was once a state teachers' college, for example, many constituents will still perceive you as such, even though you may have become a comprehensive institution two decades ago. Because there can be a significant gap between old perceptions and current reality, inoculate your messaging and marketing to anticipate the adjustment some stakeholders may need to make. A communications audit is one way to ensure that messaging is user-friendly to all who know you — or who think they know you.

**You are as strong as your weakest link.** Your image is most vulnerable in areas where perceived weaknesses already exist. Not all crises are created equal. Most negative press

you receive will be one- or two-day stories unless they reinforce pre-existing opinions of you. Be especially vigilant about perceptions of your academic programs. One public university we know of suffered a long-term admissions decline after scores of its nursing graduates, in a flagship program, were revealed to be among the lowest in the region.

**Keep it simple. Little things matter.** Apple's late founder and CEO Steve Jobs was known for his passion for simplicity in personal dress (he owned 100 identical black turtleneck sweaters) and in design. Jobs was famously hands-on in creating and fine-tuning all aspects of Apple's graphic identity, including its iconic logo. Part of his genius was understanding the emotional attachment that consumers place upon graphic identity — such as form, shape and color. College presidents should note this when undertaking a web or graphic redesign; there are many minefields here.

**Stay on message.** Consistency and continuity are to communications what location is to real estate. Today's busy, multitasking audiences need to hear a message often, repeated over time, for it to sink in. Further, research shows that most audiences can retain at most three core messages about a product or service within a given time period. There is an estimated 90 percent drop-off between exposure to a message and taking action on it. So repetition of a 30-second elevator core message is critical to your audience's understanding of it and remembering it.

Institutional image is a fragile entity. Though it takes years to build a strong image, it can be destroyed overnight. Presidents are tasked with the challenge of keeping its luster bright; once tarnished, it is often exceedingly difficult to restore. 

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