

# The Successful President: Getting Your College Known

By Dr. Scott D. Miller and Dr. Marylouise Fennell - *College Planning & Management*, June 2009

"With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it, nothing can succeed." When he uttered these words, President Lincoln, besieged from all sides, was in the midst of the Civil War, yet he realized that mobilizing public opinion in support of the conflict was critical to the Union's success. Effective marketing is no less vital to a college CEO.

"Doing well by doing good" has become a philanthropic mantra, but if institutions don't market their own successes, who will? Don't rely on others to tell your story. In a previous article, we emphasized the importance of knowing your institution; honing a focused self-identity; and bring in all key stakeholders, especially faculty, staff, and administrators, on board. Internal audiences are your best marketers if they know and understand your mission and objectives.

We've heard many times remarkable stories of internal constituents leading to major gifts and national recognition for a college or university. There's the modest grounds worker at a private college who, after his passing, made the national news by leaving the bulk of his \$1.6M estate to his employer of 30 years. Then, there's the 85-year old man who, upon endowing a chair in Religion at a poor Appalachian college, spoke of his unannounced visit to the camps one quiet Sunday morning and being emotionally moved by an unassuming staffer working in his office. Marketing by key stakeholders led to national media exposure in both cases.

Here are some recommendations:

- **Be strategic.** Three marketing objectives well executed are better than a dozen implemented haphazardly. Ask yourself, "What is the biggest single need in our marketplace?" Then, "What can our college do better than anyone else?" Marry the two and you have a recipe for success.

- **Repeat, repeat, repeat.** In real estate, its location, location, location. In marketing, repetition and consistency of message trumps all. In his 2006 *Messages That Stick*, author Chip Heath emphasized that compelling messages withstanding the test of time are succinct, unexpected, concise, and surprising. It's not always doing something new that counts; it's execution and consistency.

- **The medium is the message.** How often and in what format do your key constituencies prefer to receive information? While it's usually better to over- rather than under-communicate, both carry substantial risks.

- **Add value.** What activity or program, if enhanced by 20 percent, would increase results exponentially?

- **Know your institution, know your market, know your competition.** It's surprising to consultants that when we ask long-time employees to give a "business card" summary of their principal product or service, they can't do it. If you cannot deliver a crisp, compelling, 30-second "elevator message" to key audiences, don't think further about branding strategies until you can do so.

- **Do it first.** The marketing adage, "It's more important to be the first to do it than to do it the best," is anathema to the college ethos, with its participative committee structure. We are often loath to roll out a new course, major, or service until it's been talked to death. By then, the window of opportunity has often closed. This doesn't mean that we should introduce shoddy or substandard "products" into our marketplaces. It does imply that where opportunity lies, we should strike while the iron is hot, making necessary modifications and adaptations along the way.

- **Capitalize on institutional strengths.** Successful organizations and leaders build on their areas of strength while minimizing their weaknesses. What is your strongest brand? It's often more effective to add value to it rather than trying to introduce a new one.

- **Look for synergistic opportunities.** The new era of philanthropy is all about organizations proactively seeking creative ways to deliver needed goods and services. By partnering with other like-minded organizations, not only does the whole become greater than the sum of its parts, but also your institution will enhance its donor and membership base.

- Above all, **keep it simple.** Marketing need not be complicated. Basically, it exists to find and unmet need and to fulfill it. It's just that simple. Find an unfilled niche and fill it, and you will succeed.

"He who molds the public sentiment, goes deeper than he who enacts statues or pronounces decisions," President Lincoln pronounced. Our 16th President knew the priceless value of positive marketing in effecting policy change. It helped him to preserve the Union; it will help you to build your institution.

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