



# What Is a Brand?

A Guide to Defining Your Higher Ed Brand

by Deborah Maue



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What Is a Brand? by Deborah Maue , senior strategist at mStoner, Inc.

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I.

## What Is a Brand?

If you ask 10 people what a brand is, you'll get 10 different answers.

**At mStoner, we believe a brand is what you stand for in the minds of the people you're trying to reach, influence, and move to action.**

There are a few important ideas in that sentence. First, a brand is what you stand for in the minds of the people you're trying to reach, not your internal stakeholders. It matters what your external audiences – prospective students, parents, donors – think you stand for. Second, it's not just about what people think, it's about what will move them to take action. Even if your brand is universally liked, if it's not moving people to action, it's not worth much.

While people may differ in their definition of "brand," most people will agree on what a brand isn't: A brand isn't a tagline or a logo!

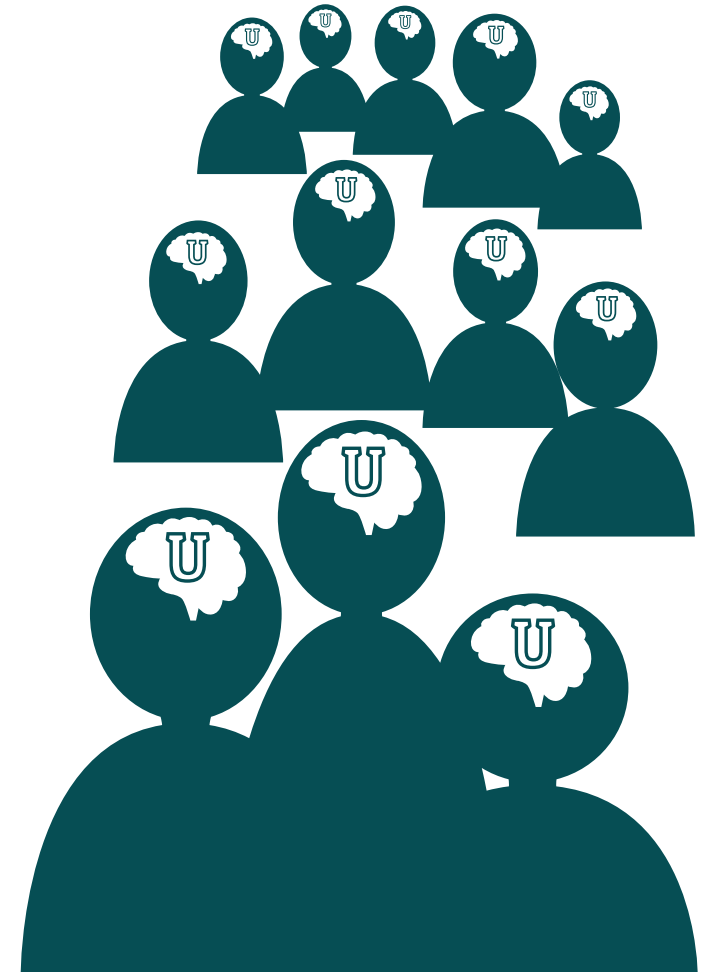
A brand strategy is not meant for external consumption. It provides internal communicators with a framework for creating messages meant for external audiences, people outside your institution itself. A tagline is part of a creative execution of the brand strategy.

While the brand can evolve, it doesn't change. A tagline can be changed when it outlives its usefulness or when it's time to emphasize other brand attributes as part of a campaign.

There is one caveat: a tagline can become part of the brand framework if people come to associate it with the brand to the point where they can't be separated. In that case, the tagline has actually become part of the brand. But it is still only one element of the brand. It is not the brand.

A logo is an easily recognizable design element or symbol, often including a name, symbol, specified colors or trademark. It is a visual representation of the brand, and therefore an important part of the brand strategy. But it is not the brand.

Many business owners and higher ed leaders get caught up in developing taglines and logos to fit their product or service without first deciding what sort of message(s) they want to deliver. The most important part of brand strategy is discovering what your brand actually is and shaping messages to address misperceptions or emphasize strengths.



## II.

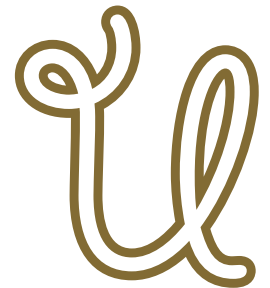
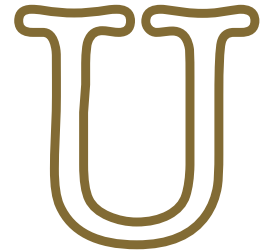
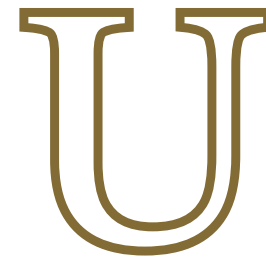
### You Already Have a Brand

Unless you just opened your doors, you already have a brand. The question is whether you have a brand in spite of yourself, or as a result of an intentional process to understand and shape it.

No matter how you look at it, higher education brand strategy is a messy process. For a university with different colleges, schools and divisions, bringing everyone together under one brand umbrella can be a daunting task. For a small liberal arts college, agreeing to a unified brand strategy can be a frustrating and messy undertaking.

If it's so difficult, why do it? Institutions with unique and differentiated brands are better positioned to withstand the challenging dynamics of the higher ed marketplace.

A strong brand that is carefully tended and evolved differentiates your institution from its competitors, helps people understand the value of what your institution provides, and creates an emotional connection with your key audiences.



### III.

## The Elements of Brand Strategy

There is no universal list of elements included in a brand strategy project. The list differs depending on the objectives of the institution and the budget for the project.

At minimum, a brand strategy project includes **market research** among key external audiences and the development of **brand positioning**. **Market research** can be qualitative (focus groups, one-on-one interviews) or quantitative (surveys among a representative sample). There is no set audience list that should be included in the research, but it's important to talk to members of the key audiences you're trying to reach. **Brand positioning** is an internal document that defines the brand promise - the promise the institution is making to the world about what it's going to be and do. It usually includes a positioning statement, brand attributes, and key messages for audience segments.

A brand strategy project can also include **brand architecture** and **logo development** to determine the relationship between the parent (institutional) brand and the sub-brands (colleges, divisions, centers and institutes), and how the relationship will be visually executed.

Internal roll-out of the brand strategy is critical for success, so institutions doing a brand strategy project often include a **brand style guide**, which provides guidelines for how the brand will be represented visually and how the brand will be used. If a formal brand style guide is not developed, the brand strategy

project should include an internal roll-out plan to educate internal communications staff about how to communicate the brand to their respective key audiences.

A brand strategy project is only as good as its implementation. Implementation of a new brand strategy often requires an updated **strategic marketing plan** to determine how the brand will be rolled out to external audiences. This plan includes determining the media that will be used for the launch, which can include a website relaunch, social media campaign, advertising campaign, email campaign, print executions, and

video. It also includes the key content strategies that will be used across each media element. The strategic marketing plan may include staffing, organizational design, and process recommendations to ensure the marketing plan can be well executed.

Finally, a brand strategy project can include the translation of the brand into an external **creative campaign** executed across one or multiple media elements, as determined by the strategic marketing plan. Creative execution generally includes the development of a campaign theme or idea, a tagline, and specific executions for each of the different media elements.



## IV.

# Why Is Brand Strategy at a University So Challenging?

Branding a university or college is different than — and harder than — branding a consumer product or business.

### 1. Most of the brand value comes from experience.

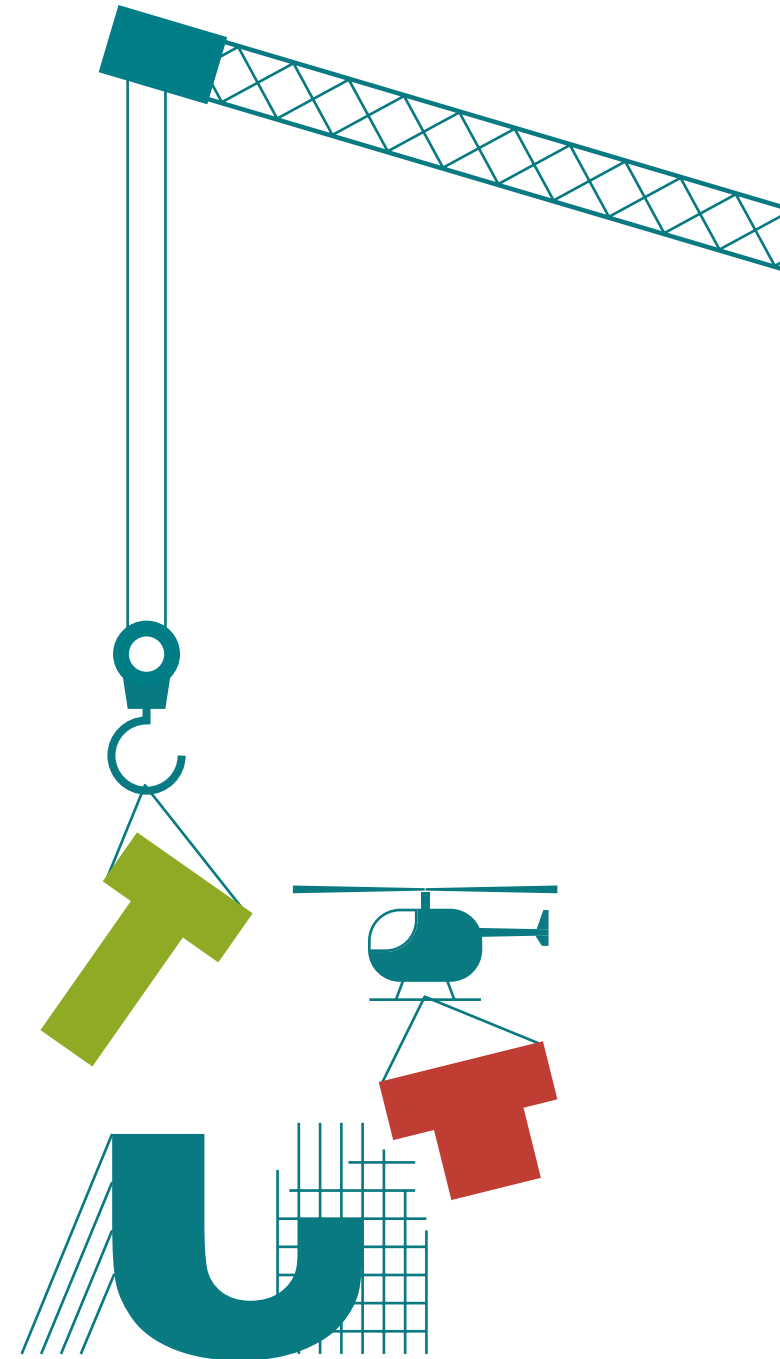
Unlike branding a new product line, a university's brand isn't something you choose one day. It's largely a result of the experiences people have with it over time. Marketing messages can build and reinforce the university's brand, but the way people think about your brand will always be more about what you do than what you say.

### 2. Institutions interact with many different audiences that want and expect many different things.

A college or university engages in many different businesses. Even the "product" it offers is different, depending on your perspective. To prospective students, the "product" is the degree. To employers, the "product" is the graduates the school produces.

Take it a step further, and think about the reasons different people interact with the institution.

- Students want to get a good job (or to be accepted to a good graduate school), but they also want to know that they will have a great experience — in and out of the classroom.
- Parents want to know that their investment will be worth it, but also that their children will be safe and happy.
- Alumni want to know the value of their degree will increase, and that the institution will help them with career networking.
- Donors want to know their money is appreciated and will be spent wisely.
- Employers want to know that graduates will be prepared to contribute on the job.



## IV.

# Why Is Brand Strategy at a University So Challenging?

Further complicating matters is the fact that these audiences aren't discrete and can't be completely isolated in marketing. For example, potential donors see prospective student advertising. Parents are also employers and, often, prospective students, themselves. All the more reason that an integrated messaging strategy – shared across all communicators – is essential for successful brand implementation.

### **3. Responsibility for communicating to those different audiences is often distributed across people in different divisions of the institution.**

Enrollment Management is responsible for communicating to prospective students. Student Affairs is responsible for communicating to current students. Alumni Relations is responsible for alumni affiliation and alumni fundraising. Government Relations is responsible for relationships with lawmakers. Each of these groups has different objectives and brings a unique perspective to the task of developing a cohesive brand message.

Successful implementation of an integrated brand requires agreement, commitment, and cooperation from all of these people. Reaching this agreement can be difficult in higher education, where there are few incentives and opportunities for cross-divisional collaboration.

### **4. Brand strategy requires not being all things to all people.**

Brand strategy requires defining what you are. And by saying, "This is what we are," you're also saying, "This is what we're not." Making this statement is difficult and scary, because you may turn away some people. But it's better to be clear about what you are, so your "right-fit" students will find you more easily. (The "bad fit" students eventually figure it out anyway).

### **5. Everyone feels personally responsible for the brand.**

A brand strategy implementation can be a lightning rod for attention from lots of different audiences, and not in a good way. People – including alumni and current students – feel personally responsible for the way their institution is portrayed, and can be very vocal in their opposition to a brand strategy they don't personally like.

### **6. It can take a long time to see results of a brand strategy project.**

Brand perceptions change slowly. It can be several years before you can measure a significant effect on brand awareness and perceptions.

## V.

# The Biggest Challenges and How to Manage Them

Every brand strategy project is unique; however, there are some common challenges institutions often face when developing or implementing a new brand framework. Here are six:

### 1. Managing scope.

Scope creep is a common problem in higher education, because there are usually many stakeholders involved in big, important projects. Add the ambiguity of what's included in a brand strategy project, and it's easy for projects to quickly expand beyond their original scope. To manage scope creep,

- Make sure the objectives and the scope are defined and agreed upon by the full team up-front and in writing. Refer back to the written agreement when a team member tries to add something outside of scope; and,
- Manage the project in phases.

The first phase includes what was agreed to in the written document. Additional work can be added in subsequent phases.

### 2. Managing the process.

With many divisions and departments represented, a brand strategy project can be a bit like herding cats. It's difficult to get everyone in a room at the same time, which means different team members have different levels of project understanding at any given time. The solutions?

- Clarify the rules of engagement. Team members who can't attend scheduled meetings are responsible for getting up-to-speed, and are not permitted to send other "players" in their place; and,
- Publish detailed meeting notes with key agreements after each meeting so that each team member has a shared understanding.

### 3. Getting everyone to agree.

Representatives from different divisions and departments have different viewpoints, because they represent different audiences with different goals and perspectives. These differences highlight why external research is critical to the success of a brand strategy project. Research moves the conversation away from "I think/you think" to what your important audiences think by minimizing the influence of personal opinion and maximizing the use of cold, hard data (and qualitative research qualifies as data - a meaty quote is as powerful as a statistic). In addition, consider engaging a facilitator for key team meetings. A neutral facilitator can make sure that everyone's point of view is heard, clarify opinions, and help the group get to a decision more quickly. Finally, and most important, identify the decision-maker for the brand strategy upfront and make sure the team knows who that person is.

### 4. Managing the grumblers.

We've heard the loud grumbling from people (usually alumni and current students) who are unhappy about the latest brand roll-out. They don't like the logo. They don't like the tagline. The reason? People feel ownership over an institution. They want it to continue to thrive. And they don't like anything that they see as a threat.



Use the research. Faculty and alumni tend to be the most vocal. It's unlikely the grumblers will ever be completely silenced, but



# V.

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there are some ways to manage the grumbling so it doesn't get out of control. First, make sure the audiences most likely to grumble are included as part of the market research plan. Get their perspective up-front. Second, make sure the people responsible for the grumblers (Alumni Relations, Student Affairs, Athletics, Academic Deans) are represented on the brand strategy team. In the end, if you've developed a unique and differentiated brand positioning based on solid market research, and agreed to by a cross-divisional and department team, stick to your guns and wait for the grumbling to blow over.

### 5. Implementing the brand across campus.

Because communications responsibilities are distributed across departments and divisions, fully implementing a new brand is a long process that requires much training, influencing, and patience. The likelihood is that you'll never get 100 percent implementation. There will always be people who don't comply with the brand. The key is picking your battles. Prioritize audiences and activities. Decide which ones really matter and let the rest go.

### 6. Translating the brand into a compelling external campaign.

A brand may be unique and compelling, but effectively communicating your brand to your key audiences requires you to have a great creative execution. Make sure your campaign is distinctive, memorable, and makes an emotional connection with the audience. Make sure your brand strategy gets beyond the features you provide and tells the audience the benefits your institution provides to them.

We would love to talk with you about your brand and help you develop an approach to brand strategy.

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