

Pennsylvania State University:
An IMC Strategic Recommendations Document

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Introduction

Pennsylvania State University is a co-educational public institution located in University Park, Pennsylvania. Affably known as Penn State, the university's flagship campus enrolls roughly 45,000 undergraduate and graduate students, with engineering being the most popular course of study ("Undergraduate and Graduate/First Professional Fall Enrollment 2011 and 2012," n.d.). Penn State's 2012–2013 Academic Year operating budget is estimated at approximately \$4.3 billion ("Penn State Budget Primer," n.d.).

Areas of Strength

In light of the recent sexual abuse scandal, the university has ushered in an era of unprecedented impartiality. In accordance with new president Rodney Erickson's five promises to the Penn State community ("Goals and Initiatives," n.d.), emphasis is rightly concentrated on developing a corporate culture that values honesty and virtue. Various interviews with the news media, including but not limited to the July 28, 2012 episode of *Face the Nation* with television journalist Bob Schieffer, have supported Erickson's willingness to cooperate with the victims, the authorities, and the public during the ongoing investigation into the scandal. Despite criticism of Erickson's acceptance of the NCAA sanctions by some members of the board of trustees—quite simply suggesting the president "rolled over" too easy—and others within the university community, Erickson remains committed to his choice that allows the university to "move forward" ("Penn State President on NCAA Sanctions," 2012).

Most effective in developing this culture, perhaps, is president Erickson's ability to recognize Penn State's football program as being "not sufficiently wrapped into the rest of the

university” (“Penn State President on NCAA Sanctions,” 2012). In purging the university’s long-standing reputation as a football school, Erickson is unrelenting in his advocacy for wholesale reform. Not only is he the personal embodiment of his own five promises, subscribing to the notions of institutional transparency and personal moral obligation, but he is also its steadfast spokesperson. By enlisting members of the university community as brand ambassadors of this new, egalitarian identity, Erickson is cementing future positive brand attitude.

Instead of relying solely on earned media or third-party press, which is often only practical for communicating with the larger public, Erickson has smartly devised more personal tactics for reaching students, alumni, and parents in establishing this much-needed transition. Most notable of these efforts is the month-old “Faces of Penn State” campaign, which recognizes the individual accomplishments of members of the university community in the areas of research, scholarship, and social service. The campaign, conducted via a nomination process, encourages active stakeholder participation. Another attempt at humanizing the Penn State experience is evident in Erickson’s personal online video announcements to the university community (“Videos,” n.d.), in which the viewer is addressed as the imagined sole recipient of his message. Finally, the Fall 2012 New Student Convocation, embracing “a theme of academics, responsibility; of citizenship, of ethics, of values” (Snyder, 2012), reiterates Erickson’s five-pronged edict—the guiding principles for the university.

Opportunities for Improvement

From a holistic IMC standpoint, Penn State is underutilizing important tools and resources for creating a synergistic campaign. Much of the university’s recent involvement in communications planning, though effective, is nothing more than an elaborate public relations

response. To move beyond its IMC infancy and to build upon the foundation already laid, the execution of Penn State's message, or lack thereof, needs to be more closely examined.

The university's use of social media is still undefined and superficial. The lack of engagement among its users, beyond the frequent Facebook announcements pertaining to football games, highlights an inconsistent use of the medium as it corresponds to the university's overarching message. When issues important to the university's culture are discussed, they are expressed as an objective statement. This method of hard-news disclosure discourages dialogue among the university community—neglecting a primary objective of social media.

Another area in need of improvement is the university's site structure, which is difficult to navigate, making access to the current campaigns nearly impossible from a browsing perspective. In fact, even when a search engine is used the results that populate are misleading or inaccurate. Denise Bortree, an Assistant Professor of Communication at Penn State, used the hashtag "facesofpsu" to tweet her advice: "Lesson for campaign dev: When you choose the name for your campaign, think about what will come up when its googled #facesofpsu need SEO" (@dbortree, 2012).

Recommended Action

Penn State must use transparency in all media. Communication needs to exhibit an open and lively exchange of ideas from the President down to the faculty down to the students, and including trustees and executive-level administrators. A corporate culture that values honesty and virtue must be emphasized in accordance with President Erickson's five promises to the Penn State community. More than just a public relations campaign, however, these goals and initiatives must transcend traditional earned media and permeate owned and paid media. The Office of the President would do well to utilize social media via the creation of Facebook and

Twitter accounts to encourage a dialogue with students and younger audiences. A blog would be another useful tool in breaking down the bureaucratic barriers and cultivating a homegrown, humanized perspective. These options for communicating the goals and initiatives of the university do not currently exist. A culture of positive perception and progress needs to pervade all senses of the community—it's more than just one individual's effort, it's a campus-wide commitment: "We are Penn State."

Penn State must recognize and appeal to all target audiences. Transparency needs to extend beyond a university's good name to all affiliated individuals. Penn State, as with any college or university, must appeal to a variety of buyer personas including but not limited to alumni, current and prospective students, and invested parents. The effects of the scandal on the university's reputation, while collectively an issue of concern, needs to be viewed, treated, and applied to each of these lenses in context. Individual landing pages for each of these buyer personas might spotlight President Erickson's five promises to the Penn State community with some text and an accompanying link. Naturally, the concept of change and building an even better university needs to be sustained at all levels and touch points during admission, annual giving, and important university-sponsored events. Information on the university's undertakings need to be readily accessible and catered to each unique individual in accordance with their interests in the university. Content must be crafted with these particular concerns in mind.

Penn State must re-brand to create brand awareness and positive brand attitude. Brand awareness and brand attitude needs to step beyond Penn State's storied football program and its successive dismantling. The "Faces of Penn State" campaign is a great example of the university's re-branding initiative. Although the message—the focus on Penn State as a great academic, research, and social service institution—is not exactly the same as the president's, it

does work in tandem to promote the university's mission in light of his core values (a clear indication of IMC in action). The level of transparency is echoed here in the unveiling, on multiple occasions and across multiple disciplines, of great individual achievements. The success of these individuals is attributed to the university at large via a strong organic connection—a sponsorship of sorts. The campaign is an effective technique employed by the university to deflect the negative attention fostered by the scandal by instead providing a series of positive, uplifting anecdotes that culminate in a very favorable narrative.

The one concern of this campaign, however, is its limited scope. The chosen “faces” may not be an appropriate enough sampling for a school of this size. Also, the very nature of the nomination process restricts the inclusion of other notable individuals. Though the nomination process offers a level of interactivity with the university community, it has an eventual expiration date. More “faces” need to be advertised on a regular, consistent basis. These “faces” need to be visible from all of the appropriate landing pages and on the home page itself to better mold public and stakeholder perception. The tact and delicacy with which the campaign has been employed to date—including very little earned media considering the impact of the scandal—is simply not convincing enough to affect an altering of brand awareness or attitude.

Conclusion

Although Penn State's initial IMC efforts have focused solely on public relations as a result of the sexual abuse scandal, elements of its “Faces of Penn State” campaign can be utilized in a broader sense. Social media, as a tool for dialogue, is an integral component for enhancing the university's objective of transparency. Content at the site level that reflects each of Penn State's target audiences will aid in the formation of brand awareness and positive brand attitude.

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