

Attention Grabbers

In a crowded market where all competitors are offering similar products, it's difficult for any one organization to break through the clutter and grab the attention of its target market. This is particularly true for business schools, which face local and global competition from other institutions all striving to offer excellence in management education. To engage the interest of potential candidates, business schools must craft ad campaigns and branding promotions that are unique and memorable.

Easier said than done, of course, but a handful of schools have managed to make a remarkable impact with creative, sometimes controversial, approaches to marketing their programs. Utilizing every medium from billboards to the Internet, the four schools profiled here have found ways to make students and stakeholders stop in their tracks and think hard about the advantages of a business education.

Four very different marketing and branding ideas focus a spotlight on management education.

by Sharon Shinn

Making It Real

It's not often that business school ads rile the media and whip up controversy. But that's what happened when Arizona State University's W.P. Carey School of Business launched its "Get a real MBA!" campaign last year.

The goal was to let local MBA candidates know that the Carey School was "the only comprehensive accredited business school in the metropolitan Phoenix area," says Craig Smith, director of marketing and communications. Thunderbird, which is also located near Phoenix, focuses on international programs, so it was not considered a true competitor; University of Southern California and University of Los Angeles were considered too far away to appeal to candidates who didn't want to leave the city.

Of course, the University of Phoenix is right in town—and virtually across the street from one of the billboards purchased for the "Get a Real MBA!" campaign. It was quickly clear that many Phoenix residents viewed the new slogan as a direct assault on the for-profit school.

"It created quite a stir," says Smith. "I was interviewed on television. There were editorials in the paper. So temporarily the campaign became about 'us versus them,' which wasn't where we wanted to go. Eventually we relocated the billboard to avoid that one-on-one comparison."

According to Smith, the basic message of the whole campaign was to encourage prospective students to consider what defines a "real" MBA, whether it's delivered online or in a classroom. That required first defining the term internally. ASU administrators hammered out a three-part answer: thought leadership, as demonstrated by Ph.D. professors and ongoing research; alumni networking, as represented by the Carey School's more than 50,000 alums; and career advancement, as exemplified by the school's nationally ranked career placement center.



“We have major signage at the airport over the escalators leading to baggage claim in that terminal. That space has been a primary driver for this campaign, because everyone coming in and out of Phoenix sees it.”

—Craig Smith, W.P. Carey School of Business director of marketing and communications



MBA students from ASU pose before one of the mobile billboards advertising the school's programs.

Ads in the “real MBA” campaign were placed on billboards, mobile billboards, radio stations, and airport signs. Because the school was recruiting grad students, it looked at the behavior patterns of 25-to-44-year-olds in the Phoenix area. Since the majority of them work full-time and have a substantial commute, the school purchased billboard ads on major traffic routes. Many of them also travel frequently through Sky Harbor International Airport—usually through the Southwest/America West terminal.

“We have major signage at the airport over the escalators leading to baggage claim in that terminal,” says Smith. “That space has been a primary driver for this campaign, because everyone coming in and out of Phoenix sees it.”

While the school hasn’t specifically tracked how the ad campaign has translated into new students, Smith says the Carey School’s MBA programs were up both in applications and enrollments for 2005. However, he is quick to point out that the increase was driven by many factors, including a new dean, a new director of admissions, 12 new faculty, and new features on the school’s Web site. Smith believes that enrollments in the Ph.D. program were also helped by the fact that Edward Prescott, W.P. Carey Chair of Economics at the school, won a Nobel Prize in economics in 2004. “We had a good year, but a lot goes into it,” Smith says.

Nonetheless, the “real MBA” campaign was successful enough that school officials decided to continue using it,

with some modifications. The first wave of the campaign had raised awareness of ASU and its MBA programs. In the next phase, new ads asked and answered a key question. “What makes a real MBA? Knowledge”—such as that provided by faculty research and the Knowledge@WPCarey Web site. The ads also explained that the “real” in “real MBA” was an acronym for *rigorous, effective, applied, and lifelong*.

Smith expects a third stage of the campaign to unroll later. “That one will probably remind people about our strengths in career advancement and networking,” he says.

Previous ad campaigns rarely lasted longer than one recruiting cycle, but Smith expects the “real MBA” slogan to be around for the

foreseeable future. “The feeling is that this one has been really effective, as far as awareness, so we’re not rushing to change it,” he says. “It’s so hard for a business school to create a campaign that gets noticed. If people are sick of this, which I don’t think they are, that means they’re aware of it, and that’s a major step forward for a school within a university.”

Schools considering marketing ideas that might be similarly controversial first should make sure they have top-down support, says Smith. Dean Robert E. Mittelstaedt Jr. “stood by this campaign when people were starting to complain, and that held everything together,” Smith says. “I think, to do a campaign like this, we had to have a dean who was aggressive in his approach and his understanding of what marketing could do.”

Second, to make such a campaign successful, b-schools need original ideas. “If you don’t have the ideas internally, invite agencies in to pitch them,” Smith recommends. “Your ad doesn’t have to be malicious or really aggressive to get noticed. It can be creative. It can play off something different about your school.

“Then, once you get something good, tweak it. Don’t change it just for the sake of changing,” he adds. “If you’ve got something that works, go with it. Those ideas are few and far between.”

DR. GEORGE P. TSETSEKOS, DEAN

DREXEL UNIVERSITY'S LEBOW COLLEGE OF BUSINESS ANNOUNCES THE OPENING OF THE

LEBOW COLLEGE OF BUSINESS CENTER FOR CORPORATE GOVERNANCE

HONORING CHRISTOPHER '51 AND MARY STRATAKIS **FEATURING** MICHAEL D. CAPELLAS, HON. 2001, CEO, MCI INCORPORATED **INTRODUCING** DR. RALPH WALKLING, STRATAKIS CHAIR IN CORPORATE GOVERNANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, LEBOW COLLEGE OF BUSINESS CENTER FOR CORPORATE GOVERNANCE



MCI CHIEF, MICHAEL CAPELLAS TELLS MCI STORY AT LEBOW CENTER FOR CORPORATE GOVERNANCE LAUNCH

"There was an accounting restatement which was over \$10 billion dollars, which one could not refer to as: 'We have a little accounting problem'," Capellas (above) quipped at the debut event for Drexel University's LeBow College of Business Center for Corporate Governance as he related issues that led him to instill a culture of accountability, honesty and customer service to rebuild MCI, then known as WorldCom after a \$40 billion bankruptcy.

The Center for Corporate Governance grew out of a decision by Drexel 1951 graduate, prominent New York attorney Christopher Stratakis and his wife Mary (top, left, shown at center), to endow the Christopher and Mary Stratakis Chair in Corporate Governance and Accountability. "By establishing this chair we could begin a trend in America's academia to place more emphasis on teaching our students morality, forthrightness and honesty in business transactions," Stratakis said.

Dr. Ralph Walkling (top, shown at far left), was appointed the first Stratakis Chair. Walkling is internationally known for his research and his ability to clearly communicate financial concepts.

"Drexel continues to be at the forefront in the examination of corporate governance issues," said Drexel President Constantine Papadakis (top, right). The University was the first to voluntarily adopt the best practices of the Sarbanes-Oxley act for its own governance, going well beyond what the law requires of nonprofit institutions.

"Through the Center for Corporate Governance, we will continue to address important issues and share insights that will benefit our students and the business community," said George Tsetsekos, dean (above).

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“Hits to our Web site shoot up when these commercials are on the air.”

—David Lane, London Business School communication director

Broadcasting the Brand

TV viewers in Europe and Asia who watch business programs on CNN have had ample opportunity to view London Business School in the light of a global thought leader. For the past two-and-a-half years, the school has partnered with the network to air a series of 45-second commercials featuring faculty members discussing critical business issues. The commercials don't sell the school's programs or degrees, but rather brand it as a repository of knowledge, insight, and global perspective.

Both organizations have benefited greatly from the partnership. London Business School gets high visibility on prime-time business-oriented programs with commercials that CNN has produced; the spots are shown on CNN feeds in the U.K., Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. In return, CNN is retained as the sponsor for key events at London Business School, and CNN-sponsored plasma television screens show the network's programs all around campus.

The key objective for the ad campaign is promoting brand awareness, not marketing to potential students, says David Lane, communication director for the school. “Obviously there's a very fine line between the two,” he says. “If some parties say, ‘I applied to London Business School because I saw your ad,’ so much the better. But the pieces are really about positioning.”

After deciding to do the campaign, school administrators debated what to promote in the thirty seconds that would be available by the time the logo and the tagline were added to open and close each commercial. “We could have showcased

our MBA program, but we decided to focus on our faculty and our thought leadership,” says Lane. “The challenge then became, how can faculty members distill their work into 30 seconds in a compelling, memorable, and intelligible way?”

Since the campaign began, the school has produced five commercials with five professors. The goal was to provide a mix of male and female faculty from diverse parts of the world, some offering more general business advice and others speaking on much more specific topics. For instance, the newest commercial, which was added to the rotation last fall, features organizational behavior professor Rob Goffee talking on the topic of leadership. “Why should anybody be led by you?” is his opening question.

“That's a really good hook for a 30-second ad,” says Lane. “It's totally comprehensible to any CNN viewer. Goffee spends the next 20 seconds answering the question.”

Finance professor Elroy Dimson offers a much more targeted ad that looks at how the stock market compares to other investments over the long haul. His segment is a reminder to the viewing public that London Business School has a strong financial program.

Going by informal input, says Lane, response to the commercials has been highly positive. “We're not able to see a direct causal link between these ads and how applications have been affected,” he says. “However, hits to our Web site shoot up when these commercials are on the air. The anecdotal evidence from the media, faculty, and prospective students is very rich. Our current students are very positive because they feel the campaign will increase their own brand worth.”

Television is an incredible medium for conveying the notion that a product or an institution is a major player, Lane says. “If you're earnest enough and ambitious enough—if you want to do something on an inter-

national basis—then people are comforted and affirmed by the fact that they see you on TV,” he believes. “They say, ‘This must be a serious school, a serious brand.’”

Lane expects that the school will continue running the current ads and creating new ones over time. All the previous ads are

CNN runs commercials for the London Business School in the U.K., Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa.





Fairness is what justice really is.

—Potter Stewart
Associate Justice, U.S. Supreme Court

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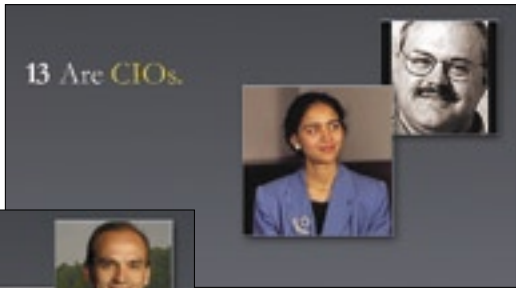
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The University of Rochester delivered a minimovie about the school straight to the inboxes of alumni.



still relevant, he notes, and can be viewed at www.London.edu/CNNads.html. “And there’s always new faculty queuing up to say, ‘Oh, yes, I’d be happy to be a media star.’”

Schools that might want to adopt similar campaigns should pick media outlets with which they can build a sense of trust—and that can offer a mutually advantageous relationship, says Lane. “Clearly, for CNN it’s fantastic to be associated with a brand like London Business School, and for London Business School it’s fantastic to be associated with a brand like CNN,” he says.

Administrators also should keep in mind that “the key to brand promotion is differentiation,” says Lane. “In general, business schools need to work harder at answering the question, ‘How are *we* different?’” London Business School has answered that question on international television—and plans to continue answering it in just that fashion for the foreseeable future.

Playing on a Screen Near You

In June 2004, alumni of the Simon Graduate School of Business Administration at the University of Rochester in New York received e-mails from their alma mater that invited them to view a “Web-mercial” about the school. The smartly produced two-minute movie showed how the Simon School prepares its students for leadership positions through small classes, personal attention, and nationally ranked programs. The video offered a collage of portraits of some of the school’s most prominent graduates, including 146 CEOs, 105 CFOs, 41 COOs, 66 professors, and five deans.

The minimovie ended by offering alums a chance to click on an online “donate now” button. By the end of the fund-

ing cycle 30 days later, money had poured into the school as a response to the e-mail ad.

“As a professional school, we find that one of our biggest development challenges is that students aren’t here long enough to develop the same connection with the school they might if they were undergrads,” says Dawn McWilliams, executive director of marketing and communications. “This is a wonderful way to show people what’s happening here and ask for money so we can continue these great programs and they can continue to have pride in the school.”

The company that produced the video was one McWilliams had worked with on other projects, so she was confident the staff knew the school and could produce the video in a relatively short timeframe. Because the video actually calculates numbers and names names, McWilliams was thorough about making sure it was accurate.

“We physically ran our alumni database to search for job titles, and I counted them so I could defend the numbers if I had to,” she says. “The pictures we show are really those people, and we contacted them to get their permission. We have so many more alumni with top titles now, so when we update the video, the numbers will go up.”

And the process of updating the video began almost as soon as the first one was e-mailed. Keeping most of the commercial the same and merely retooling the opening and closing segments, the school was able to create two new versions of the video. One was aimed at students who were considering applying to Rochester. The tagline was “How can you be one of these leaders?” and the click-now button took them to the school’s admissions page. The other one was designed for corporate recruiters.



“No actual administrators were harmed in the making of this video.”

—Maria Graham O’Brien, Columbia Business School director of public affairs

Revamping was important, says McWilliams, “because we didn’t want to waste the energy, money, time, and coolness of the original video.” A variation of the same message was also planned for the school’s 2005 Christmas card. She expects to edit and re-use the video at least one more time.

For a project like this to be successful for other schools, she says, it first must have a compelling message. The Simon School focused on its ability to turn out leaders. Second, she cautions, the video must be relatively brief.

“We had a tendency to keep wanting to add on,” she says. “Our vendor told us, ‘No more than two minutes, or you’ll lose your viewers.’ The key was that I could watch it over and over and not get bored.”

Three variations of the Web-mercial can be seen online. The fund-raising version can be found online at www.simon.rochester.edu/webmercial/default.htm, the one for corporate recruiters at www.simon.rochester.edu/webmercial/cmc, and the one for admissions at www.simon.rochester.edu/webmercial/adm.

Stealth Marketing

Columbia Business School dean Glenn Hubbard never made a rap video about the financial world, but if you follow certain links to the school’s Web site, you’ll come across footage that might make you think he did. The hilarious performance, presented like an MTV video under Hubbard’s name, was actually a student skit offered up last April at the business school’s spring Follies event. It has quickly gained notoriety throughout the business school community—and added a little mischief to Columbia’s reputation.


While the school has not attempted to capitalize on the video in any marketing effort, administrators have no objection to the message it sends out, says Maria Graham

O’Brien, director of public affairs for the New York City-based school. “Clearly, you only produce that kind of video if you feel really comfortable with the administration. We think it shows that our students are witty, they’re having a good time, and they have strong relationships with the staff. We haven’t tried to promote it, but we’re happy for it to be an ambassador for the school,” she says.

The student Follies are held every semester right before finals and frequently include skits featuring parodies of faculty and staff. Occasionally faculty members participate in the “Saturday Night Live”-style skits, says O’Brien—for instance, one professor plays with the band offering music at the revue. But while the rap performance included mock appearances by Hubbard and a few other staff members, she says, “No actual administrators were harmed in the making of this video.”

The video can be viewed online at www0.gsb.columbia.edu/students/organizations/follies/index_files/Dean%20Dean%20Baby.wmv. Columbia officials haven’t tracked whether it has had any impact on the school’s image or its student recruitment, but O’Brien acknowledges that as a “guerrilla” marketing tool, it might have had some effect. Certainly it presents the school as a place where it might be a lot of fun to learn about business.

Medium and Message

Every business school wants to get noticed. The trick is for schools to identify their target markets, find the best medium for reaching that audience, boil down the message they want to send, and craft an ad that resonates. It’s certainly not an easy task but, as these schools have proved, it can be accomplished when schools draw on their creativity and insight to grab attention. 

A fake rap video has students from Columbia Business School dressing up as the dean.

