

Targeting the Market

Every business school must develop an identity that differentiates it from competitors, as well as formulate strategies to attract students to its programs. Often, these tasks require the school to run focus groups and administer surveys to discover how the program is perceived and who might be interested in attending it—and who might not—and why.

Recently two very different schools set out to

refine their own images and fine-tune their student bases. The College of Business Administration at Florida International University developed a promotion that capitalized on its reputation as a place for mavericks while targeting a young, professional demographic. The Sloan School of Management at Massachusetts Institute of Technology isolated the reasons that its female population was so low and embarked on a comprehensive campaign to sharply increase the numbers of women in its MBA program. Both initiatives succeeded at two levels: They not only drove up student interest, they helped the schools clarify how they wanted to present themselves to the world.

Two schools find fresh approaches for reaching the students they want.





Uncommon Campaign

Florida International University launches a fun branding initiative to reach technologically literate young professionals considering MBAs.

by Luis Casas

Developing a recognizable brand in a crowded, competitive market is a key challenge for business schools everywhere. At the College of Business Administration at Florida International University in Miami, we faced that problem a few years ago as the school strove to differentiate itself from the ten other state universities in Florida, as well as educational institutions in the greater metropolitan area.

FIU has positioned itself as a young, diverse, and growing school that offers great value for the price. These qualities put us in direct contrast to our two key local competitors for MBA students, both private schools. Because we have more than 38,000 students, FIU is Miami's largest institution of higher education—and the College of Business Administration is FIU's largest professional college.

A few years ago, what we lacked was a strong, coherent, easily identifiable brand that would help make FIU's College of Business Administration the institution of choice among many of Miami's MBA hopefuls. The situation was complicated by the fact that we were associated with several names—including the Alvah H. Chapman Jr. Graduate School of Business, the R. Kirk Landon Undergraduate School of Business, Florida International University, and FIU. We needed to determine who we were, who we wanted to reach, and what kind of promotional campaign we could design that would help us attract our target market.

Crafting an Identity

To construct and promote a new identity for the school, we began working with advertising agency Alma DDB. The agency conducted interviews and focus groups with current and prospective MBA students, as well as those who had elected to go elsewhere, to discover their perceptions of our school and our competitors.

Among the questions posed to focus groups were: What schools did you consider, and how much research did you do when weighing your options? Which of these factors were important in helping you decide where to go: price, prestige, perceived quality, location, diversity of student body? How much was your decision influenced by others?

The agency discovered that our key identity was “FIU Business,” which broadly identified both the university and the business school. They also found that our target market should be young professionals between the ages of 25 and 30 who had earned undergraduate degrees and now lived and worked in South Florida. We also learned that people saw FIU as a place for mavericks, a place for independent thinkers interested in rich discussions.

That revelation led us directly to the development of the Uncommon Thinkers campaign, which targeted people who make their own decisions, don't necessarily follow the crowd, and enjoy living in a diverse international city like Miami. The underlying message is that these kinds of people see the opportunities that lie beyond obstacles, challenge conventional wisdom to solve issues from a novel perspective, and put together apparently unrelated pieces of information to come up with creative solutions to business problems.

The campaign not only speaks to current and prospective students, but to alumni, faculty, staff, and administrators. And the very fact that we have identified ourselves as “uncommon thinkers” has raised the bar on everything else we want to do.

Getting the Word Out

Once we adopted the tagline of Uncommon Thinkers, we launched a two-pronged, 60-day branding campaign in spring 2007. The campaign was comprehensive, comprising public display ads, print ads, social networking messages, and local promotions.

Some of the efforts were directed generally at the population of South Florida. We purchased outdoor ads on buses and bus shelters, as well as a large billboard on a main highway. We also advertised in *The Miami Herald* through printed inserts and small sticky notes attached to the front page. These visual components featured blue-and-white graphics that incorporated the question “Are you an uncommon thinker?” and the attention-getting device of a block of upside-down text. They also included the silhouette of a person who was clearly pondering an idea.

We wanted it to be obvious that this was an *active* thinker, not someone who was just thinking philosophically. So we settled on having the character appear to be mulling over a thought while working at an open laptop.

Print ads were supplemented with radio commercials that sponsored traffic reports. These fairly straightforward spots asked the teaser question, “Are you an uncommon thinker? Find out at uncommonthinkers.com.”

A second part of the campaign specifically targeted young professionals. We advertised on Facebook and placed print ads in *The New Times*, a weekly local publication focused on concerts, movies, and restaurants. We also participated in happy hour promotions on Thursdays and Fridays at the establishments most likely to draw young professionals going out after work.

We debated what kind of giveaway people would actually keep and decided on a pen that featured a hidden interior banner that could be pulled out and retracted. One side of the banner was printed with the Uncommon Thinkers message; the other side was printed with a 50-year calendar—much more unusual than a regular 12-month calendar would have been. The giveaway thus underscored the campaign’s core message.

Home on the Web

No matter what the medium, the goal of the ads was to direct potential MBAs to the www.uncommonthinkers.com Web site. Since the notion of “uncommon thinkers” is somewhat elaborate and difficult to communicate in simple pieces, we created a site where visitors could explore the concept in an interactive environment.

The site offered puzzles, brain teasers, and a visual test that helped people determine what kind of uncommon thinkers they were. It also included stories about visionaries who have made a mark in the business world and invited visitors to join a group of likeminded people on Facebook. Naturally, it also provided information about FIU’s business school—including profiles of uncommon students, faculty, and alums—and invited visitors to sign up for an information session at the grad school.

We revamped these information sessions just as the Uncommon Thinkers campaign was under way. The goal was to attract more potential students by offering more information sessions—four per month, compared to two per term—and to have them at more convenient locations, including online. Interested candidates were directed to a specialized Web site, www.fiubusiness.com, that listed the location of upcoming events so they could choose the most convenient one.

While it’s difficult to measure the results of a branding campaign—particularly when it’s combined with a revamped recruiting strategy—our most important goal was certainly



Florida International University handed out pens like these at happy hour events where professionals were likely to congregate. The 50-year calendar on the reverse side of the retractable banner is unusual enough to fit the “uncommon thinkers” theme that drove the entire campaign.

met. We dramatically increased the attendance of prospective students at information sessions, from 184 in 2006 to 687 in 2008—and 2009’s numbers were comparable with 2008. We also saw a significant increase in the numbers of graduate students who applied to, were admitted to, and enrolled in our programs. For instance, new enrollment was 502 students in 2006 and 883 in 2008, a jump of 76 percent. GPAs and GMAT scores also were generally higher.

In addition, the campaign won attention from the National Association of Graduate Admissions Professionals, which awarded FIU’s College of Business Administration the 2009 Promotional Excellence Award for Branding a Graduate School or Program.

Ongoing Efforts

To build on our initial success, we have continued and modified the campaign over the last two years. In 2008, we tried a new tactic to take advantage of the “always-on” technology of cell phones.

We realized there’s a huge chasm between the offline and online worlds. If people see or hear about a Web site while they’re away from their computers, they have to remember it and type it in the next time they’re at a keyboard. We wanted to bridge the gap between the moment someone says, “This is cool,” and the moment they can take action.

We reasoned that more candidates would click through on the link to the Web site if that link appeared in their inboxes. Therefore, new radio spots and pre-show ads in movie theaters invited people to text message their email addresses to FIU so we could email them the link to the Uncommon Thinkers site. Unfortunately, the response was not nearly as good as we hoped.



Dr. Shalei Simms (our 1,000th minority business professor), Dr. Belinda Shipps (Dr. Triple), Dr. Alisa Mosley (our first PhD Project professor) and Dr. Alisha Malloy (Dr. Double). Together, we've succeeded in more than tripling the number of minority business professors in the US from 294 to over 1,000 in 15 short years.

Thank you to the more than 200 business schools who are committed to diversifying their campuses with The PhD Project.

We all know the importance of a diverse workforce. Without it, our ideas become singular and complacent. The PhD Project looks to put an end to all that. We are an alliance of foundations, corporations, universities, and professional and academic organizations. We are dedicated to increasing minority representation in the business world by creating opportunities to get minority professors up in front of the classroom to serve as role models for the next generation of minority business leaders.

The PhD Project proudly celebrates 15 years of achievement. When we started in 1994, there were only 294 minority business professors in

the United States. Today, we are proud to report that number has more than tripled to more than 1,000 and is increasing every day.

This academic year, we have 215 participating universities who are illustrating a clear commitment to creating a diverse academic environment and are able to recruit from our network of more than 1,400 minority faculty and doctoral students.



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University of Utah
University of Virginia Darden Graduate School of Business
University of Washington
University of Wisconsin - Madison
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
University of Wyoming
Virginia Commonwealth University
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
Washington University at St. Louis
Wayne State University, School of Business Administration
Yale University

Non-Doctoral Granting Institutions

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Arkansas State University
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Brigham Young University
Brooklyn College - CUNY
California Maritime Academy
California Polytechnic State University - San Luis Obispo
California State Polytechnic University - Pomona
California State University - Bakersfield
California State University - Chico
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California State University - Channel Islands
Central Michigan University
Chapman University
College of Staten Island - CUNY
Colorado State University - Fort Collins
Creighton University
Dartmouth College
DePaul University, College of Commerce
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Fairfield University
Fayetteville State University
George Mason University
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Howard University

Humboldt State University
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Long Island University
Loyola College of Maryland
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Medgar Evers College - CUNY
Merrimack College
Miami University-Ohio
Michigan Technological University
Middle Tennessee State University
Millersville University of Pennsylvania
Morehouse College
North Carolina A&T State University
North Carolina Central University
North Carolina State University
Northeastern University
Northern Illinois University
Penn State University-Erie
Pepperdine University
Prairie View A&M University
Rider University
Robert Morris University
Queens College - CUNY
Ramapo College of New Jersey
Salem State College
Saint Johns University
Saint Joseph's University
Saint Xavier University
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San Francisco State University
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Seattle University
Sonoma State University
Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville
Southern Methodist University - Cox School of Business
Susquehanna University
Texas Christian University
Texas State University-San Marcos
University of Alabama at Birmingham
University of Baltimore
University of California-Riverside
University of Dayton
University of Denver
University of Detroit Mercy
University of Louisville
University of Massachusetts- Boston
University of Minnesota - Duluth
University of Northern Colorado
University of Notre Dame
University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez
University of Puerto Rico-Rio Piedras
University of Richmond - Robins School of Business
University of San Francisco
University of St. Thomas
University of Southern Mississippi
University of Tulsa
Villanova University
Virginia State University
Wake Forest University, The Babcock Graduate School of Management
Western Kentucky University
Western Illinois University
Western Washington University
Wichita State University
Willamette University
Winston-Salem State University
Worcester Polytechnic Institute
York College - CUNY
Youngstown State University

If your business school isn't on this list, consider the benefits a diverse faculty could bring to your institution.

To find out more about participating in The PhD Project, contact **Bernard J. Milano** at 201-307-7662 or email bmilano@kpmg.com

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See us at the AACSB's International Conference and Annual Meeting at Booth #217

So in 2009, we changed our approach again, tapping heavily into the world of social media. The entire Uncommon Thinkers site has migrated to a Facebook fan page, where users can take the Uncommon Thinkers test and add the results to their profiles. At the same time, both FIU administrators and fans can post articles, links, and comments.

As of January, 35,000 people had taken the test, and the site had attracted more than 3,000 fans, whose comments show that members truly understand our intended message. According to one: “I really like all that is happening with FIU’s business school. Things like this reinforce my choice of majoring in business and entrepreneurship.” A second member writes that the fan page really “captures the essence of people like me.”

Words of Advice

When a business school is contemplating a new ad campaign, its first crucial step should be to decide how it wants to position itself. Not only must it create a distinctive identity, but that identity also has to be accurate and credible. It’s a natural tendency for schools to say, “This is who we want to be.” But it’s essential for them to first understand how students and potential students actually perceive them.

The second step is to work with people who understand the market and the medium. For instance, one of my best decisions was creating a position for an e-marketing coordinator and hiring a 25-year-old with a master’s degree in management information systems who lived 24/7 on the Web. Employees like this will become even more invaluable as the “digital natives” of the Millennial Generation take over college campuses and MBA classes—and as technology becomes indispensable to almost everyone. Even the older students taking EMBA classes can’t live without their BlackBerries and their iPhones. It’s our responsibility to use the new social media to reach out to current students, potential students, and alumni.

Of course, the first responsibility of any school is to determine what it has to offer—and then make sure it presents itself to its target market in clear, precise, and engaging terms. At FIU, that process resulted in more than a successful ad campaign. It helped us determine who we are, so we could attract the kind of students who would flourish here.

Luis Casas is the director of marketing, communications, and recruiting for the College of Business Administration at Florida International University in Miami.



Winning Over the Women

MIT Sloan devises a broad outreach plan to attract more women to the MBA program.

by Julie Strong

In 2001, only one-quarter of the students pursuing MBAs at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology were women. That put the MIT Sloan School of Management in Cambridge way behind our peer groups such as Stanford, Harvard, and Wharton, all of whom could boast female populations of 34 percent or better.

Concerned by the statistic, we decided to do a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the reasons women were opting against an MIT Sloan MBA. We reviewed peer practices, combed through press statistics and articles, held discussions with female students and faculty, and surveyed alumnae. To discover how our school was perceived by outsiders, we also conducted a branding study and interviewed candidates who had accepted, rejected, or abandoned MIT Sloan.

These “abandoners”—women who had shown an interest in the program, but never finished an application—yielded surprising insights. Some thought that the MIT Sloan MBA might be too tech-oriented; others were concerned that the program might be too rigorous. But still others simply were not ready to make a decision about grad school.

In fact, one of the most important things we learned is that women are in the admissions pipeline for a long time. They’re often looking a year and a half ahead. Many of these “abandoners” didn’t finish applications because their intention was to apply the following year. Once we understood that their window is open a little longer, we realized that we had to keep them in the system and continue to cultivate relationships by sending them brochures and inviting them to events.

Additional research showed us that women make decisions about an MBA program based on its location, specific courses or curricula, the diversity of its faculty and students, and its costs. They weigh factors such as the school’s qual-

ity, media rankings, and career placement assistance less than male applicants do. Women also seek out a wide variety of sources when researching business schools, including Web sites, brochures, job fairs, admissions personnel, and alumni.

In the eyes of women, two things we had going for us at MIT Sloan were our East Coast location and our friendly staff in the MBA Admissions office. Women also appreciated the attitudes and input of the alumnae they met at recruiting events. Counterbalancing those positives were the negatives: Our admissions staff was not particularly proactive; our booth at MBA forums did not have much to entice women; and our school did not convey the idea we could provide the “soft” skills or general MBA education that someone already fluent in science and technology would want.

For MIT Sloan, the trick was figuring out how we could emphasize the positives, overcome the negatives, and show more women candidates that we could be the perfect school for them.

Focus on Females

In the following years, we used a “mosaic” of approaches to win over female candidates. These included:

- *Focusing on “high-touch” in a “high-tech” environment.* When a school has the word “Technology” in its name, people expect a “cooler, grayer” environment. One way we resisted this perception was by refusing to switch to the CD and online brochures that colleges favored in the early 2000s, preferring to stick with personal phone calls and printed brochures.

- *Creating promotional materials that would appeal to women.* We made sure all recruiting materials included images of women portrayed in positive ways. But one of our most effective tools was a nontraditional brochure produced primarily by students.

I had decided we could not just create the kind of standard brochure that all sorts of companies use when they are trying to interest women in their products. Instead, I went through our student facebook and identified women with writing and photography backgrounds, as well as women with interesting stories, and I invited them to help us. The students interviewed each other, photographed each other, and wrote up the profiles that turned into a brochure called “Six Stories from the Women of MIT Sloan.”

In addition to distributing it to prospective students, I had the brochure blown up into poster boards, set them up at the

MIT Sloan produces brochures specifically designed to show what life is like for a woman enrolled in the management program.



library, and invited students and staff in for an ice cream social. One senior lecturer pointed out that, even though it was a brochure

for women, it never talked about being a woman at MIT Sloan. It just talked about being a student here. That was the voice I wanted to capture.

- *Collaborating with other organizations.* We joined Forté Foundation, a group dedicated to increasing the numbers of women in business through business and educational initiatives. Each member school offers half-tuition scholarships to at least two women; these scholars get a chance to network with Forté company sponsors during the organization’s annual conference. Students also can seek grant money from Forté. One year the Sloan Women in Management Club was awarded \$5,000, which it used to fund a speaker series, a workshop on negotiating, and networking opportunities.

Additional scholarship money earmarked for women has also attracted more applicants from a broader pool. I think that is because many women are interested in working for nonprofits and socially responsible companies in less traditional industries, where their income possibilities might not be as great. Educational assistance upfront gives them more options when they are looking for jobs.

- *Planning events aimed specifically at women.* In particular, we hold one event every year in August, featuring recent and not-so-recent female alumni who talk about how their MBAs have affected their careers. August is a little early in the recruiting season, but it seems to be a good time for people to come to the Boston area for a long weekend, and we have had attendees from as far away as California.

The new focus has paid off. By 2006, MIT Sloan’s female population had climbed to 31 percent. In 2008, it was 35 percent, and the incoming class of 2009 was about 38 percent women.

I think business schools really got a wake-up call when law schools and medical schools began seeing parity in the numbers of men and women enrolled. We started saying, “We want some of these great women to come to our schools, too.” Sometimes it takes a change in mindset for business schools to attract women in high numbers, but the results can be phenomenal. ☑

Julie Strong is senior associate director of MBA admissions at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Sloan School of Management in Cambridge.