



HOW TO

Elevate Your School's Brand and Win Over Your Audiences





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INTRODUCTION

If you look at businesses, nonprofits, and universities that have had great success with their marketing and communication efforts, it's because they've mastered doing one thing really well: they know how to tell a good story. Organizations like Apple, Starbucks, Patagonia, GoPro, Disney, Toms, and others understand that good storytelling is one of the best ways to reach their customers and win their trust. But it's not just *any type of story* that wins a customer's trust and engagement, but a *certain type of story*.

The story you tell has to *actually matter* to your audience.

What Does Storytelling have to do with Marketing?

Stories are intrinsic to our nature as human beings. Unlike fact-heavy lectures or presentations, stories have the ability to tap into the human spirit. They resonate with our emotions and values, often pointing to a deeper human truth. This is why we often remember things better when we hear them in a story. It's why we tell our kids fairy tales: to teach them something about the world in a form that's more entertaining and effective than merely telling them about it. Stories are so powerful that they can even save our lives.

There's no doubt that a journey is far more engaging than a statement.

A *Fast Company* article titled "Change or Die" featured a striking statistic uncovered by Dr. Edward Miller, the dean of the medical school and CEO of the hospital at Johns Hopkins University. He found that, within two years, 90 percent of people who have had coronary-artery bypass grafting surgery revert back to the same unhealthy habits that led to their heart disease in the first place. Despite their brush with death, the majority of these patients fail to make long-term changes to the pernicious habits that they could control.

But employing the techniques of good storytelling could actually change these discouraging findings; Dr. Dean Ornish, a professor of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, has helped his patients make lasting lifestyle changes by encouraging them to imagine a happier future made possible by beneficial behavior. The use of their imaginations fueled their desire to

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maintain permanent changes much more effectively than those who were otherwise spewed facts about harmful and healthy behaviors. Dr. Ornish's emphasis on *story* led to healthier, happier, and longer lives.

There's no doubt that a journey is far more engaging than a statement. Audiences are captured by narrative, especially ones that chart the path to a resolution that they are invested in. And what better way to invest someone in a story than to put them at the center?



Who's the Hero in Your Marketing?

A fatal mistake that most schools make when marketing their academic programs, engaging donors and alumni, or communicating their mission to external stakeholders is that their stories are all about the school—what makes the school's programs worth the sticker prices, the commitment and success of the faculty, or the service-oriented work the school is doing for the community. Of course, these things *do* matter to your audience and need to be communicated.

But the problem isn't that most schools are not communicating them; it's that they're not communicating them in the right way. What makes some schools stand apart from the rest is their commitment to place their audience—and not the school itself—at the center of the story they're telling with their marketing and communication efforts.

They want to know how your school can impact their own lives, dreams, and aspirations.

Think of that person you meet at a party who is going on and on about how much money they make or how many luxurious destinations they frequent a year. The truth is that many schools come across like that insufferable party guest, only communicating how great their offerings are in a manner that is arrogant and, honestly, uninteresting.

When it comes to your audience, they only want to hear about how your school can affect them in meaningful ways. Whether that's providing them with a means to follow their career aspirations or financially support a mission they feel enthusiastic about, they want to know how your school can impact their own lives, dreams, and aspirations.

Now think about someone you meet at a party who takes time to ask you questions, demonstrates a genuine interest in your life, and connects with you by sharing their own experiences and stories. In the exact same way, it's by modeling this type of

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communication that you make your audience trust your school and want to enter into a relationship with it. When the story you tell presents your school as the secondary character concerned with the success of your audience, it will compel them to engage your services with an understanding of how your school can impact their lives for the better.

Position Your School as the Guide

Every good story has a hero—a character we root for and want to succeed. And your audience is only going to be interested in your school's story if they themselves are the hero of it. That's what Apple did in the 90s with their "Think Different" campaign. People resonated with the campaign, as well as the story they heard, because Apple presented *their customers* as the hero within a narrative of individuality and uniqueness. In this story, Apple was merely the helpful "guide" that could equip the customer with technology to enable their self-expression and creativity.

The good news is that there is great potential for your school to tell a great story, as it offers a service that can drastically transform your audience's lives for good. You aren't selling toothpaste or vacuums, but rather an education that can lead to meaningful and fulfilling careers, national economic health, and greater civic engagement. And those are only some of the many ways your school impacts students, alumni, donors, and the community for the better.

There are few services one can purchase that are as life-changing as a university education. That's why your school has a story that your audience needs to hear—one in which you help them reach fundamental life goals and dreams. Who wouldn't want to be part of a story like that?

Then how exactly do you speak to prospective students, parents, donors, faculty, employees, and other stakeholders with your marketing

and communication efforts in a way that positions *them* as the hero and your school as the trusted and dependable guide?

This ebook will explain how to elevate your school's brand in the minds of your audience using a proven and easy-to-follow framework that puts them at the center of your brand's story. Much of this ebook takes many of the concepts developed by best-selling author Donald Miller in his book *Building a Story Brand* and applies them to the world of higher education. In addition to providing helpful information, the end of each chapter will include next steps to consider to help you think through how you can apply some of these techniques today into your marketing strategy.

There are few services one can purchase that are as life-changing as a university education.

As you know, higher ed is an industry unlike any other with its own unique challenges and opportunities. By positioning your school as the helpful and knowledgeable "guide"—as opposed to the "hero"—you can communicate the value and benefit of your school in a proven way that captures your audience's attention and ultimately wins their trust and engagement. This is a game-changing technique that can help you meet enrollment, fundraising, engagement, recruitment, retainment, and other institutional goals critical for success in today's higher ed landscape.



1

CHAPTER ONE

Why You Need Empathy to Tell Your Brand Story

It's important that the story your marketing tells positions your audience as the main character, not your school. As Donald Miller explains in his book *Building a Story Brand*, the best brands understand that their story needs to explain how they can help their audience—whom they recognize as the “hero”—achieve a goal or solve a problem. That's because an audience only cares about a brand's story if it ends with *their* life being changed for the better.

So if your audience needs to be the hero of your brand's story, then your school needs to play the role of the “guide”—the helpful aid who leads them to achieving their goal. A “guide,” however, is not truly successful unless it has two major characteristics: empathy and authority. In this chapter, we'll take a look at the first characteristic and explain the importance of expressing empathy to your audience.

What is Empathy?

It's easy to understand why empathy is such a critical factor in the way meaningful relationships are established and nurtured; we've all likely opened up to someone, be that a family member, friend, or coworker, only to be entirely misunderstood. It can leave us feeling neglected and dismissed, which definitely

doesn't help strengthen a relationship. Of course, the opposite is also true: the more we feel understood and accepted by another, the stronger that relationship becomes.

An article from [Forbes](#) unpacks three types of empathy: “cognitive empathy” (understanding what another person feels), “emotional empathy” (experiencing the feelings of another person), and “compassionate empathy” (acting to do something about the understanding and feelings). It's when all three types of empathy are expressed that we're able to connect most deeply to another person. Of course, your university or college isn't a person, but the same rules apply.

Your audience wants to see that your school demonstrates an interest in their desires.

Your audience is only going to want to interact with you if they feel that you understand and care for them while offering a way to help them through some type of service or “action.” Whether they be a prospective student hoping to reach their dream career or a recently retired donor eager to support a meaningful and worthwhile organization, your audience wants to see that your school demonstrates an interest in their desires. Your noticeable compassion is what makes your brand story resonate in a way that can help you meet enrollment, fundraising, engagement, and other institutional goals.

How Can You Convey Empathy to Your Audiences?

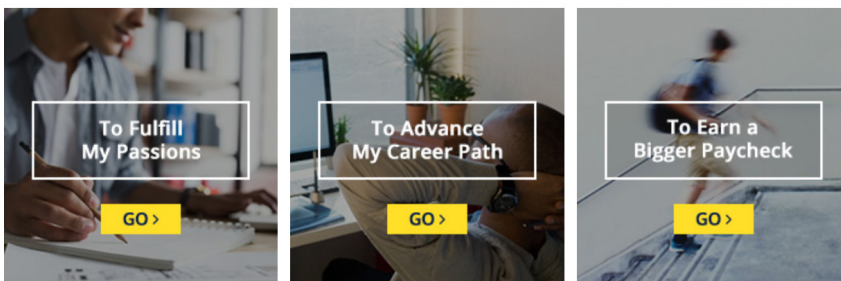
Fuller Theological Seminary, a graduate seminary in the greater Los Angeles area, recently made the difficult decision to move their campus 30 miles east to Pomona. As you can imagine, relocating a major institution of higher learning is a massive undertaking—certainly one that would create a fair amount of anxiety amongst donors, students, faculty, and other stakeholders. However, Fuller proactively and carefully acknowledged this uncertainty in a number of ways. Namely, they directly assessed people's nervousness in an issue of their university publication, appropriately titled “[Disruption](#).” In the magazine, Fuller featured faculty, the president of the university, and other stakeholders reflecting on the historic move and what it would mean for their future. It was a great way to demonstrate to their audience that they both understand and feel for them—that they're all “in it together”—and are committed to doing everything they can to make the transition as smooth as possible. Such a public display of brand “empathy” helps their stakeholders trust that the dramatic change is not happening without them in mind.



Regis University also demonstrates brand empathy with its engaging treatment of prospective adult degree completion students. On [their website](#), they provide three clear and easy-to-follow options for visitors to explore: “To Fulfill My Passions,” “To Advance My Career Path,” and “To Earn a Bigger Paycheck.” These three navigation paths reveal that Regis understands how varied and unique are the motivations for adults to return to higher ed. Because the idea of going to school after so many years away can be nerve racking, this effective digital strategy

gives prospective students a clear place to start on their educational journey, reflecting Regis’ attention to the perceived challenges that may hinder an adult’s choice to apply.

Everyone has a reason for going back to school. What’s driving you?



Regis University website clearly addresses student motivations.

Likewise, in regard to the traditional undergraduate student, a student vlogger at Chapman University posts videos with tips about life as a college student. In

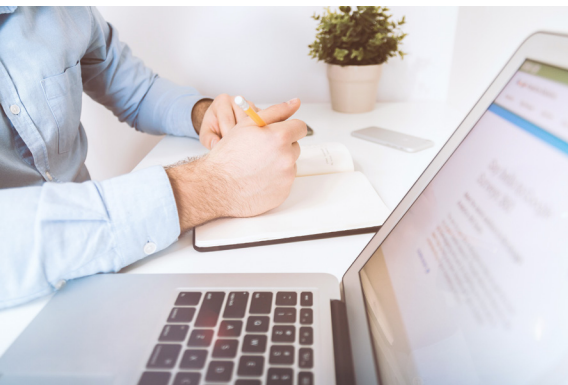
one video, for example, she explains [ideal ways to organize your dorm with IKEA products](#). Such a helpful resource not only gives prospective students a real “look behind the scenes” of life on campus, but it also shows how a student who *truly* understands a rising freshman’s fears can offer trust-building guidance.

Know Your Audience So You Can Empathize

Empathy is critical to the marketing story you tell.

There are numerous ways to demonstrate empathy to your audience, from emails to videos to alumni magazines, but the key is first to familiarize yourself with what your audience is feeling and thinking and then to communicate that you understand them with the story you tell with your marketing. How can you demonstrate to a new student at orientation that they won’t be alone during that stressful first week? How can you relay to a donor that you want to give—and are giving—they tangible results of their financial support? How can you share with a prospective adult student that you’re committed to supporting them through what can be a significant financial and emotional investment?

If your audience doesn’t believe that you have their best interests in mind, then they aren’t going to care whether or not you can help them solve their problems—even if you can! You might



have the perfect offerings, but audiences will turn away if they aren't confident in whether you genuinely “feel for them.”

There is no doubt that empathy is critical to the marketing story you tell—but that alone isn't enough. You might be able to express that you care about your audience's problems, but they won't really listen if they don't have a reason to believe you can *actually do anything about them*. That's why it's just as important to convey authority as well.

Steps to Consider:

Can you identify places within your marketing strategy that convey empathy to you audience? It is helpful to audit your marketing content in order to identify whether or not each piece is conveying that you both understand and feel for your audience.

If so, what exactly makes these pieces “empathetic”? Is it the language you're using, the type of photography, the overall design and presentation?

What do you think each one of your major audiences (prospective undergraduate students, alumni, donors, faculty recruits, etc.) wants to hear from you to be convinced that you understand them? Brainstorm this for each audience separately with your team. Try to do this with people on campus who know each audience best, such as admissions counselors, university advancement officers, etc.

What are some ways you can find out what your audience is thinking and feeling? Have you conducted interviews, focus groups, or user testing in the past that you can reference?

If you answered no the last question, how might you start collecting this information from your audience?



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CHAPTER TWO

Why You Need Authority to Tell Your Brand Story

Conveying authority is how you demonstrate to your audience that you have the expertise and capacity to solve their problems or help them meet their goals.

In the last chapter, we explained how important it is for your school to demonstrate empathy—that you understand and “feel for”—your audiences. In this chapter, we’ll review the second and equally necessary characteristic of a good brand: authority.

What is Authority in Marketing?

Once you have convinced an alum, prospective student, faculty recruit, or community stakeholder that you understand and care about their needs and desires, they will want to know if you can help them *do something* about them. Even if your marketing material already tells your audience that you have just the right service or opportunity for them, no one will believe you if all you’re doing is telling them; you have to show them, too.

As Donald Miller explains in *Building a Story Brand*, conveying authority is how you demonstrate to your audience that you have the expertise and capacity to solve their problems or help them meet their goals. Your audience isn’t looking for a school to only empathize with them, but one that can also help them.

Authority in Practice

Since every school's marketing story claims that they have the perfect program or fundraising initiative, demonstrating real authority—not just talking about it—can give your school a major edge. One organization that is particularly great at this is the successful email marketing service Mailchimp, whose brilliant story conveys how they truly “get” email marketing. Not only do they offer [email marketing resources](#), which include tips, guides, and tutorials, but they also feature [customer success stories](#) that reveal how their customers are finding success through Mailchimp's services. In other words, by featuring “how-to” content and customer success stories, they are showing, and not telling, their audience how they can help leverage email to meet business goals.

Another successful brand that has done a good job of demonstrating authority is Warby Parker. As a company that sells customized eyeglasses, one way they show their expertise is by offering

visitors to their website a [fun and engaging quiz](#) to determine what pairs of glasses they might be most interested in. Not only is this a clever way to get visitors to engage with their site, but it reveals a deep understanding of both their audience's desires and preferences. This formulaic, personalized, and detailed quiz helps them establish that they really know the eyeglasses business.

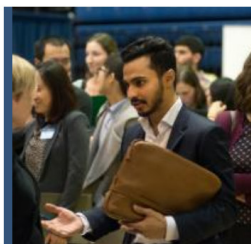
As an example related to higher ed, UC Davis conveys authority with engaging content through a blog called [“What Can I Do With My Major?”](#) which features articles and stories explaining the many career options available to students based on their selected major. Prospective students (and their parents) are therefore able to use the university as a guide to help them think about the value and possible career paths of certain majors. The blog highlights real-life examples of UC Davis alumni, which only adds to its authority as a major university committed to helping students find desirable jobs no matter their field of interest.

Latest What Can I Do With My Major? Blog Posts



Study Abroad Led a Biotech Major toward International Work

What Can I Do With My Major? | Blog Post | March 28, 2019 - 3:15pm



5 Ways to Impress Employers at Your First Career Fair

What Can I Do With My Major? | Blog Post | March 15, 2019 - 11:02am

UC Davis provides engaging content through a blog.

Using Available Resources to Demonstrate Authority

One great benefit your institution has is an “in-house” population of educated faculty and staff who can help you demonstrate your authority; as an organization committed to spreading and expanding knowledge, they are perfect resources to tap into. This is exactly what Boston University has done, highlighting their [faculty experts](#) who have been featured in the news media. Visitors can search by faculty expert or topic, ultimately walking away with the impression that BU’s faculty is world class and participating actively in a variety of societal initiatives and issues.

If empathy reveals the “heart” of your brand, then authority reveals the “head.” Can you feature testimonials from alumni highlighting how they took advantage of your school’s career services and landed a job after graduating? Can you demonstrate to donors how their generous giving has contributed to a new learning center or science lab? Can you feature third-party endorsements highlighting the quality of your academic programs so that your audience sees that your school isn’t the only one celebrating its programs? It’s necessary to provide “reasons to believe” that you can actually make a difference in the lives of your audience. If they know your school both cares about them and can do something to help them, then you’re telling the right story with your marketing—one your audience will want to be a part of.

Faculty Experts




Search by name or expertise

Trending Topics: Climate Change, Constitutional Law, Health Policy, Infectious Disease, International Relations, ISIS, Middle East, Opioid Abuse

Browse Experts: by name, by field, or by expertise

Boston University faculty members are available to provide expert commentary and analysis on a broad range of topics. If you need assistance finding an expert, contact BU Public Relations at 617-353-2240 or pr@bu.edu

Featured Faculty Experts [View All Faculty Experts](#)

	<p>Jack Beermann Harry Elwood Warren Scholar Professor of Law</p> <p>Expertise: Administrative Law, Civil Rights, Constitutional Law, Contract Law, Economic Regulation, Federal Courts, Judicial Appointments, Litigation, Local Government, SCOTUS, Supreme Court, Torts</p> <p>Coverage: Professor Beermann in the Media</p>	<p>(617) 353-2577 beermann@bu.edu LinkedIn</p>
	<p>Azer Bestavros Professor of Computer Science</p> <p>Expertise: Cities, Cloud Computing, Computer Science, Cybersecurity, Data Science, Information Security, Internet, Networking, Privacy</p> <p>Coverage: Professor Bestavros in the Media</p>	<p>(617) 353-9726 best@bu.edu Website LinkedIn</p>
	<p>Nahid Bhadelia Assistant Professor of Medicine Director of Infection Control, National Emerging Infectious Disease Laboratories (NEIDL)</p> <p>Expertise: Biosafety, Ebola, Epidemiology, Infectious Disease, Lassa, Zika</p> <p>Coverage: Professor Bhadelia in the Media</p>	<p>(617) 414-5201 nbhadeli@bu.edu Twitter</p>

Boston University highlighting in-house authority.

It’s necessary to provide “reasons to believe” that you can actually make a difference in the lives of your audience.

There are countless ways for your institution to demonstrate authority, which include promoting testimonials, educational content, statistics, third-party endorsements, awards, community partnerships, and more. Over the next few chapters, we'll provide tangible and effective examples of how you can convey both empathy and authority in the story you tell to your audience so that you can ultimately earn their support and meet your varied institutional goals.

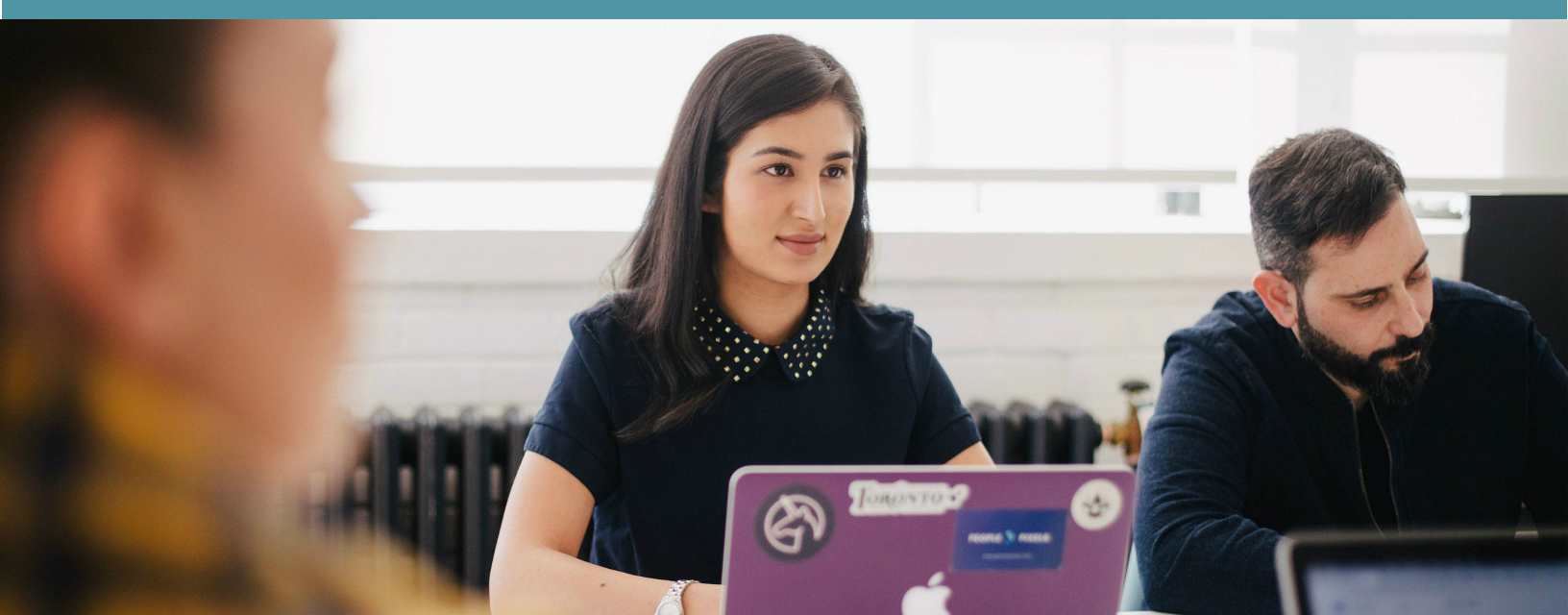
Steps to Consider to Build Authority in Your Marketing:

How are you not only telling your audience you can help them solve their problems or reach their goals but also showing them? Review your marketing content and look for instances when you are proving you have some kind of authority and expertise.

Where could you use stats, testimonials, or third-party endorsements to convey authority in the gaps you have in your marketing? We'll get into these more specifically in the next chapters.

How might you adopt some of the strategies used in the above examples both inside and outside of higher education?

What are some ways to incorporate the expertise of faculty, staff, or alumni? How might you best promote that expertise (in a blog, video, social media post, etc.)? Similar to the last chapter, it's worth collaborating with others on campus and thinking this through for each major audience separately.



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CHAPTER THREE

How to Get Testimonials and Why They Matter So Much for Your Brand

Sure, your marketing is the outlet for you to share how you can help others, but your message will resonate even more when you're not the one sharing it; rather, your brand will be most trustworthy with testimonials, or content featuring what others have said about your college or university. Who better to speak for you than those who have *already* benefited from your school?

Of course, featuring testimonial content presupposes that your audience does in fact have positive things to say about your school. If your offerings aren't solving their problems or helping them reach their goals, then no technique covered in this chapter (or ebook, for that matter!) will do you any good. Every good brand knows how to tell a compelling story that promises something to their audience, but every good brand also—at its core—genuinely offers something that delivers on that very brand promise. Assuming your school has been making your audience's lives better, you're already in a great position to boost your marketing story with prominently featured testimonials.

The most challenging part of this can be tracking down those who have engaged your school's services, be they committed faculty members, recent alumni, or long-time donors, and asking

them to share their experience. But while it will require some leg work to accrue, organize, and present testimonial content, the effort is well worth it.

Build Testimonial Surveys for Each Audience

Fortunately, there are some strategies to gather testimonials that are just as simple as they are effective. One relatively easy way is to email current students, alumni, donors, or others in your audience a survey with a few questions and space for them to share about their experience with your school. Make sure you keep these surveys short, and don't ask for too much! You'll only get a few responses for a survey that's going to take more than five minutes to fill out.

Not only can a survey like this provide you with valuable stats (we'll cover those in the next chapter), but it can also help you build a repository of testimonial content. Even if you end up with more content than you need, you'll now have a hub of testimonials to draw from over time. One last note—and this goes for all testimonial content: always make sure to receive permission to use what someone said on any of your marketing material.

Go Where Your Audience Is

Another effective way to build up testimonial content is to go straight to where your audience is located. At this year's Homecoming, for example, you can reach the several alumni

you know will be in attendance with a booth at which to share their two cents. Pull out a camera (or smartphone, if that's all you have) and ask them to say a few words about what made their university experience so special. This is an easy way to capture short clips that can be placed on social media or your website with minimal editing. And you'll probably find that most alumni are thrilled by the opportunity to reminisce with you about their alma mater.

Think Through How to Utilize Each Type of Testimonial

Faculty and staff are often great allies while you're acquiring testimonials, as a graduating student or high-level donor may be more inclined to respond to a professor or university advancement officer with whom they have built a relationship as opposed to a faceless email address from the school. Requests from faculty can be especially effective when you need a specific type of testimonial, such as one from a music major or online adult student. With this in mind, consider how you can recruit fellow employees to connect you with the audience you need.

Despite all the work it could take to get testimonials, they are critical tools to show your audience that people like them have benefited from your university or college. This is exactly why restaurants with strong Yelp reviews have such an advantage: past customers give evidence and a "reason to believe" that others will be pleased with their food and service.

Video Testimonials are Powerful

Once you have your testimonial content, there are a number of ways to share it in your marketing story, from a concise quote on your website to a simple video on social media or within an article in your alumni magazine. As an example, check out this [touching and inspiring video](#) by the American Cancer Society, which features a girl named Zia Saylor who sold homemade bracelets to help raise over \$11,000 for charity. The American Cancer Society could have told the exact same story with web copy, but visitors to the website find it much more powerful and compelling to hear it from a fellow donor themselves.

Such videos remain impactful for colleges and universities as well. Oklahoma State University, for example, features [“Orange Memories,”](#) in which students share how their time at college has helped affirm their authentic sense of identity as well as how they want to impact the world after graduation. Santa Clara produced a [similar video](#) featuring current students’ deep sense of community within a vibrant campus setting that offers limitless opportunities for

engagement. While your university marketing collateral needs to communicate what makes your campus unique and connected, it must also be supplemented with testimonials that give your audience a compelling “reason to believe” in your story.

Get Creative When Displaying Testimonials

Videos aren’t the only way to deliver a testimonial, of course—it is cheaper yet similarly effective to pull quotes from conversations you’ve had with your audience. For instance, this [well-designed print piece](#) by Loyola University New Orleans Law School features engaging photos of students that are accompanied by quotes, a simple way to prove that the information in the brochure is believable.

Long Form Testimonials Can Be Effective

Additionally, you might feature testimonials in the form of longer articles or stories, such as in a university blog or print publication. Mazda does exactly this with their [“My Mazda, My Story,”](#) a series of long-form stories that highlight positive experiences that customers have had with the company’s various car models. In fact, this relates to another effective tactic for conveying empathy and authority with your brand: content marketing (we’ll discuss this in more detail in a later chapter!).



What Makes Santa Clara University Awesome

9,786 views

44 0 SHARE SAVE ...

Santa Clara University shares student testimonials on the sense of community.

It's important to thread consistent testimonials throughout your marketing story, as each example of what others have to say in their own words helps maintain the overall "reason to believe." You should have them featured on your website and all throughout print brochures, landing pages, social media campaigns, annual reports, and anywhere else

your audience is going to engage with your school. You don't, however, have to bombard your audience with *hundreds* of testimonials for them to be effective. A couple of well-crafted videos and a few strategically placed quotes (like those in the aforementioned brochure) can do wonders in making the story you're telling with your marketing both believable and compelling to your audience.

Steps to Consider:

Identify in your marketing where you are and aren't using testimonials—might there be an opportunity to include more of them?

Consider the different types of testimonials you're using. Do you have many current student testimonials but few donor testimonials? It's worth considering each major audience separately to ensure you have the right type and number of testimonials for each one. You may have a hundreds testimonials from alumni all over your website, but you won't be speaking to all of your audiences if you fail to highlight donors or adult students.

In what format are your testimonials? Are they mostly quotes? Primarily blog posts? Remember that variety keeps your marketing engaging. How can you diversify the format of your presentation?

Do you have testimonial content that you're not promoting effectively? You may have responses from a survey that can be repurposed, or

maybe other departments on campus have their own testimonial content that you may not know about. It's not uncommon to have testimonial content that simply hasn't yet been integrated or made public. (A reminder: Make sure you have permission to use someone's quote, picture, or name before doing so!)

There's no need to be overwhelmed! Start simply: think through some survey questions you could ask a specific audience and consider sending it out. Even if you're not quite ready to turn those responses into marketing content, you'll at least have it for when you are. It's always best to work with those on campus who know the particular audience best. Once you know who you're marketing to, how to reach them, and how to diversify an effective set of testimonials, you'll be supported by those who can vouch for you—those who give people like them a "reason to believe."



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CHAPTER FOUR

Why Stats Are Critical to Your Brand Story

When considering examples of effective “reasons to believe” to include in your marketing story, statistics tends to be obvious. It’s through statistics—the “cold hard facts”—that you can often answer some of the most important questions your audience is asking: What is the graduation rate of your programs? How many graduates get jobs, and where? How are my donations being used to support the mission of the school?

Of course, such questions (and many more like these) are perfectly understandable, especially when it comes to one of the biggest investments your customers will make in their lives; an education costs tens of thousands of dollars and will have a lifelong impact. And while there are a constellation of pieces that constitute a convincing and effective brand story (as this ebook highlights), statistics are extremely persuasive in showing your audience that your school can both solve their problems and help them reach their goals.

Similar to testimonials, however, the most challenging aspect of highlighting statistics to your audience is tracking down the right information. No matter how difficult, it’s important to put considerable effort into collecting, organizing, and presenting valuable stats, as this information goes far with today’s increasing public demand for schools to demonstrate their value and worth.



Dig Around for Available Data

Collecting data will often mean working closely with other colleagues across campus. For example, you could collaborate with university advancement to find out how many Millennial alumni are donating each month and then use those numbers in a creative way to attract other alumni on social media or email. Or you might reach out to the financial aid office for an up-to-date report on how much aid your school awards so that you present the best information to prospective students and parents in the right places along their buyer journeys. You might already have some great information collected but just need to think through how best to organize and present it in a creative and compelling way. Take time to do a kind of “inventory audit,” going over all of your data to see what could be promoted or more effectively highlighted.

Start Collecting Useful Data Now

If you don't have certain data that you would otherwise find useful, you can begin collecting them today. Even though this effort may not

pay off for a couple of years, your work will help ensure a strong marketing story in the future. For example, you could ask your MBA program to start following up on their most recent graduates six months after graduation to see whether and where they are employed. If you have the capacity, offer to help them create an easy-to-complete survey that the business school can send out as an email campaign. What about the school of nursing, education, or engineering? If you start building systems that track the success of your students today, then you'll have much more to pull from and highlight tomorrow. The key is to start collecting this data as soon as you realize you don't already have it or aren't already collecting it.

Leverage Your School's Statisticians!

The truth is that you will not always be able to track down everything you want. It can be hard to get in touch with graduates and busy donors, and you'll certainly not be able to track down specific information like the average salary of graduates by acquiring a response from each and every alum. Fortunately, there are easy-to-implement statistical models out there to help you establish a large enough population from which you can pull valuable, accurate, and statistically significant data.

In other words, a basic understanding of statistics methodology will allow you to collect meaningful data about an entire population while needing only to talk to a small percentage of your alumni or current students. Several tools online can walk you through this process with relative ease, all without the need to employ an

If you start building systems that track the success of your students today, then you'll have much more to pull from and highlight tomorrow.

expert statistician (that said, you're lucky to have an institution with math or sociology departments that most likely have an expert statistician on hand!).

Thinkful, an organization that provides programming and development courses for those looking to get into the tech world, has done a great job of using stats to tell their marketing story. They provide [statistics that highlight](#) what one could expect as a return on their investment, including the percentage of grads hired as full-time developers as well as grads' average reported salary increase. They also provide a detailed breakdown of these two outcomes in impressive report formats. These are exactly the kinds of statistics that give Thinkful's prospective students the confidence to enroll.

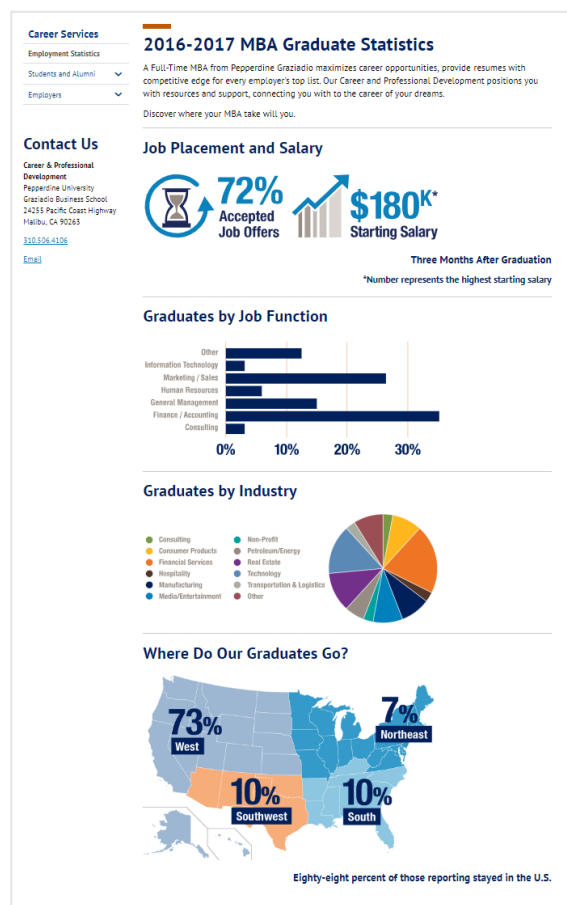
Display Stats in Eye Catching Graphics

Pepperdine University's business school (Graziadio) shares convincing stats in a similar way, having [devoted space on their website](#) to display outcomes like the percentage of accepted job offers, the highest starting salary, and a breakdown of the industries in which graduates found employment. Another example from higher ed, Kenyon College, offers an easy-to-navigate ["Kenyon By The Numbers"](#) section, which features stats that detail its number of tenure-track faculty holding a terminal degree, the percentage of students who graduate in four years, and the number of consecutive years the school has been recognized as a top producer of Fulbright fellows.

Don't Forget About Stats for Alumni and Donors

While stats like these certainly matter to prospective students, they are also just as important when speaking to your other audiences, such as alumni and donors. As an institution aspiring to increase financial support, your school is competing

Implementing statistics into the story you're telling with your marketing adds a level of professionalism and respect to your school.



Pepperdine University shares eye-catching graphics on student outcomes.

against countless other worthwhile charity and non-profit organizations to which your audience could just as easily give their money.

Powerfully communicating with their audience, Invisible Children's website [highlights key stats](#) in the same way that any other company would to instill confidence in their prospective supporters. They appeal to donors by including the number of bills signed into law with the help of their efforts as well as how many tens of millions of dollars they have gotten the U.S. Government to spend on life-saving programs in Central African Communities.

Turning back to higher ed, the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor leverages donors by highlighting the success of their "Giving Bluesday" with a [breakdown](#) of how much money specific programs and initiatives within their various schools and departments received. Rather than state that the university raised money for the institution as a whole, the detailed breakdown precisely lays out where donors' money is going. When potential donors know how money is used, they will be much more confident that their contributions will be applied in the way they want them to be.

Lastly, implementing statistics into the story you're telling with your marketing adds a level of professionalism and respect to your school. It conveys to your audience that you take both their concerns and questions seriously and that they deserve to have accurate data and information to help them make the decision that's best for them.



Steps to Consider:

Audit your content to identify the areas in which you are using stats. Are there areas in your marketing that could benefit from a piece of data? Make sure you do this for each major audience—you may, for example, have great stats for donors but lack compelling stats for adult degree completion students.

Are the stats you're highlighting up to date and convincing? Might there be a more interesting and compelling way to represent them with your design? Stats from ten years ago aren't going to be nearly as effective as stats from last year.

If you aren't already collecting information that would be valuable, how can you start doing so? Try to identify who you need to work with in order to put into place a helpful system of data collection.

If you can't track down certain data, are there other ways to convey something similar? For example, if you can't find out the average salary of graduating MBA students, can you at least find out how many graduating MBA students get jobs within six months of graduation? It's worth thinking creatively about what you *can* highlight even if what you want to highlight isn't available.



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CHAPTER FIVE

Distinguishing Your School with Third-Party Validations

An important and very convincing way to demonstrate authority is to display third-party validation in the form of awards or distinguished recognition. It's terrific that your school is recognized as a great teaching institution or one of the local community's most sustainable organizations—but what makes an award so impactful is that *someone else* is saying this or that about your school. In other words, a respected third party is saying it on your behalf, which makes for a much more convincing “reason to believe” that your school can deliver on the promise embedded in your marketing story. A prospective student or parent, faculty recruit, or donor is much more likely to believe you can solve their problem or help them reach a goal if a respected “other” is already vouching for you.

We see this all of the time outside of higher education. The automotive company Kia does a great job of highlighting third-party endorsements on [their website](#), featuring awards they have won for various car models. Another example is Best Buy, whose [website homepage](#) includes that they have been named “Barron’s 2019 Most Sustainable Company” and are listed among the “World’s Most Ethical Companies.” By featuring awards like these front and center, they are demonstrating that unbiased third-party organizations have vouched for the quality of the

company and its products. Cuisinart, too, highlights their awards with a [“Cuisinart Master Awards List,”](#) which rather convincingly gets across to customers that they have an impressive repository of third-party validations.

College Rankings as Validators

When it comes to higher education, one of the most popular ways to emphasize third-party validation is by highlighting traditional university and college ranking systems. The problem is, however, that these ranking systems are limited and end up squaring certain schools against others, and the most prestigious and wealthiest of which end up benefiting the most. Additionally, these ranking systems have major flaws and can be manipulated both intentionally and unintentionally to benefit certain schools at the expense of others.

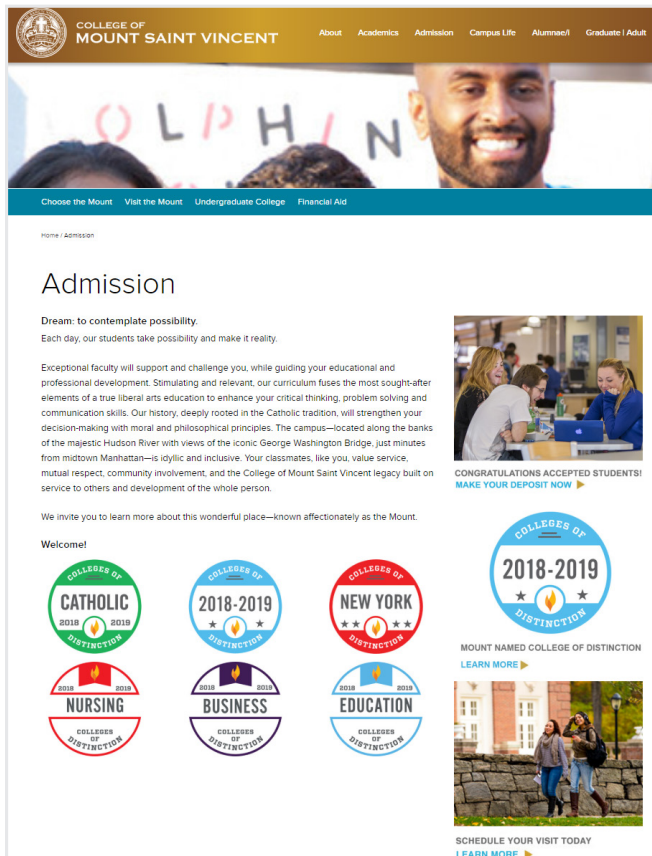
The problems inherent in the traditional ranking systems have been covered by major publications. In fact, well-known journalist and author Malcolm Gladwell [wrote about this](#) in *The New Yorker* a few years ago. Gladwell explains that ranking a university or college in a one-size-fits-all approach is no different than trying to rank the best automobiles in a comprehensive list; such an endeavor would pit SUVs against sedans against convertibles, all of which have certain strengths and weaknesses depending on what a given customer values.

A college or university is similar in this respect. Each one varies greatly in size, location, offered disciplines, types of extracurriculars, values, mission, and so on. That’s why a typical rankings system ultimately fails to serve smaller schools whose programs and services are just as high in quality as many of the brand-name schools. The truth is that not all students are looking for the same kind of school, but rather one that fits their own unique and personal needs and expectations. While rankings can demonstrate quality in certain categories, they don’t ultimately convey the whole story of what a school has to offer. The good news is that there are still ways to distinguish yourself with awards and third-party recognition without relying solely on the limited traditional ranking systems.

People and Ideas Over Prestige and Statistics

At Colleges of Distinction and Abound, we have designed an evaluation system that incorporates both quantitative *and*

What makes an award so impactful is that someone else is saying this or that about your school.



College of Mount Saint Vincent displays endorsements and recognitions.

qualitative methods. We focus on all of a school’s qualities as opposed to a set of limiting statistics that tell only part of the story. We go beyond numbers to look at the ideas, people, and mission behind each institution. Colleges and universities don’t offer a one-dimensional service; they constitute a complex investment of time, resources, effort, and money. They offer several years of an immersive experience that not only prepares students for meaningful work, but also helps them forge and confirm personal identities and values; build lasting relationships with peers, mentors, and professors; and widen their understanding of the world and their place within it.

Our evaluation system isn’t hierarchical, either. We don’t actively pit certain schools against others. Instead, we evaluate schools in a

holistic light, considering how they demonstrate characteristics that serve students best. For traditional undergraduate programs, we evaluate schools based on the following four distinctions: Engaged Students, Great Teaching, Vibrant Community, and Successful Outcomes. And, for graduate and adult degree programs: Accessibility, Affordability, Acceleration, and Advancement.

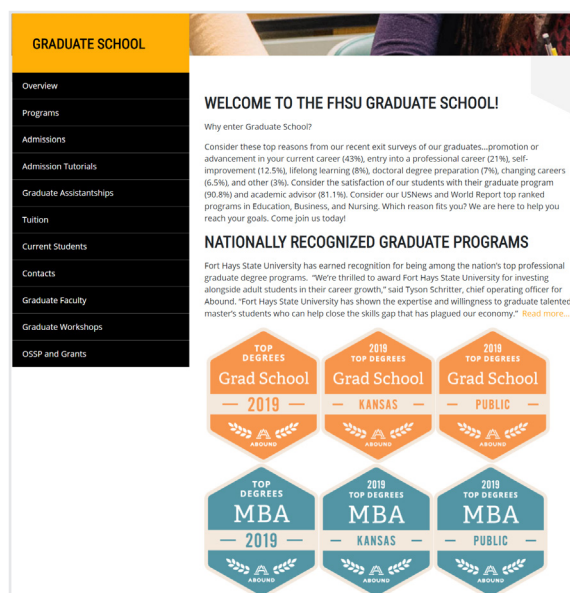
Using Third Party Endorsements in Your Marketing

In the traditional undergraduate space, the [College of Mount Saint Vincent](#) has taken advantage of our evaluation process and award insignia by highlighting how the school has been recognized as a private Catholic school in New York as well as how their nursing, education, and business programs are distinguished. Similarly, [Elizabethtown College](#) has highlighted their distinguished engineering program on their website to signal to prospective students a high quality of STEM-related education that they can expect should they choose to attend. [Adelphi University stresses our “Career Development”](#) recognition throughout their social media channels. Schools like the [University of Indianapolis](#), [High Point University](#), [Seton Hill University](#), and many others have also been evaluated and recognized as quality institutions and highlight as such in effective ways in their digital marketing material.

Within the graduate and adult degree completion space, Fort Hays State University features Abound insignia on [their website](#) to provide third-party validation for their MBA program without needing to rely exclusively on traditional ranking systems. Schools like the [University of New Orleans](#), [Mount Saint Mary's University](#), [Morningside College](#), and many others are doing the same: their use of Abound's holistic award insignia conveys authority to prospective adult students in the same way.

Using Endorsements Across Multiple Audiences

There are many other ways to convey authority to your audience by highlighting third-party awards. Perhaps your school has been recognized for its involvement in the local community? Alumni and donors are always happy to see proof that your institution is making a difference in the surrounding area and being recognized for it. Or perhaps your faculty have been awarded for their commitment to teaching, or your communications department for their creative marketing efforts? Things like these—and many others—are worth highlighting in order to draw recruits and make your institution that much more attractive to your various audiences.



Fort Hays State University displays third-party validation.

Of course, the major reason third-party validation plays such a vital role in your marketing story is that you can't fake them: you are either offering a service that is award-worthy or not. This is why at the heart of every great marketing and brand story is a brand that offers a great product or service. There is no shortcut for this, but if your university is serving its students, helping the community, and living up to its mission, then we encourage you to learn more about how you can gain the distinction your school deserves.

Interested in having your institution recognized by Abound or Colleges of Distinction?

Contact us at info@collegesofdistinction.com

Steps to Consider:

Audit your content to get a sense of where you are highlighting your awards and third-party validations. Are you finding gaps? Are you only highlighting them to certain audiences and not others?

Are the awards you're highlighting from quality and respected organizations? It's important that your third-party validators are also organizations with which you want to be associated.

Are you only focused on highlighting traditional ranking systems in your marketing? Consider Colleges of Distinction and/or Abound, which can provide you with a less limiting way to speak about the quality of your school and programs.

Try reaching out to other departments and offices on campus to see if they have received awards from other organizations. You may find that other areas of your school have already been recognized but haven't thought to share it with you.



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CHAPTER SIX

Highlighting Your School's Partnerships to Win Over Your Audience

Your brand's story can be boosted further by bringing attention to the partnerships your school has forged with other organizations. Do you have partnerships with local businesses that offer attractive, exclusive internships to your students? Do you collaborate with area hospitals to offer seamless certificate programs to busy adult nursing students? Do you have relationships with local nonprofits or institutes with whom you can host joint speaking events and conferences?

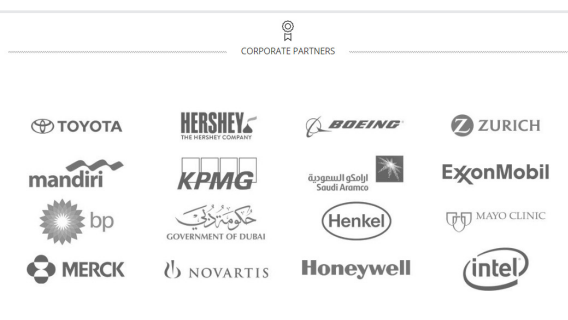
The Halo Effect of Partnerships

Highlighting your relationships with other respected organizations simply helps your own organization look good. For example, an education department with strong relationships in neighboring school districts or a business school with local startup connections automatically seem more trustworthy and of high quality; they already have third-party validation from community members in their field. Since quality organizations are only going to forge relationships with other quality organizations, it's important not to downplay how your partnerships can help augment and cement a positive perception of your school.

It's important to highlight your partnerships to help cement a positive perception of your school.

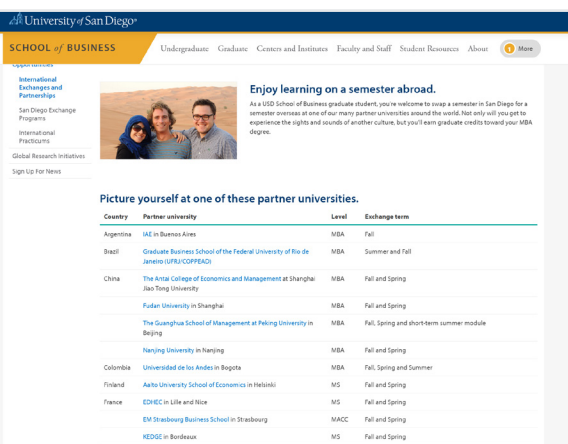
How Are Others Leveraging Partnerships?

George Brown College strategically highlights their collaboration and service with local partners in [this brochure](#), which includes several quotes from industry experts and leaders in the city of Toronto sharing how they value working with the university's students, faculty, and staff. The brochure deploys compelling photography depicting students and faculty off campus and within the community, revealing that George Brown College is not an isolated "ivory tower," but rather a very involved contributor to its surrounding community. This also conveys to students that attending the school will connect them to internship and networking opportunities and, therefore, a better chance of finding meaningful work in their chosen field after graduation. There is no doubt that this proud display of George Brown's community partnerships is helping their overall marketing story.



Arizona State University's Thunderbird School of Global Management highlights corporate partners on their website.

Keenly aware that the effectiveness of a business school depends on how it relates to leading companies within its respective industries, the Thunderbird School of Global Management also takes advantage of its partnerships to support its marketing story. On [their website](#), the school highlights their corporate partners by simply listing their logos, which include major brands like Toyota, Intel, Mayo Clinic, and Boeing. This mere display communicates to the audience its involvement in the industry and thus an impressive level of authority as a business school.



The University of San Diego dedicates space to showcase their many partnerships with other institutions.

Turning back to another aspect of an effective story brand, Georgetown University's ["MBA Employment Report"](#) highlights corporate partners with an outstanding example of empathy and authority. Not only does the piece offer detailed information about the percentage of graduates who receive an offer within three months of graduating, the average full-time salary, and the average signing bonus (all great examples of compelling stats, which we discussed in a previous chapter), but they also include a list of top Georgetown MBA employers, including Amazon, Deloitte, and American Express. Overall, the piece is both very informative and persuasive.

More Than Just Businesses...

The University of San Diego (USD) has robust partnerships with universities all over the world, allowing students to gain international business experience in a number of places. They offer an impressive [list of partner universities on their website](#), where

visitors can easily navigate by country, program level, and exchange term—a demonstration of how efficiently the university can grant access to a plethora of global business experience no matter the time or location. Seattle University has implemented something similar to USD, creating [a searchable list of community partners](#) and explaining that they are “enthusiastic about connecting students, faculty, and staff at Seattle University to long term commitments at [their] community partner organizations.” By including a vast repository of partner logos, they effectively convey that they have strong relationships with other strong organizations of all types within their community, which again only aids the perception of the university in the minds of their audience.

Most universities have already established a decent amount of partnerships over the many years of their history. That’s why it might only require that you make your previously forged partnerships known to your audience. Think about how you can convey some of these partnerships on your website, marketing brochures, or landing pages. Needless to say, you’ll have to ask permission from each organization if you opt to use their logo (which is an effective visual approach). And, lastly, it’s important to be actively forging relationships all the time. Of course, the strategies involved in doing so lend itself to another book, but it’s always worth considering how to be on the lookout for partnerships worth adding to your school’s network.

Steps to Consider:

What organizations do you currently have partnerships with? Might you be able to reach out to other departments and offices to find out if there are other organizations that you don’t know about?

Think through which partnerships would be meaningful to which audiences. You may find that some partnerships are great to highlight to donors, while others would be more attractive to prospective graduate students.

Audit your marketing content to find out where you are highlighting your partnerships. Are there gaps? Are these partnerships not presented in the right places or to the right audiences?

Consider reaching out to the organizations you already have partnerships with to ask whether you can use their logo on your marketing collateral.

How can you work with stakeholders on campus to develop more partnerships with your university? This is obviously a much more involved and higher-level initiative, but is there anything you can do to help get things moving?



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CHAPTER SEVEN

Why Every Institution Should Be A Content Marketer

As an institution committed to safeguarding, pursuing, and sharing knowledge, the last tactic covered in this ebook should be right in the wheelhouse of any institution of higher learning. Content marketing is one of the most effective ways to convey to your audience both “empathy” and “knowledge.” Content marketing refers to providing your audience with free educational, inspirational, or entertaining content in an attempt to build a relationship with them, strengthen the perception of your brand, and subtly encourage engagement.

Most colleges and universities already do this to some extent. For example, an alumni magazine or annual report is essentially a type of content marketing—free content offered to members of the school’s community to keep them engaged with the school in some way. By offering to give your audience something educational, valuable, or inspirational, you are acknowledging their needs or desires with an empathetic gift that demonstrates your willingness to help them, even if in a minor way.

At the same time, educational content further asserts your role as an authority in an area of knowledge. When a business professor writes an article on a university blog about the importance of developing professional relationships as an entrepreneur or a dean conducts a podcast interview with biology faculty

about the latest breakthrough in genome editing, you're giving your audience a reason to believe that you are a committed, engaged, and knowledgeable institution. The more you can convey this to your audience, the more they are likely to engage with you as a prospective student, donor, or potential recruit.

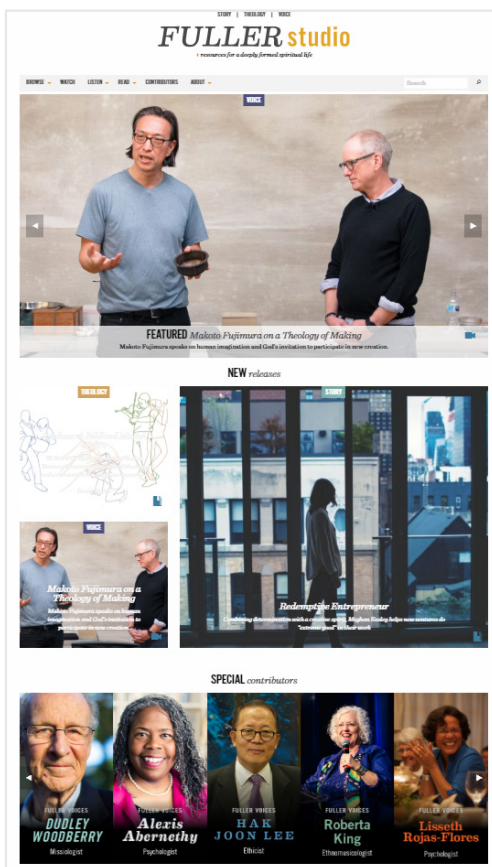
Examples of Great Content Marketing

Fuller Seminary has taken to heart the value of content marketing with their [Fuller Studio](#), which is an online space for the institution to publish content from the university magazine. But it does much more than that: Fuller takes advantage of the digital medium by featuring videos, podcasts, and photos, all of which make for an engaging and polished content hub experience that is akin to that of any major publication. It's not hard to see how a prospective student would view Fuller as an innovative leader in faith-based academia or how a donor would feel good about supporting the institution's mission. While it's true that something like what Fuller has done entails a sizeable amount of resources and a higher level of support, it no doubt communicates to audiences the institution's commitment to their mission within higher education, making it a very attractive organization for people who fall within their audience demographic.

However, you don't have to launch something quite that involved or robust in order to demonstrate authority and empathy through content marketing. The company Blue Bottle Coffee, for instance, provides [helpful and educational content](#) for brewing quality-tasting coffee in a relatively simple format, detailing a step-by-step guide that any amateur barista can reference at home. It's free content that anyone can take advantage of whether or not they're using Blue Bottle Coffee beans or grounds. Yet, it's easy to see how someone who stumbles upon their website in an attempt to learn how to brew coffee better might consider giving the company's coffee a shot because, well, it certainly looks like they know *a lot* about coffee. If they are such an authority on what makes great coffee, then surely they must sell great coffee as well, right?

Educational content further asserts your role as an authority in an area of knowledge.

Fuller Seminary dedicates a section of their website to highlight content from their magazine in a more engaging way.



Another compelling, non-higher ed example of content marketing comes from Intrepid Travel, an organization that books trips for customers to various destinations all over the world. They feature an [online content hub](#) highlighting travel stories and travel tip articles. From pieces on drinking beer in the Czech Republic to the best hiking trails in Australia, Intrepid Travel provides free and helpful resources to eager and curious globetrotters. Someone may reference an article to learn about the “must-see” attractions of Marrakesh and then, perhaps, consider booking a future trip through Intrepid Travel. By providing free inspirational and educational content, they are demonstrating authority (they know the art of travel as well as anybody) and empathy (they understand both the challenges and joy of international travel) in a successful way.

Jumping back to higher ed, Boston University, which already features one of the most impressive examples of content marketing with their [Bostonia magazine](#), also constructed a creative and humorous [Alumni Starter Kit](#) online to help newly-minted alumni begin life after college with confidence and support. Not only is it entertaining, clever, and helpful, but it’s a great way to keep alumni connected to the university. It also means that an alum who takes advantage of the resource might be that much more likely to financially support the university down the road. Something like this is relatively simple, cheap, and easy to do, but it can go a long way in demonstrating to your audience both empathy and authority.

All in all, content marketing is one of the most effective ways to show—rather than just tell—your audience that you’re a knowledgeable and empathetic institution in the story you’re sharing with your marketing.

Steps to Consider:

Do you already have a content hub or blog that could be more active? Universities often already have a platform on which to do content marketing but haven’t kept up with adding content regularly to it.

Who are some experts you can ask for help with content? Do you have relationships with certain knowledgeable professors or experienced alumni? What about admissions counselors or current students? The good news is that being part of a university gives you access to a lot of individuals who can help you create educational and compelling content.

What does your promotional strategy look like? You might already have an active blog or online magazine but are not committing enough time to getting your content in front of your audience. Consider how you can use email, social media, and digital advertising to get your content in front of more people.

How can you figure out what kind of content your audience is interested in? Consider emailing a survey to your audience or conducting short interviews with them in order to determine what content they are most interested in consuming.

What type of content are you already creating or want to create? Blog posts? Videos? Podcasts? Instagram stories? It’s important to diversify your content since different audiences will consume different types of content. Of course, you don’t want to overload yourself if you’re just starting out, either. Be realistic about what you can do today (e.g. blog posts, Instagram stories, etc.) and what you can build up to over time (longer videos, podcasts, etc.).

CONCLUSION



As we've discussed in this ebook, the most successful brands understand that the best way to reach their audience is to tell a story that *actually matters* to them—one that positions your school as the empathetic and knowledgeable guide at their service. When you do this, you're telling a story with your marketing that makes your audience the "hero" instead of a mere side character. It's a primary way of showing, and not just telling, your audience that you can help them achieve their goals or solve their problems through the story you tell with your marketing. And this technique doesn't only work to meet enrollment goals, but it can also help your school reach fundraising, engagement, recruitment, retainment, and other institutional goals critical for success in the higher ed landscape of today.

We've provided examples both within and beyond higher education to help you think about how you can improve your own marketing story and elevate your school's brand. We have also detailed five major tactics that you can adopt to convey empathy and authority to your audience by incorporating testimonials, statistics, awards, partnerships, and content marketing into your marketing strategy.



Get the Distinction You Deserve and Elevate Your Brand

If you're looking for a way to start elevating your school's brand, you will find it especially effective to demonstrate third-party validation from a respected organization, a critical step in conveying authority to your audience. Working in higher education since 2000, our team has become a recognized, trusted resource that helps students find schools that are truly good fits for them, ***all while helping great higher ed institutions gain the distinction and visibility they deserve.***

Reach out today to learn how we can help you achieve the distinction you deserve and elevate your school's brand in the eyes of your audience.

Contact us at info@collegesofdistinction.com

AUTHOR INFORMATION



Tyson Schritter, Chief Operating Officer

In his role as Chief Operating Officer, Tyson helps colleges and universities transform their brands by equipping them with marketing tools that highlight their greatness. Tyson's book "Reaching Beyond Rankings: How to Use College Evaluation Systems to Find Your Dream School" helps students make sense of college rankings in conjunction with other systems to find the right school for them. With a passion for higher education, Tyson is dedicated to helping colleges thrive in a rapidly changing market.

Now a 10-year resident of Austin, Texas, Tyson feels senior enough to gripe about the city's rapid pace of growth and escalating traffic. He is also an extremely passionate baseball fan and often aligns his college visits with the Cubs' out-of-town schedule.



Chris Hazell, Writer and Editor

Chris is a published writer, editor, and content strategist. He has over five years of experience working in higher education where his content strategy work and writing has won several awards. He is passionate about communicating ideas and stories in strategic and meaningful projects and enjoys doing so in collaboration with others.

Aside from copywriting, editorial writing, and content strategy, Chris is a fan of reading good fiction and non-fiction, watching the latest Rotten-Tomatoes-acclaimed film or television series and frequenting local cafés with the best ambience and brewed coffee. He enjoys time spent with friends and family, especially when it involves good food and drinks, and he remains a devoted (though often disappointed) fan of UCLA football.



Nathan Wilgeroth, Associate Director of Outreach & Senior Editor

Originally from Austin, Nathan came back home to join our team after studying English and sociology at Boston University. Nathan works with our members of both Colleges of Distinction and Abound to help them best utilize our tools and profiles. In addition, he collaborates with the marketing and communications teams to craft each blog, article, and publication. Outside of work, Nathan unapologetically geeks out about theatre, yoga, and analyzing anything from the smallest use of punctuation in a poem to the largest overarching systems that shape society as it is today.

