

# Five Strategies for Building a Great University Brand

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A decade ago, few universities thought strategically about their brand. Now, as the market for academic talent, funding, and recognition heats up, the need has become acute. Universities recognize the necessity of building appreciation for what makes them unique. Yet while some universities may be regarded as “great” brands, most aren’t. And it may be because of the ways in which higher education approaches branding.

A color, mascot, or a few words can conjure up strong recognition and appeal for some institutions but not for others because brand is much more than a color or a slogan. Great brands are built by the sum total of promises made—and fulfilled—that add up to meaningful and lasting relationships.

Through our work in higher education and other industries, we’ve developed five key strategies for building great brands. These principles are especially important to universities, where size, complexity and an aversion to “marketing” can make it difficult to build a coherent brand. The more aligned your efforts, and the clearer your promises, the stronger your brand will be.

## **Strategy #1: Brand is not a campaign; it’s your culture.**

You do not build a brand by *selling* something. You build a brand by *being* something, and letting that culture shape the way you behave and communicate. Think about the power of culturally-driven brands like Patagonia or the Girl Scouts of America. Through their cultural values, they inspire a desire to participate. All organizations have cultures, but they can be difficult to bring to the surface. It is important to spend time with people across the institution, to listen and understand their perspectives, because with that effort, you can identify the core principles and drivers that galvanize your community.

## **Strategy #2: Brand is community driven.**

Brand comes from within. It must be believed in and supported by all members of your community. Great brands are those whose missions people want to be a part of, because they are the aspirations of the community. Harley Davidson is not just a type of motorcycle; it is a community of riders whose lifestyle is distinct and appealing to its market. Universities are large, complex communities. Each person needs to understand, believe in, and want to support the university culture in his or her own way for it to be successful. When brand is community driven, it goes from promise to reality.

## **Strategy #3: Brand inspires behaviors.**

Many of our clients tell us they came up with core values during a retreat, but when we look at them, they sound a lot like everyone else’s values. Behaviors, not just basic human values, are critical to building great brands. People generally want to do the right thing, but how do they know what the right thing is for the brand? To be successful, brand behaviors must be defined, articulated and rewarded. Virgin America’s mission has been “to make flying good again,” to help people enjoy the experience. Everything Virgin does, from investing in new cabin décor to creating better inflight entertainment and service experience, contributes to that goal. Customer satisfaction and business success are the rewards that reinforce these behaviors, creating a cycle of growing brand strength.

## **Strategy #4: Great brands are disciplined.**

Great brands also tell you what they are *not*, by making very clear decisions about what they will or will not do or say. One of the best examples of this is Apple. They are simplicity embodied. They have committed to making far fewer products than Samsung or GE, while achieving greater sales and building a much more valuable brand. In marketing, they rally around a few simple themes each year, which keeps the brand fresh and shows how focus brings their promise to life in powerful ways.

**Strategy #5: A great brand is never finished.**

Nike, one of the most successful brands ever, sums it up with the maxim: “There is no finish line.” This has been its mantra since it was founded. At its core, it represents the athlete, not the product, and athletes always have a new hill to climb or record to break. Over its history, there have been many ways in which Nike renewed its brand promise, but always with the same DNA—the commitment to athletes, the same challenge to constantly excel, and the same core personality.

As you consider the work that you do every day, ask yourself, what does this project or this initiative say about our university as a whole? Does it tap into our culture, engage and inspire the community, and reinforce who we are? Is it clear enough, specific enough, and does it provide a path forward? If not, then it may not be helping your efforts to become a recognized and appreciated brand.

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