

# Branding For Higher Education

**Brand U**



*inspired*  
BY UNDERSTANDING™

# What is a Brand?



Let's look back to the old west. Although the practice started much earlier, branding livestock was a big part of commerce at the time. A brand identified an object (livestock) as the property of an entity (a ranch or breeder). That brand for all intents and purposes WAS the ranch or breeder. It was simple to read and unique to the ranch or cattle owner; it told people quite clearly where the livestock came from, and, in some cases the quality of the animal. A brand was frequently used in the purebred [cattle business](#) to identify an animal's original ownership.

Fast forward 100-plus years to brands today: A brand, as defined by the [American Marketing Association](#) is "A name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers." It sums up your product or organization in a name or a symbol, much like the cattle brands of old. It says who you are and, in many cases is an indicator of quality, reliability or other

attributes, such as popularity, social consciousness, cost, an action, and more. Some brands are so iconic they have become verbs, such as Google and Xerox; some brands have become words that have become synonymous with the actual product such as Coke, which often simply means soda; some brands have become adjectives, such as Cadillac (as in "the Cadillac of blenders"); and some iconic brands represent an entire culture, such as Harley Davidson.

A brand is more than a label or a name or a color or a sign. It's a promise, it's a culture, it's an ideal; it's tangible and intangible. As [Heidi Cohen](#) defines it, "A brand creates perceived value for consumers through its personality in a way that makes it stand out from other similar products."





# Why Brand Matters in Higher Education



Let's look at the higher education landscape: [Overall post-secondary enrollments are down](#); [funding is down](#), and [costs for tuition are up](#). Prospective students are beset on all sides by messages from higher education: television, social media, the internet, and direct mail, just to name a few. Ways to get your message out are more plentiful than ever, and everyone is making use of those avenues, making the higher education space very noisy. Without a unique brand and a great value proposition, you will get lost in the noise and your ideal prospects may never hear your message. It's a challenging time and maintaining or increasing applications can be difficult.

Brand is what is going to set you apart from everyone else, especially in a competitive environment. For the older, better-known and better-funded schools like Harvard, it's not much of a problem, but for everyone else, standing out is what will bring success - and a solid brand is the way to stand out.

Most people probably think that well-defined and powerful brands belong primarily in sectors like retail, technology, and sports. The truth is there may be no sector more important for a well-articulated brand than higher education. A 17-year-old is making a one-time, high-price decision, probably for the first time in their life. In the absence of thoughtful brands, the decision could be fraught with risk. But when the student, and typically also the parents, can clearly understand not just the rational parts of the university (like the location, the program offerings, the faculty members, the residences), but also the emotional parts (the philosophy, the "vibe," the culture, and the personality), then they can make a much more informed decision. So it is actually incumbent on higher education institutions to articulate their brands in a way that can give students a sense of what to expect: There is a certain covenant, or promise, that your brand, and any good brand, should aspire to. It's part of the relationship with the student.



## Why Brand Matters in Higher Education

(continued)



What makes things more difficult is that the benefits of a college education can be somewhat less tangible, than say, buying a new car. How do you make higher education as a product more tangible to prospective students?

Your unique attributes are what makes your university or college stand apart from all of the others. The quality of education, the faculty, the culture, the alumni, the activities – these are the tangibles that create an intangible: your *why*, and that is what brings students to your school.

When a person buys a pack of gum that is “wrong” for them, they solve their problem by buying a different kind of gum. The wrong mobile device: They get used to it or upgrade or maybe complain about it on Twitter.

The wrong car: They trade it in, or maybe suck it up and feel disappointed until the payments have been made, and eventually buy a new one. However, the person who chooses a school that is just completely “wrong” for them – may end up on a personal, academic, career, or life path that just doesn’t help them reach their potential. A well-articulated brand is a powerful tool to match up the right people to the right kind of university.

Your institution already has a brand: It’s what people think of your school when they hear the name. No matter what you think your brand is, what really matters is what consumers think your brand is. Your job is to reconcile the two. And that is what’s going to pull your higher education institution ahead the others.



# The Brand Plan



But don't worry about what other institutions are doing; think about what your school needs to do. After all, Harvard is great, but you don't want to be another Harvard; you want to be the only *you* there is.

Chances are some work will need to be done to figure out who you are. You'll need to take a hard look at what you're doing and what you're going to do. You'll have to figure out what makes you different, and whether there are things you need to do to make your school even *more* different. You will need a brand plan.

Through consultation, review, interviews, and analysis, you'll need to identify what makes your school what it is, then summarize that into six short, easy-to-understand ideas:

- 1. Brand Architecture:** The relationship between your main brand and any sub-brands, supporting brands and programs that you have. Your university; schools within the university; programs within the schools; classes within the programs; and support programs and activities.
- 2. Brand Vision:** A tangible statement about where you are and where you want to be based on the university's objectives.
- 3. Brand Positioning:** There are dozens of definitions floating around, but to put it simply, it's what makes you better and different.
- 4. Brand Pillars:** Brand pillars are definitive, factual pieces of proof that support why your brand positioning is true.

**5. Brand Personality:** Your personality is a snapshot of how your brand behaves, its tone, its voice, and who it would be if it were a person.

**6. Brand Promise:** The promise is a distilled statement of what your brand will always deliver - what it will be famous for.

That's the brand strategy, but you also have to look at the outward expression of your brand as the world sees it. That should be a reflection of your strategy, and it is critical. It consists of the four basic elements of how you communicate:

- 1. Corporate Identity:** Corporate ID refers to your name, logo, and slogan, and how they work together. It's not just any one of those elements — it is their relative balance, their uniqueness, how they underscore your story, the relative weight of each, and what your corporate ID, in total, says about you.
- 2. Tone:** Your tone is the type of language you use, and how you want to make people feel when they visit you, deal with you, and read or experience your promotional materials.
- 3. Visual Elements:** Your visual elements include your color palette, photographic style, fonts, etc., that become the signature of how you communicate.
- 4. Concept:** The creative concept is the big creative idea that you become associated with, that engages your audiences, and is remembered.

# The Brand Position



The litmus test for a solid brand position consists of the following:

- 1. Available:** Your position is one that no one else is saying. In crowded and competitive markets such as the education market, you cannot be saying the same thing as a competitor. If the recommended position is not available, it needs to be re-evaluated.
- 2. Deliverable:** Your position has to be true to who you are. If you present yourself in a false or dubious manner, people will figure it out quickly. If the recommended position is not deliverable, then you have to back up; truth is a critical element of positioning.

*Your institution already has a brand: It's what people think of your school when they hear the name. No matter what you think your brand is, what really matters is what consumers think your brand is. Your job is to reconcile the two.*

- 3. Salient:** Perhaps most important, your brand position has to be relevant to your audiences. If the recommended position is not salient, then people will not be attracted to you, they will not connect with you, they will not switch to you.
- 4. Interesting:** Your position has to be delivered in an EXCITING way. Even with a B2B, if the recommended position is not interesting, people will forget you. As the great David Ogilvy once said, "You cannot bore people into liking you."

So, to sum it up let's go back to cattle for a moment. In her "[Small Business Survival](#)" blog, Becky McCray sums branding up this way: "Here's the lesson: It's not the brand that makes the bull valuable. It's [the breeder's] reputation that makes the bull valuable. The brand is just a way of showing it."



# Beyond the Brand



The brand is an important way of identifying and differentiating your school, but there's more to success than just the brand. There's social media, email marketing, digital ads, and more, all using the brand as a basis. What ties all of those tactics together to grow leads and admissions is your website. Without an optimized and robust website, one of two things will happen:

1. No one will find you;
2. People will find you, but they'll find nothing useful and will leave immediately.

Neither one of those scenarios is ideal. You want people to stay on your site, look through the pages, and get useful information – and you want them to come back. That will help them learn more about your university so they can make the informed decision to apply and attend.

Consider this: According to [HubSpot](#), in 2014, 97% of high school seniors said a college or university's website was the best place to find the most reliable information about that particular school; 89% of parents also said they relied on a website for quality information.

Your website, like your brand, is a representation of who you are and what you offer. Make sure the site:

- Is welcoming
- Makes the school appear credible
- Provides truthful information
- Highlights faculty and administration as professionals
- Clearly outlines programs and courses
- Has a consistent layout and structure
- Is easy to navigate
- Is well-written (speak directly to your audience)
- Doesn't have typos and grammatical errors.

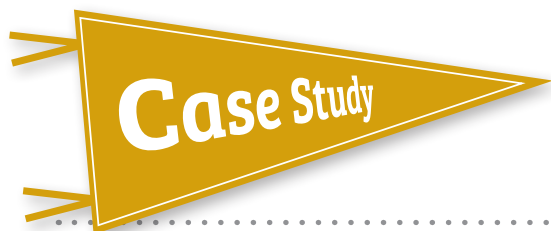
And be sure to offer helpful content, such as ebooks, white papers, financial calculators, videos, a blog, and links to social media. Give prospective students everything they need to know to make an informed decision to apply, and eventually attend.



## m5 Consulting

Want to strengthen or redefine your brand? We specialize in branding strategy; it's in our DNA. Just click to request a consultation. No strings attached.

**Let's Talk!**



Plymouth State University was thought of, even by those close to it, as generic and undifferentiated. The state in which it is located isn't necessarily equated with better universities, but there are a number of them, so this university faced massive competition from other institutions that were all broadcasting essentially the same message. Enrollment was in decline and there were lingering negative perceptions about some aspects of the university. At the same time, the university was rolling out a new educational model, called "Clusters." Clearly it was time for a rebrand. m5 was also tasked with working with PSU to increase enrollment for both undergraduate and graduate students

Before working on the brand strategy, m5's team, headed up by [Michael Pickard](#), Senior Vice President of Strategy & Branding, conducted interviews with senior executives at the university – the president, VPs/ provost and marketing staff; five focus groups consisting of alumni, faculty, staff and students, were conducted; information from previous studies and plans were reviewed; and promotional materials from other universities were studied and considered.

While current students, alumni, staff, and parents are important overall, the main focus of the brand strategy was to develop a high-level brand message that spoke to prospective students and their influencers.

A SWOT analysis revealed that the strengths of PSU included the intimacy of a small school, the active community, the athletics, the rural location and the new educational model.

The opportunities as m5 saw them were to leverage the new Clusters educational model, develop and target a distinct student persona, differentiate from the other state universities, and to get the students to experience the campus either physically or virtually.

m5 developed the persona of an ideal student, identifying pain points and perceived roadblocks; background information and demographics; and important Influencers. This was the target archetype to who the marketing efforts would be directed.

The concept was that for the right student, Plymouth State offers the ideal university experience. The interdisciplinary approach of the Cluster model allows students to build their own program to suit who they are, and who they want to be, in a supportive university environment, surrounded by nature and mountains. From this perfect combination of nature and nurture came the tagline, "See Further Up Here." m5 activated the differentiated brand through a new website and highly digital campaign.

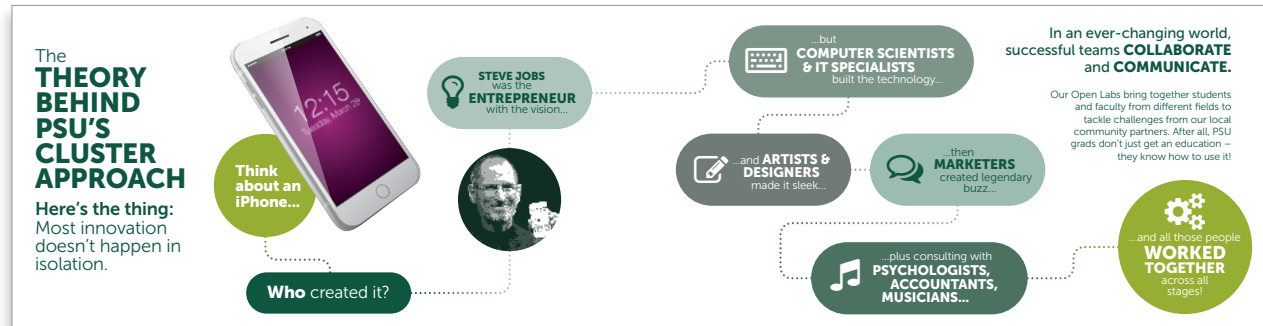
### The Results:

- Undergraduate campaign conversions increased 206 percent
- Graduate campaign conversions increased 152 percent
- Inquires doubled and initiated applications increased 22 percent.
- Cost per acquisition for undergraduates, \$52
- A record breaking class of 1,300 freshmen.

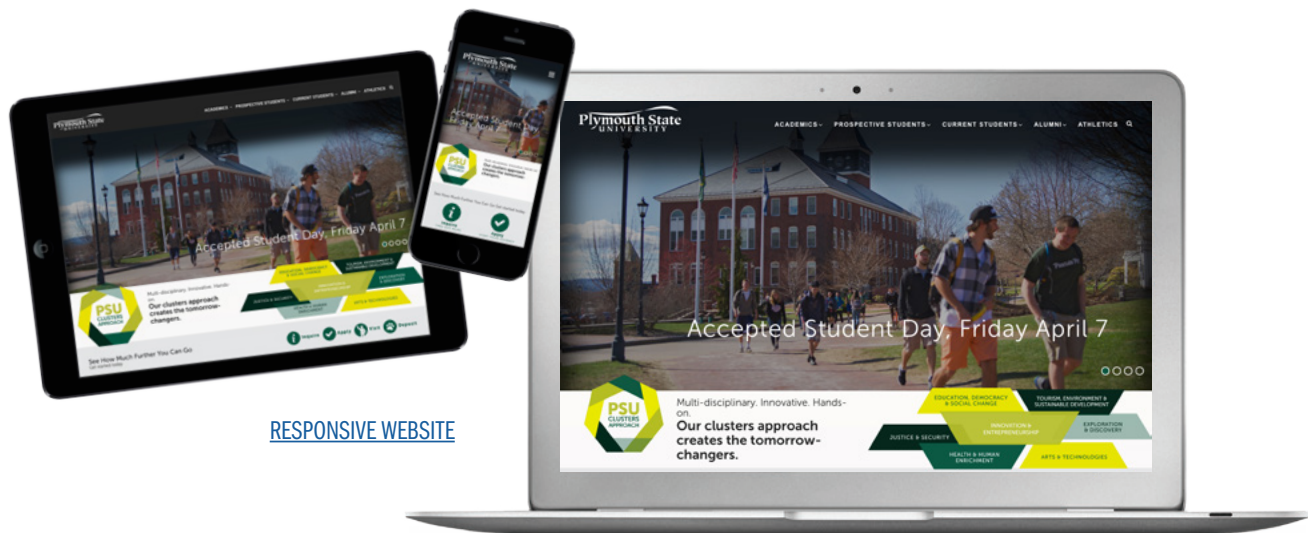


# Case Study

## CLUSTER APPROACH – INFOGRAPHIC



## VIDEO – [VIEW IT HERE](#)



## RESPONSIVE WEBSITE

## Case Study



Enrollment at Acadia, one of more than 90 Canadian universities, 13 of them located within a four-hour drive of Halifax, was in decline and they needed a change in momentum. While Acadia has a solid reputation and a 125-year storied history, it was coming into a time where funding was decreasing, costs were climbing, the number of high school-age prospects was declining, and many other universities were upping their branding game.

Acadia's audience included prospective and current students from all over Canada and the world, their parents and influencers, plus faculty and staff, alumni and the larger community. Through in-depth research, we developed an archetype that is representative of the bulls-eye student who would thrive at Acadia.

What were perceived as challenges were exactly what made the university attractive to that archetype: Acadia is a liberal arts school, in the middle of nowhere, in a tiny university town. The brand platform was built around owning the university's differences, and having a style of learning that is truly different from the competitors.

m5 went to market with the overall umbrella brand platform at the awareness level, and then tailored further communications based on the behavior of the lead. We developed a message matrix that paired user behavior with digital ads to be served through programmatic and remarketing. Understanding that the decision process was not instant, we served these ads for a period before making the real ask – submit your application. This approach proved successful, spurring many successful applications that met with acceptance.

From a creative perspective the ads focused on the new positioning – grow exponentially. The concept was that Acadia is a place where you grow not only intellectually, but as a person; it's a place devoted to helping its students see, discover and unleash their potential for great things. The tagline was "It's in you; Acadia will help you unleash it."

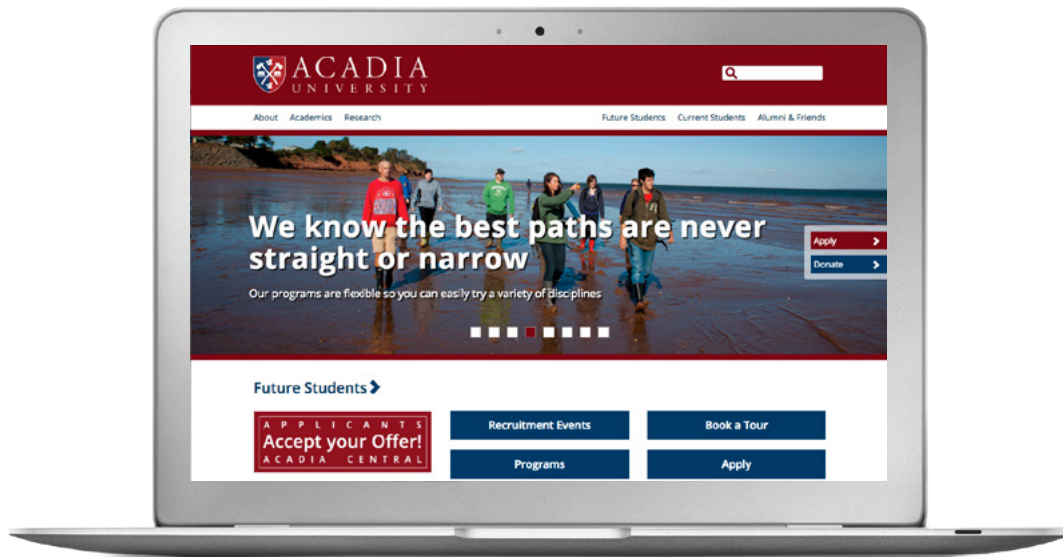
### The Results:

- The number of applications increased dramatically in one year – up 31% within Canada
- Applications went up an unprecedented 534% within Atlantic Canada
- There was an overall 25% increase in first year enrollment (at a time when only one other university in area experienced any growth).

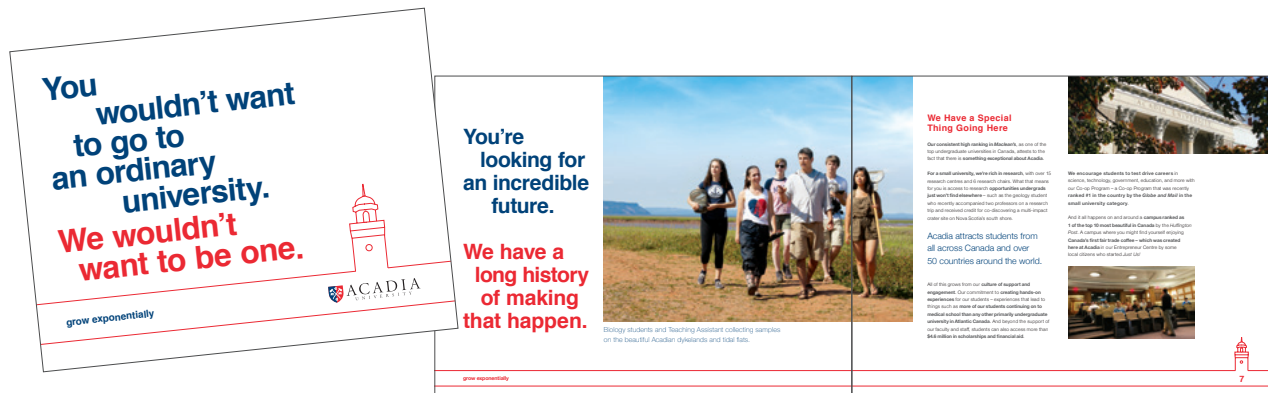
# Case Study



BRAND PHOTOGRAPHY



WEBSITE



STUDENT VIEWBOOK