Where Legends Are Made: How The University of Alabama Synergized its Fabled Athletics Brand with its Academic Missions Through Brand Archetypes

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Marketing - Branding (College Sport)
Abstract 2019-234
Friday, May 31, 2019
Room: Napoleon AB corridor

Personality archetypes have been used extensively in brand creation, identity, and development for decades (Siraj & Kumari, 2011). However, a review of the literature in higher education and intercollegiate athletics revealed no case studies examining how a state flagship institution of higher education that is known for its iconic intercollegiate athletics tradition has successfully drawn on personality archetypes to resonate with key stakeholders. Successful athletic programs can be influential in garnering greater visibility for universities and provide a platform for showcasing university campuses and their distinct brand identities (Vincent & Williams, 2016). However, several authors (see Clayton, Cavanagh & Hettche, 2012; Harris, 2009; Watkins & Devlin, 2013) found that 30-second television football advertisements were mostly homogenous and, as such, failed to positively showcase and differentiate their institutions. These findings suggest that many universities have been underperforming in their advertising and branding efforts and that they need to carefully examine what defines and differentiates them. The Crimson Tide football team has experienced exceptional success over the past decade and as such, The University of Alabama may be the most authentic institution to feature in an advertising and branding campaign of this ilk. As an extension of the strategic planning process, set against a context of a decade of unprecedented growth in both the quantity and quality of its student body, the timing of this campaign seemed ideal. Although The University of Alabama had experienced many golden times with its fabled championship tradition in football, it had, before Legends, never taken full advantage of them in a strategic advertising and branding campaign. Legends, the university’s first such campaign was launched with a television advertisement during the highly anticipated opening Kick-Off Classic football game against The University of Southern California in 2016. The 30-second advertisement combined distinctive images of football players with students practicing ballet and conducting research in science labs.

This case study of The University of Alabama’s Where Legends Are Made award-winning advertising and branding campaign provides insights about how it captured the essence of the university and communicated it in a compelling story. Drawing theoretical perspectives from McCombs and Shaw’s (1972) agenda setting theory and Carl Jung’s personality archetype theory, we used document analysis and semi-structured interviews with key members of the University Administration, Strategic Communication Department, the production team, and external consultants, Dartlet Carnegie, to illustrate how an aspirational master narrative broke through the communication clutter.

The results document how the strategic advertising and branding campaign was conceived, planned, executed, and evaluated. We outline how empirically tested archetype personas were successfully employed to synergize its fabled athletics brand with its academic missions by emphasizing its authentic leadership, contender, and innovator brand archetypes. The campaign resonated with key stakeholders and prospective consumers alike, with each interpreting it in a way that is compatible with their own values, lifestyles, and culture. These findings and their implications are relevant to other state institutions of higher education with fabled athletic brands that wish to distinguish themselves through strategic integrated advertising and branding campaigns.