

Corporations know that a strong brand is essential to a successful communication strategy. For fraternities and sororities, a brand can be more than a logo and a tag line; a brand can become an ideal for the community itself. Organizations that use and communicate a values-based brand through their public relations efforts, recruit individuals who espouse those values, creating a paradigm shift away from the established normative culture of hazing and alcohol misuse.

An early form of “branding” for fraternities and sororities is the coat of arms. Derived from European families who used a coat of arms to identify themselves on the field of battle, fraternities and sororities use a coat of arms for values identification, immediate association, and recognition. However, the form’s relevance to the average undergraduate diminished to the point where today a coat of arms or crest are more revered for their decorative qualities and less for their ritualistic significance.

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Many inter/national headquarters concentrate efforts on developing and updating brands for their chapters but find resistance to these campaigns from chapters that do not completely buy into their own fraternal values. These groups dismiss the branding as “what ‘Nationals’ wants us to do” rather than embrace it as an accurate reflection of their values. Their resistance may stem from a lack of understanding their own fraternal rituals or a complete rejection of the stated values. There is a disconnect between what values sororities and fraternities *should* be branding and what they *actually* brand, resulting in poor decision making and public regard for fraternities and sororities.

Without clearly defined values, it can be difficult for a chapter, council, or fraternity/sorority community to synthesize the elements of an appropriate brand. When chapter t-shirts and promotional materials reflect a lack of respect for women, a culture of alcohol, or another warning, values are not fully integrated into the chapter. For a community that believes “image is everything,” most cannot agree on what that image *should* be. The declining interest in fraternity/sorority life is a natural and understandable reaction to a community that often says one thing and does another.

At this point in the history of fraternity/sorority life, simply promoting values congruence may not be sufficient. We should recognize the importance of strong, local, values-based brands that can serve the future needs of fraternity and sorority chapters. While some individual groups can benefit from their own branding efforts, community-wide brands can be more effective. In addition to drawing more potential new members into the fraternity/sorority community as a whole, the brand can be used by administrators internally to align the chapters with the campus mission. This results in increased accountability of those chapters who do not uphold the values of the entire community, separating them as an anomaly rather than part of the normative culture.

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A 4-step process can help students identify the message behind their campus-wide brand.

1 S.W.O.T. Analysis: Examine the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that fraternity and sorority members perceive in an open, free-form discussion. The purpose of this discussion is two-fold; the students will be on the same page about how they perceive the community around them and they will generate a list of “publics” they interact with regularly. This can also help engage student in the process of developing a community brand.

2 Direct Linkages: From the results of the S.W.O.T. analysis, ask students to identify the publics with a *direct* connection to the fraternity and sorority community. Draw a circle with the fraternities and sororities at the center, with branches leading off to other circles containing the identified publics. This helps students prioritize the publics of the highest concern and recognize those with a direct connection to their success.

3 Public Values Identification: After the students have prioritized their publics and are able to select one or two with the highest priority, they need to understand them better. Have students brainstorm what they believe are the values of the publics identified; if possible, incorporate members of that public into the discussion (for example, having a professor present to discuss faculty values). The commonly used phrase “know your audience” is critical at this step.

4 Messaging: The results of the public values identification must then be compared to the shared values of the fraternity/sorority community. The points of congruence will produce the best messages to correspond to the public. A certain amount of creativity is required here, and the message should go through a few drafts after being presented to a few “test” members of the public. The message should be basic and easily understood and communicated in as few as one or two words.

Once the brand is created and designed, it must be incorporated throughout the fraternity/sorority community. A brand does not become a “living, breathing” part of the campus until it is repeated and recognized by the campus community. If a brand is popular, it will become a mantra, inspiring students to live up to the ideal it represents in addition to their own fraternal beliefs.

In addition to branding, a community or chapter can create a values-based public relations campaign by making some changes that, while simple, require an adherence to basic fraternal values.

- **Chapter officers:** The public relations chair/officer should be focused on the core values of the chapter, not just in getting the chapter’s “name out there.” In effect, they become the “chief ethics officer” and should be charged with instilling a certain amount of responsibility into the chapter for its own values. This means when a potentially dangerous decision comes before the chapter leadership, the public relations chair responds with “that doesn’t match our values” versus “that might make us look bad.”

continued on page 13

- **Faculty:** It can be difficult to determine which faculty members are fraternity or sorority members on any campus; however, there are at least a few easily identifiable allies (who may or may not be affiliated themselves). Bringing these individuals closer to the fraternity/sorority community, via an awards program or honor society induction, is an important step in creating a voice for a fraternity and sorority community that has credibility with the faculty.
- **Athletics:** Strong support of campus athletics is an easy way for a fraternity/sorority community to align themselves with the rest of the community. In addition to being enjoyable and communal, campus athletics are one of the purest forms of school spirit. Highly public, spirited participation at college sports events can elevate image; however, it can reinforce old stereotypes if alcohol or inappropriate behavior are involved.

When creating a new image for fraternity/sorority life, we must acknowledge that there is already a brand. It is beer and wings, *Animal House* and *Old School*, hazing and sexual assault. Images like those are difficult to overcome, but that is why a comprehensive branding strategy is even more important. As stereotypes become self-perpetuating in some chapters' misguided pursuits, more damage will be done (probably beyond what we have already seen or can imagine). There is only so much abuse the system can take before it is too late, and a values-based approach with a focus on messaging can bring about the beginning of a solution.

– *Ray Lutzky is Marketing Coordinator for Marketing Management Analytics, Inc.*