

WHAT'S YOUR ATHLETICS DEPARTMENT'S BRAND?

I'll give you a hint. It's not what you think it is. Sure, we all have mission statements, strategic plans and, perhaps, branding initiatives. But those often tend to be focused on what we want our organizations to be.



Justin Doherty

The reality is that our brands are whatever our customers/fans/donors think they are. And the better we communicate our mission statements and execute our strategic plans, the more closely our customers/fans/donors' impressions of us will align with our own impressions of us.



If an athletics department mission statement includes the goal of great customer service, then we need to make sure our customers (fans) are having an experience that matches our mission. If that's not happening, then the mission statement is just words on a piece of paper and the fans walk away having formed their own (likely negative) impression of the organization. That impression becomes your brand.

The CoSIDA brand over the years has in many ways included an impression of sports information professionals as keepers of statistics and producers of media guides, both of which have been traditional duties of those in the field. The key word there is duties. Those tasks are just part of the profession, not the whole thing. They are not, or should not be, the essence of that office's role within an athletics department.

Communications professionals should, and must, serve a more wide-ranging purpose within the collegiate community and that notion is at the heart of CoSIDA's efforts to re-brand and re-position itself. One of the primary initiatives CoSIDA has embarked upon, as part of a broader overall strategic plan that its Board adopted in June 2008, is a new strategic-based logo.

A brand is, of course, more than just a logo, but there is no question that a logo serves as an important visual representation of any organization and, in our case, a profession at-large. The CoSIDA logo has for years been, basically, a laptop computer. The current CoSIDA leadership does not believe that logo does a good job of representing our profession, organization or its 2,500 members. Again, athletics communications is about more than sitting at a computer. It is more than carrying out perceived mechanical-based and repetitive duties.

CoSIDA launched its new strategic-based logo in late November. We believe it to be clean and more progressive than the old one and our

Board of Directors approved it unanimously. The new mark is navy blue and red with a touch of gold. It also includes the tagline "Strategic Communicators for College Athletics." The tagline sends, we believe, an important message to the intercollegiate community about what we believe our profession should be and can be and how we want you and others within the community to view as our primary resource role within this wonderful enterprise of college athletics. We want, and need, to be perceived as a strategic resource rather than a mechanical-based one.

As I mentioned earlier, the logo is just one part of an overall strategic/branding plan, but it's one of the key visual representations. But a brand has to be more than just image. It has to have substance. For a long time, CoSIDA members have viewed themselves (and, subsequently, others have viewed CoSIDA members) solely as people who manage information (statistics, media guides, bios, etc.). But public relations practitioners play a key role in the strategic initiatives of any organization and that is the message we want to convey.

The communications component of any organization is essential for that organization to succeed. According to prsa.org, the Public Relations Society of America's Web site, "Public relations also sees 'the whole corporate picture,' as it relates to issues that CEOs worry about. Public relations is a key driver of business outcomes critical to organizational success, including crisis mitigation, reputation and brand building, consumer engagement, sales generation, wealth creation, issues management and beneficial shifts in constituent attitudes and behaviors." In short, communications professionals should increasingly be seen as much more than mechanics in carrying out their duties and responsibilities.

Communications professionals in college athletics can reach a wide variety of audiences if they are positioned to do so. The messages that come from a communications office can support ticket sales, donations, marketing efforts, Web site content and on and on. Those efforts can have a direct effect on revenue as well as image building and image enhancing. They can be and should be viewed as architects in this regard rather than mechanics with such important efforts.

We aim, as we move forward, to do all we can with our membership in this regard. We ask that you in the community at-large re-assess how you view our profession and its professionals and help us with our efforts to re-position our primary resource role throughout the enterprise. We ask for your help and direction as we seek to be more universally viewed as "Strategic Communicators for College Athletics."

Thanks for this article to Justin Doherty, assistant athletics director for external relations, University of Wisconsin and CoSIDA President.

