

From a Dog's Breakfast to a King's Table: Branding and Marketing a Major Research University



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The Visual Disconnect

Many a college and university communications and marketing professional has had to convene the conference table meeting. You gather top administrators. You find the largest conference table in the biggest conference room at the institution and lay out dozens (or, in our case, hundreds) of brochures, magazines, business cards, view-books, laptops displaying web pages, and much more of the plethora of print and electronic publications and images representing the organization. The mission is to dramatically show just how tangled and confusing the institution's visual identity – and by extension its brand – has become. There is probably an app for it these days, but when we did it at the University of Colorado (CU) just more than a decade ago, it was a decidedly large conference table.

One administrator at CU called the materials on display “a dog's breakfast.” Few knew quite what that meant, but we all understood it to have many unappetizing ingredients. And that was the image the university was projecting. It was not an image befitting a major educational and research institution that is among the top public universities in the country graduating some 15,000 students annually and ranking among the top 10 nationally in research prowess.

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CU is a large and complex institution, a collection of diverse people, programs, and places. It has four campuses around Colorado: the flagship in Boulder (nearly 36,000 students), an urban campus in Denver (almost 15,000 students), a regional campus in Colorado Springs (just over 12,000 students), and an acclaimed medical campus in Aurora (4,300 students). Its fully online options are housed within CU Online. It boasts 5 Nobel laureates, 10 MacArthur “Genius” fellows, and some 20 alumni-astronauts, who have spanned the US space program, from the early Mercury missions to the International Space Station today. It is Colorado’s third-largest employer and has an annual budget approaching \$5 billion and an annual economic impact of \$14.5 billion.

When it comes to branding, marketing, and visual identity, many public universities such as CU are not command-and-control organizations. The leader cannot say “Here is our logo. Use it.” Instead, a centralized-decentralized approach means units (CU’s departments and entities) act with a fair amount of independence on each campus and within its schools and colleges, much less within the larger organization. The result was obvious on the conference room table. The print collateral and digital resources were sorely mismatched. Fonts, colors schemes, and photography styles were inconsistent. Hand-sketched logos and graphic attempts with clipart were outliers but definitely in the mix. This disjointed mosaic did not reflect our mission-driven university, one of Colorado’s most important assets.

Why Brand?

We had to do something about it. The events that followed our conference table meeting proved often to be painful in the short run and productive in the long run. And the outcome resonates more than ever today.

We had a personal and professional stake in the brand strategy and outcome. We are not only professionals whose duties include serving as keepers and promoters of the institution’s brand, but we ourselves are CU alumni. We have also sent our children to CU. We care deeply for the place that continues to influence our life trajectories and aims to positively transform the lives of thousands of others. We work in different parts of the CU system and therefore offer macro and micro perspectives.

It is important to note the difference between branding and marketing. Branding is the promise of who you are as an organization, using key imagery, narratives, and culture to permeate the place. It is what you stand for and how your institution drives emotional connection. Marketing is how you promote that brand and build strategic relationships, ranging from target audience segmentation and customer journey mapping to orchestrating authentic marketing mix touchpoints, such as traditional and digital advertising and interactive websites.

It was time to embrace the lessons of the conference table exercise. We needed a renewed focus on brand management, strategy, and execution, including a deeper focus on digital engagement and research. Fortunately, at CU, we had a president who recognized the problem. As an experienced business and civic leader, he understood the necessity of effective branding and marketing in private and public spheres of influence.

He set us on the sometimes painful but ultimately productive path of getting our arms around the university's brand and marketing efforts in ways that were networked, consistent, and visually appealing. His mantra was that the hundreds of disjointed messages and images confused our stakeholders, and there were many to confuse.

Like any large research university, CU's audiences include prospective students, current students, faculty, staff, parents, alumni, donors, elected officials, media, the business community, community organizations, research partners, and more. The dog's breakfast approach was inefficient (particularly in the use of funding). But, worse, it was ineffective because CU exists in a crowded higher education marketplace where competition – for students, for donations, for state funding, for faculty, for research dollars, and for attention – was and is extreme. We needed to create alignment and greater cooperative networks and consistency across campuses to line up under a master brand umbrella.

When we started our project, state support for colleges and universities, particularly in Colorado (which ranked 48th nationally in state support for higher education and is now 47th), was in a downward spiral accelerated by the recession of 2008–2009. A crop of online institutions poached students and faculty. Worthy charities (especially during the economic downturn) competed for philanthropic dollars. Additionally, about one-third of people in our state (less nationally) have a college degree. This means nearly two-thirds of people do not have an affinity with the university outside shirttail connections, such as my cousin or grandchild went there, or I like the football team.

Perhaps most important, the flood of images and messages from ever more sophisticated and technologically savvy corporations, organizations, and causes made effective branding and marketing imperative to CU and its colleague colleges and universities.

Navigating Branding Speed Bumps

Branding and marketing have not always played well inside higher education. A common refrain is a version of “We are *educators*, imparting knowledge and conducting important research, not grubby businesses making and selling widgets. Be away with your branding and marketing!” Yet the market realities facing higher education skewed that somewhat true but antiquated notion.

To help make the case, CU engaged a nationally known branding and marketing firm. We warily eyed a few speed bumps: a history of the university studiously avoiding even the appearance of anything so pedestrian as branding and marketing, a skeptical internal audience perfectly comfortable with not being told what to do, and a public ready with criticism of “wasting taxpayer dollars.” Yet, we waded into the fray.

We will not paint a rosy picture. Getting the wider university community on board with branding was part persuasion and part trench warfare. We found that the conference table exercise was the tip of the iceberg. In an inventory of logos alone, we uncovered more than 500 across the CU system. Since the 1980s, CU's visual identity has been anchored by an interlocking version of the letters *C* and *U*. The

more successful units still used it. Some lesser offenders corrupted it with various colors, orientations, and additions. Most just created an entirely new logo that seemingly had no connection with the university whatsoever. When we asked about its origin, we often heard a version of “the director’s niece designed it” or the all-too-common (and proudly delivered) “our students created it!”

Another problem was the athletics logo on our Boulder campus, known as the Ralphie logo. Ralphie is the live buffalo mascot that leads the CU football team onto the field before games. The logo is a canted interlocking *CU* inside the outline of a buffalo. It is wildly popular. The Boulder campus administration had been waging its own campaign to limit it to athletics and spirit uses. It is trademarked and licensed, so unauthorized use of it costs the athletics department lost revenue. Additionally, there was a contingent on the campus who felt an athletics logo, no matter how compelling, should not represent an academic institution.

Whether using Ralphie or a niece’s or student’s design, units fiercely held their positions. “We are competing against the University of X!” they cried. “We have to differentiate ourselves from Y,” they said. Our favorite was those who felt compelled to differentiate themselves from similar schools or colleges on CU’s other campuses. In other words, we were competing against ourselves. “We are special. We are different. You do not understand!” There is a certain irony in a communications and marketing professional hearing from a Philosophy Department chairman that we just do not get it.

The first step was to get a sense of the magnitude of the problem through market research and a competitive assessment. The university needed to ascertain what key audiences thought of us – not what we thought of ourselves. We surveyed our national competitors. We sent out 40,000 electronic surveys and received an impressive 25% response rate. We held focus groups with alumni, donors, current and prospective students, parents, and business and community leaders. We presented at endless faculty meetings and staff meetings. The market research played out in similar fashion across the university, on a broad scale, and in colleges and departments.

Our committed colleagues in communications and marketing across our system were allies in the cause and invaluable to the effort, including employees in central communications offices and communicators at college and department levels. They were on the frontlines every day, making connections, listening, sympathizing, refuting, and weaving inspiring narratives. They always held the line and steered the more recalcitrant back into the fold. During the branding initiative, we convened several in-person brand summits, attended by hundreds of communications professionals, to get everyone on the same page.

Central university communications offices at all four campuses developed brand promises, elevator speeches, messaging platforms, branding websites, advertising, and more. All cascaded from higher-level messaging that leadership and communications and marketing professionals collaborated on and agreed to. Within months, they engaged school and college deans, communicators, and selected faculty to collaborate on unit-specific messaging platforms, creative strategies, and marketing mix elements. Everything they created laddered up to the campus and CU system’s branding and positioning.

Nobody likes having things taken away from them, especially things they hold dear. However misguided about the value of their micro approach, the partisans were loath to give up on their logos and visual identities, no matter how unattractive or ineffective. Nor did it help that the people asking them to do so were from the distant, faceless central administration or the communication's office: "What do they know of us?!"

Our centers and smallest subunits with more independent funding streams were most likely to oppose giving up decades-old logos. Their directors said things like: "Our partners at X university and Y community organization are not going to work with us anymore because that color scheme does not mesh with theirs." Another saying we heard was: "People know us as a national center and it's better to stick with the old logo because the new CU logo may hurt our funding prospects."

In our estimation, they substantially overestimated the impact of their marks and underestimated the broader university's brand equity. Because CU is a national research leader, an identity forged with CU is highly likely to bring in more partnerships and more funds. We witnessed some negotiations and personalized guidance take place in these arenas. For instance, communicators took the extra time to deliver newly written and designed websites paired with professionally refreshed print collateral in exchange for brand compliance. This is not to say that the squeaky wheel always gets the grease. Some branding negotiations remain ongoing in these subunits. The brand also needs continual policing because people new to the organization often dive right into their own brand redesigns, unaware of the larger university effort.

Launching Our Efforts

The launch of the new branding solution was multipronged. It started with a sustained internal campaign that had the backing of the university president and each campus chancellor. We laid out a compelling case that described the problem and its consequences and solutions. We used third-party market research to make the case that no, the units were not as special as they imagined. Their logo was just an ingredient in a dog's breakfast that was indistinguishable from many other ingredients. A unique logo would not help differentiate subunits. They only confused stakeholders. Worse, many outside observers did not know that some units were even affiliated with CU. They were like free agents floating around in the market.

University culture reveres research. When our constituents saw the breadth and depth of our quantitative and qualitative market research efforts, detailed earlier, they were impressed. The epiphany was obvious to our stakeholders. Our brand equity rested with the University of Colorado, not its component parts. If people had a touchpoint with the university or even if they did not, they knew CU, what it did, and what it stood for. They did not necessarily know the Philosophy Department or the Parking Services unit or the College of Arts and Sciences specifically, but they knew CU. This gave us a toehold to advance in the trenches.

The headlines and messages that would soon hit the market were previewed with internal audiences during the launch. While they proved popular, we discovered

many covert art critics with decided opinions. There was also a chunk of people who just would not buy it, no matter how compelling. But the vast majority did. Our key to headline and messaging success was engaging and carefully listening to stakeholders early and often. Research with our audiences helped articulate our brand personality, illustrating the university as a person with a unique personality. We convened endless meetings to inform the university's common mission and vision of who we are, what we do, and what we aspire to become.

Along the way, people at the university had lots of opinions, and few of them could be distilled into concise sentences or statements, which is the lifeblood of branding and marketing. But through continual engagement, feedback loops, input and refinement, lots of listening, and some imploring, we got there. Our branding teams developed messaging around four of the university's fundamental activities (expanding each to a two-word idea): learning and teaching, discovery and innovation, health and wellness, and community and culture. The broad messaging buckets encompassed virtually everything the university does and allowed campuses, schools, colleges, and units to tailor their specific messages to their key audiences. Most everyone went home happy.

Campuses created beautiful marketing campaigns with refreshed messaging, which were consistent with the umbrella brand. For instance, CU Boulder's "Be Boulder" campaign showcased diverse students and famous alumni, often pictured with dramatically beautiful mountain images and well-known campus buildings on what many view as one of the most beautiful campuses in America. CU Denver launched with a "Learn with Purpose," which morphed into a "CU in the City" campaign. These campaigns featured highly diverse students and faculty faces, paired with urban Denver photography scenes. These campaigns were blessed at top levels of the university. They graced airport terminals, viewbooks, city billboards, banners on city and campus light poles, and more.

The Importance of Graphic Expertise, Branding Toolkits, and Brand Boards

How do you replace hundreds of logos with a simple yet powerful version of the interlocking *CU*? The secret ingredient was talented graphic designers across our campuses, who took great pride in the work. This was nobody's niece. These were highly skilled professionals who knew about color and line spacing and fonts and images – all those seemingly small details that are critical to successful imagery.

There was also a bit of a carrot and stick involved. The carrot was the wonderful visual identity that made it easy for campus units to adopt. Branding toolkits were made readily available, tailored to units. These key resources made units feel empowered. They were connected to the larger university but also appreciated that their department or unit had a certain prominence within it.

We created a board on each campus responsible for brand identity standards, along with a systemwide board comprised of representatives from all the campuses plus the president's office. The systemwide board members are the arbiters of all things brand: mediating disputes, fielding requests, and evangelizing. This group created a brand identity manual that clearly laid out the rules of the road, with lots of visual examples.

The president and chancellors clearly and consistently communicated why we were engaged in the work, what the outcome would be, and what it meant for campuses, schools, and departments. We also codified the work in university policy, the amorphous guide to all things at a university. CU's Board of Regents, its governing board, approved the policies and let it be known that they expected compliance for the good of the university.

Still, it was not all sweetness and light at the end of the darkness. There were naysayers who clung to the old ways. The loneliest job at the university was that of brand cop, those poor souls dispatched to the far reaches of the campuses to engage would-be brand offenders and convince them to join the fold. For instance, some units asked to create T-shirts and giveaways with older logos or off-brand marks. Others wanted to place independently created department taglines on merchandise. They might say things like "My husband owns a clothing design company. Can't we employ his graphic design services to make this happen?" The answer was a resounding no. Campus units needed to purchase university giveaways, clothing, and merchandise from one of our seven licensed vendors, who had all been officially trained on university branding standards. Our vendors cooperate with internal clients, communicators, and branding experts to get signoffs on design before printing. As a result, we no longer have stretched or independent logos, or unapproved taglines, on university giveaways.

As another example, "brand cops" worked to calm faculty members asking for uniquely designed business cards and office stationery. We needed to stick to university policy and say no. All orders for CU business cards and stationery use a standard CU template and are printed at our university print shop for consistency. The only variation is multilingual elements added to faculty and staff business cards, if applicable to their campus role and responsibilities.

A marketing and communications leader at another university, upon hearing about our project, said, "The woman who led that effort at our university was the most hated person on campus for 2 years; now, she's beloved."

Branding Success: Measurements, Outcomes, and Feedback Loops

Success came gradually and then suddenly. We narrowed 500 logos down to a half-dozen. Soon, the furor around the project subsided almost entirely. New materials looked good. They reflected a serious and valuable research university. People

suddenly understood that the brand and visual identity were important and that it was no longer the Wild West where units did what they wanted. There would be the occasional brushfire, but nothing that could not be doused.

Still, there were aberrations. The entire Colorado Springs campus negotiated with the president to use UCCS in its typography because that is what it is commonly known as. The compromise was that it would be used alongside the interlocking *CU*. Not ideal, by any means, but not horrible. Ironically, in market research the campus conducted nearly a decade after the branding project started, fully one-third of respondents did not know the campus was affiliated with the University of Colorado. Images and words matter.

The healthcare system affiliated with the university was another aberration. Just as the branding project was wrapping up, the University of Colorado Hospital teamed up with other health systems and hospitals to create UCHealth. It was confusing because the University of Colorado Hospital is a separate entity from the university. Although all of its doctors are faculty in the CU School of Medicine, in the early 1990s, the Colorado Legislature made it an authority separate from the university. When the hospital merged with other hospitals and healthcare systems, it was governed by its own independent board. We at the university certainly tried to bring them into the branding fold, but they determined they needed brand autonomy to deal with their own market imperatives and competitive pressures. It was probably a lost opportunity (for both entities, we believe), but one we could not control.

We use a variety of metrics to track success of our branding efforts. Those relating to lead generation and our student enrollment pipelines are tracked via a sophisticated data visualization software tool. These measures include application numbers and enrollment yield information. Administrators may view these numbers at a high level and then dive deep to see them play out at the unit and major levels across time. With this software, we see trends relating to student diversity, student success, and much more. We track advertising, social media, and PR with metrics from impressions, reach, clicks, likes, and engagement from stakeholders. Our mass emails now feature branding templates. We track open rates, clicks, registrations, and the like.

For the university overall, the outcomes have been positive. CU set annual fundraising records for almost the entire decade after the project was implemented. Enrollment at the four campuses hit record highs. Research funding topped \$1 billion annually for the first time. While it may be a stretch to attribute all that success to branding and marketing, they certainly contributed.

They also laid the groundwork for CU's successful marketing campaign of recent years with the tagline "All Four: One." It aimed to show that the university had four campuses and offered something for every kind of learner, in addition to being an asset to Colorado and its communities. It can be seen in a marketing sponsorship of the high-speed train to Denver International Airport, on television, on social media, in print, and elsewhere. Annual research assessing the project shows a rising needle on favorable impressions.

Conclusion

The university we chose as undergrads so many years ago is still our continuing passion. The institution's public mission, paired with its accomplished and diverse students, faculty, staff, and alumni, propel it forward. While it was a long and winding brand journey, all campuses and units are now living under the same iconic University of Colorado umbrella. We project consistent, coordinated images and narratives. Our brand value is conveyed in strategic, thoughtful, clear, and compelling ways. It is good for us to have the perspective of nearly a decade to look back to see where we came from and where we are today. The success makes us proud as communications and marketing professionals. But it makes us even more proud that it is our alma mater.