

CHAPTER 5

(With) Whom Do You Need to Cohere (Co-Hear)?

For the students in my advertising class trying to sell me a candy bar (see Chapter 3), this question is a no-brainer. After all, there's only one guy in the room who's waving around a five-dollar bill and professing a sugar craving.

But in a world as complex and multi-faceted as higher ed, the answer may not be as clear-cut; and without a pretty thorough understanding of how your particular institution does (or should) respond to this question, your marketing endeavors don't stand a chance. So before we commence with some specifics on how to arrive at coherence, let's take a moment to identify—and prioritize—the audiences who will be critical to your success.

Peter Drucker, in his thought-provoking essays captured in *The Five Most Important Questions You Will Ever Ask About Your Nonprofit Organization*¹, smartly suggests that you begin by focusing on your *primary* audience. For schools, that would be students and their

surrounding support network of faculty and staff.

“Wait, wait, wait,” I can hear you saying. “What about donors? And legislators? And boards? And parents! Those are pretty primary to *us*, anyway.” Of course they are important, and we’ll get to them in just a bit. But they are not your primary audience. Your primary audience consists of those for whom your mission is written. A college would simply not exist for any reasonable purpose were it not for students.

Here’s a way to think of your primary audience. Picture a Callaway® HX Hot Plus® golf ball. You’ve got one lying around the house, right? Constructed for improved distance, this beauty is made of three parts: It has a Polybutadiene core (that’s hard rubber to you golf-ball novices) that is wrapped in a speed layer of DuPont™ HPF, which is then wrapped in an outer, harder shell of Ionomer with HEX Aerodynamics. Have that pictured, do you? Great, because that’s a perfect image to illustrate your primary audience.

We noted before that your primary customer is the group your mission is written to serve. At a college or university, remember, that would be currently enrolled students in any size or shape they come. Residential 18-year-olds. Forty-something working adults. Online. Offline. Inline. All currently enrolled students. Not prospective students. Not former students (alumni). *Current students.*

In our golf ball analogy, that amazing Polybutadiene core represents current students. Powerful stuff, that Polybutadiene—as are your students. They’re powerful because they represent the audience you must satisfy most. They must be served well. They must benefit most from your mission. For them, you absolutely must deliver on

your promises. If your mission is to create world leaders, then there will be future presidents, senators, CEOs and emperors among them, and you will have to offer services and programs to prepare them. If you exist to equip students for careers, then your career-planning officers will be top-notch professionals; corporate recruiters will be storming your campus to retain new hires; and your students will be launching careers immediately after graduation. If you are educating pastors and missionaries, your students will expect preparation second-to-none for filling pulpits and engaging diverse cultures and places. If you are all about delivering a clear foundation in the liberal arts, your humanities core has to rock.

In other words, you have to meet—or better yet, exceed—the expectations of your primary audience. If you do not make the user-experience on a par with—or better than—your claims, you should sell your campus right now, or merge with another school that is serious about doing so. On today’s golf course of higher ed, amateurs won’t be long-term players. The competition is too great, the cost is too high and the market is too savvy.

Not long ago, while on site at Post University, a for-profit residential liberal arts college in Connecticut whose institutional tagline includes the phrase “student-focused,” we were taking a campus tour with Marcelo, the director of marketing. When we walked into the dining commons, he bumped into a student who was helping with one of his projects on campus. Marcelo took the occasion to ask the student how things were going and if there was anything she could think of that would make her experience better. “Well, I’m pretty happy with things as they are,” she said. “But it

would be great if we could have an occasional shuttle van scheduled for trips into town.” “Done!” was Marcelo’s response. Clearly, he understood his primary market—and the importance of delivering what you say you will deliver. And, indeed, today a designated regular shuttle service transports Post students to destinations throughout town.

(Someone—or everyone—reading this right now is saying, “That’s just giving in to those spoiled Gen Y brats.” But remember that those precious treasures of Boomer and Gen X parents are the customers for whom you exist. And here’s another alert: Neil Howe, the expert on generational studies and the author of *Millennials Rising*, predicts that Gen X moms and dads will not be helicopter parents, but rather stealth bombers in that they sneak in with hard-hitting demands. Duck and cover, baby.)²

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So current students represent the heart of your primary audience; they’re that all-important inner core in our three-layered golf ball. But let’s extend this metaphor further.

According to DuPont’s website, wrapped around that core in the Callaway HX Hot Plus, you’ll find a layer of HPF resins that “offer a breakthrough combination of resilience, softness and toughness” to help drive the ball farther. In our illustration, this resin wrapper is your teaching faculty. These distinguished women and men, like the resin, equip your students to go the distance. They must be resilient, given the demands of their students, and they must offer gentle guidance and “tough love” to set a proper course for their protégés.

Your faculty is also part of your primary customer group. And, as you well know, they have their own set of needs, about which they can be rather vocal. Listen to those needs—even the outrageous ones—and, to the extent that you are able, meet them; because professors are inextricably linked to your students and, though the mission isn't directly about them, they are part of your product. What's more, they're essential ambassadors in recruitment. The University of South Florida acknowledges the power of faculty in convincing admitted students to enroll. USF developed a “BFF (Best Friends Forever)” communications strategy that engages faculty and staff from academic departments and programs in personal contacts with their most promising and qualified admitted students.

And what about that protective outer layer of our Callaway golf ball? The tough stuff? You guessed it: staff and administration. Presidents and senior officers who set the course and manage. Directors and coordinators who carry out the plans. Directors of admission. Deans of Student Life. Athletic directors. Controllers. Chaplains. The people on your campus who hold it all together, getting hit hard and often, and sheltering the students and faculty from the blows. And of course, the really thick-skinned and tough-shelled: cafeteria staff, admissions road warriors, data entry personnel, physical plant specialists. All of these significant members of the community are part of your primary audience. As employees, their needs must be met, too.

Collectively, your primary customer audience is the frontline of your marketing effort. So you should be asking, openly and often: What does your primary audience think about you? What are their

needs? What's on their wish list? What would make their experiences with you better? Do you really know? If not, you'd better find out, stat. Because more public relations progress, recruitment success and capital campaign achievement rests in the hands—and especially on the lips—of your primary customers than any other audience you consider important.

Here again is that definition of coherence from an earlier chapter: Coherence is the discipline of ensuring a transparent connection between customer expectation (brand) and authentic user experience. Coherence is aligning what we deliver with what we say we deliver. Coherence engages customers in shaping a meaningful experience that meets their needs.

Make sure your efforts toward coherence focus first on your primary customer audience. Meet their needs. Exceed their expectations. Make raving fans. Because as we noted earlier, in a world defined by proliferating social media, you can be assured that your internal audiences are very closely connected to your external audiences.

Get it right with your primary customers, and you'll get it right.

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