

## CHAPTER 6

## En Route to Coherence: Locating Your Institution on the Marketing Map

Several years ago, business took me to downtown Boston, which at that time was in the throes of the “Big Dig,” the city’s enormous roadway and tunneling infrastructure project. A colleague and I had flown in late in the evening and had a client meeting the next morning. The weather was poor, and I was glad that our Hertz rental car was equipped with a global positioning system. As annoying as the system’s mechanized voice could be (“Right turn in point five miles”), Randy and I appreciated the clear direction as we left the hotel and made our way through the maze of streets and highways under construction.

Near Faneuil Hall, however, in the middle of a critical voice instruction, the system cut out. I looked at the small screen, hoping that the bright pink arrows would guide me when the voice did not. Instead, I saw a green band running left to right across the screen with a text message indicating that

the system was “seeking third satellite.” While Randy scavenged for the complimentary city map from Hertz, we started a conversation about GPS programming.

Global positioning systems may rely on space-age technology—satellites—but they also employ an age-old methodology to guide befuddled travelers like Randy and me. That methodology is called “navigational triangulation,” and reduced to its basics, it is simply a matter of using the intersection of lines from three points to locate someone or something in space. Before there were satellites, someone seeking to pinpoint a location could use three landmarks to achieve the same results—though he or she wouldn’t have the luxury of a car that offers audible step-by-step directions.

As Randy and I reviewed our collective knowledge of GPS and triangulation, we were struck—not by another car, I am happy to report—but by an analogy. As we creative types are prone to do, Randy and I started to connect the dots between the idea of navigational triangulation and our work as marketing communicators for our clients in the not-for-profit sector. We observed that, like a GPS, today’s organizations and institutions need three perspectives in order to position themselves accurately within their environments. The “satellites” our clients must seek are:

- *Who they are.* Beyond what their official mission and values statements say, today’s not-for-profits—colleges and universities, especially—need to know what effect they really have on the world around them, and why;

- *What messages they are currently communicating about themselves.* Institutions must understand not only what is intended, but also what is implied or suggested by the look, feel, image and content of their marketing efforts;
- *What external audiences understand and believe about the organization.* What consumers say you are—regardless of whether those perceptions are accurate in your eyes—defines your “brand.”

These three “satellites” help colleges and universities—and other not-for-profit organizations—define their places in the market. They can identify your true points of differentiation and meaning, and in a very real sense, locate your organization on the landscape of competing groups and messages. Quite simply, these three satellites will put your institution on the map.<sup>1</sup>

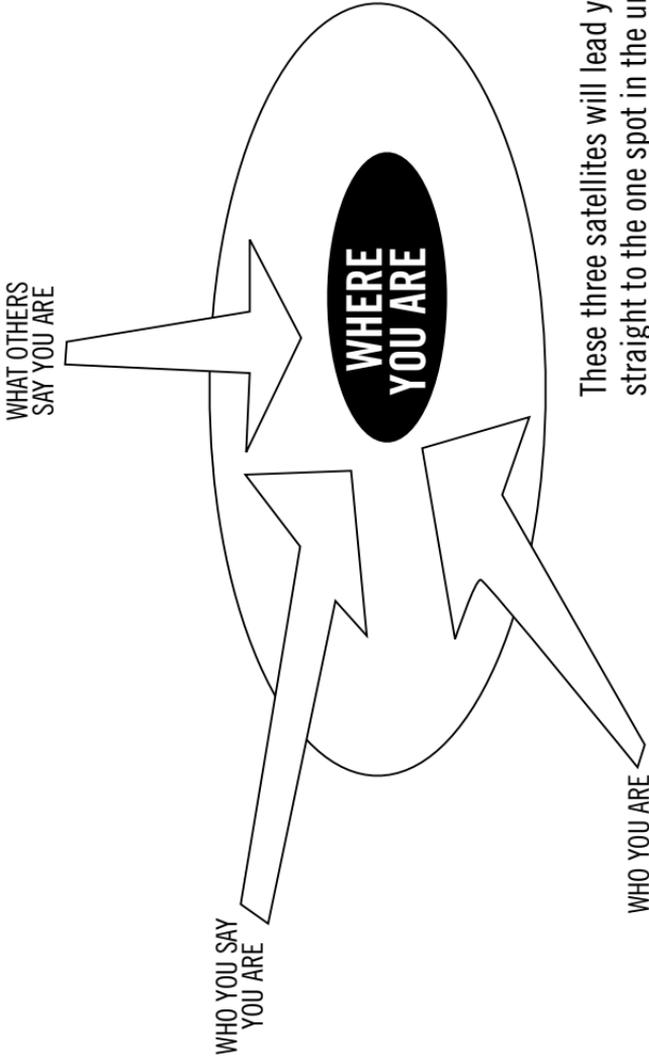
It must be said, however: you cannot hobble along guided by only one or two of these satellites. It simply won’t work. Just as Randy and I were left lost and scrambling when one of our satellite signals was interrupted, you cannot pinpoint your one-and-only market position without the aid of all three of these perspectives. And without knowing that position, you cannot move toward coherence.

Here’s a good example of the three satellites in action. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, at a critical moment in the history of Sweet Briar College, RHB was invited to assist in developing messaging to support recruitment efforts. You may recall this first-tier, single-gender institution was threatened by declining enrollments. We began our work by seeking the “first satellite” perspective (*who are*

*we?*) through market research on campus. (At RHB, we employ a signature research methodology called *Circles of Influence*<sup>SM</sup>, a variation of the traditional focus group that allows us to explore the relationships and experiences that characterize life on a particular campus.) During our *Circles* conversations, we consistently heard students, faculty and staff refer to the students as “girls” rather than “women.” We were interested in this use of language that, at first blush, seemed less than politically correct. Yet, at Sweet Briar, the use of “girls” was perfectly acceptable.

Another interesting observation that arose from our “first satellite” investigation: In almost every one of our interviews, someone would whisper as an aside that the school’s colors were pink and green. After a few days of repeatedly hearing this, we began to ask questions about the apparent reluctance to publicly discuss school colors. We were informed that the issue was a campus sore spot, because some members in the community considered those colors “too girly.”

Lastly, our conversations on campus introduced us to an array of beautiful, if a little quirky, annual traditions and activities that connected the community in meaningful and lasting ways. We were told of the custom of passing along graduation gowns from one class to the next, each year adding a memento from the graduate; of tap clubs, the Sweet Briar social organizations structured around extracurricular interests; of class rings and personalized mugs; of annual Founder’s Day processions. Of course, we heard scores of other interesting messaging platforms, as well, but I’m calling attention to these particular findings to make a specific point.



These three satellites will lead you straight to the one spot in the universe occupied by your organization.

When we moved to the “second satellite” portion (*what do we say about ourselves?*) of our study, examining the College’s current marketing and communication efforts, we discovered that while the academic quality message seemed clearly conveyed, little attention was given to the interesting community experiences that characterize Sweet Briar. We also noticed that, at the time, all the College’s marketing messages referred to students as “women,” which we noticed in contrast to our conversations on campus. And the packaging of the College’s marketing tools employed a palette of cool colors: blue, green and silver. (Again, I’m highlighting a few observations from the hundreds we considered.)

These findings helped formulate some questions that we were able to pose to external markets in our “third satellite” research (*what do others say we are?*). Specifically, given the College’s needs and goals at that time, we sought to understand the perceptions of prospective students, their mothers, and alumnae with various demographics targeted to specific geographic areas. Among other topics, we wanted to know how audiences perceived the use of the words “girl” and “woman.” We wanted to know to what extent they valued tradition and memory-making experiences. We wanted to know the associations they made with the color pink.

With the insights gained from all three satellites, we found opportunity. We discovered a niche among academically qualified, engaged, confident, fun-loving 17-year-olds. We garnered courage and were emboldened. We uncovered a space that only Sweet Briar could occupy. As a result, Sweet Briar launched a risky, but remarkable, recruitment campaign in 2005, based on the theme

“Think is for Girls.” The accompanying visuals implemented the school colors of pink and green, and—without diminishing the messages of academic quality—highlighted the closeness (and even the quirkiness of the traditions mentioned earlier) of the Sweet Briar community. As we noted, the campaign yielded positive results for the College. It’s also garnered substantial attention from the higher ed community. But the campaign likely would not have taken off, had we relied on less than three satellites of perspective. Let me explain.

Had we only the results of the first satellite question (*who are we?*), we may have dismissed the use of the word “girl” as too detached from the formality of higher ed, if not too uncharacteristic of education’s commitments to political correctness. We may have overlooked the option of pink and green as a color scheme, given the tentativeness we heard in our interviews. (Remember, interview participants *whispered* this information.) From satellite two (*what do we say we are?*), our reluctance to act on the language and color would likely have been confirmed, since the existing materials shied away from those topics and tones. The third satellite (*what do others say we are?*) gave us the open window to pursue new messaging and packaging, since employing “girl” language, a new color palette and revised messaging yielded positive response. Armed with all three perspectives, Sweet Briar took a bold move to the front of the line.

You can, too.

---

1 In his book *Truth, Lies and Advertising*, Jon Steel also makes a case for the application of the triangulation theory, suggesting that good advertising needs three perspectives: the agency’s, the consumer’s and the client’s. And my friend, James Hillman, who, in addition to being a successful business owner, is also a pilot, says that, when flying, five perspectives are required for global positioning. He reminds me that since our marketing work is done on earth, however, three perspectives will suffice.