

# Successful Partnerships are KEY to Developing Employees as Brand Ambassadors

*By Rosemary Madnick, Michelle Renfrew, and Melissa Parks*

**I**n an increasingly interconnected world within universities facing multiple challenges, successful partnerships must be based on clear collective actions and goals. In higher education, universities are finding that it is no longer effective to focus narrowly on research, student recruitment, and donor communications. Rather, we must explain what the institution does, develop a unique market position, and strengthen the university brand. When it comes to strengthening the university brand, there is no better way than to develop internal brand ambassadors through employees.

A university's brand can be described as its reputation, the mental image that appears in the minds of its many stakeholders that include prospective students and their parents, employees, community members, legislators, alumni, donors, faculty and staff at other educational institutions, and even funding agencies. When managed well, a strong brand can make a difference in how the university's stakeholders support, engage with, and contribute to the institution.

Although the marketing and communications department is primarily responsible for developing and maintaining the university brand, and the office of grants and contracts is primarily focused on obtaining and managing research from sponsors, the most powerful way for the university to communicate the brand is through its employees. The Office of Grants and Contracts Administration and Marketing and Communications departments at the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) have a common goal: turn every UAF employee into a brand ambassador.

In the fall of 2012, UAF unveiled a new brand strategy for the campus. Part of the strategy included a tool-box of flexible templates and other resources for employees to use. The resources that were provided to campus resulted in many departments becoming early-adopters who embraced the new brand and had the tools they needed to become brand champions. The Office of Grants and Contracts Administration department was one of those early-adopters, and they quickly understood that even though their jobs were very different from those on the marketing and communications team, they too were responsible for shaping and managing the university brand through their day-to-day activities and exchanges with stakeholders both inside and outside the organization.

When developing brand ambassadors for your organization, it is important to understand that brand ambassadors are created

organically. The organization can establish a framework to work from, but to be successful, brand ambassadors need to feel a passion and enthusiasm for what they are championing, and a sense of ownership and pride in the organization.

The following are tools to help you establish strong partnerships and become a brand ambassador for your organization.

## **Commitment**

Make a commitment to following your core organizational practices, roles, and responsibilities. This is done by engaging in dialogue and sharing good practices with your partner.

## **Focus on mutual benefit**

Identify what your partnership means and what your goals are. Achieving mutual benefit during the partnership enables both parties to meet their own objectives and common goals.

## **Understanding the needs of your partner**

When you understand the needs of your partner, you can focus on leveraging and building capability and capacity. Make it happen, but be clear and be prepared to adapt to the changing needs of your partner.

## **Respect**

In a successful partnership you have to respect the differences in approach, methodology, and objectives of your partner. Be transparent and actively engage to share experiences.

## **Here are just a few examples of how to help employees become brand ambassadors for your organization:**

- Develop a brand strategy that represents what your organization stands for. Communicate what it means and why it's important to your employees, and strengthen the brand by incorporating the brand strategy in all that you do.
- Create easy-to-use templates for employees that follow your institutional identity guidelines and represent your brand visually to internal and external stakeholders.
- Create standard responses that use your brand voice and make sure everyone in the department uses the same voice to create consistency. This will not only make sure that the same brand



image is being used, but it also shows others the department is working together.

- Create easy-to-use forms that can be used and signed electronically. By creating easy-to-use electronic forms, they can be processed more quickly and keep the integrity and brand image clean.
- Develop guidelines and templates for creating websites. Multiple templates give individual departments flexibility and choice while making it easy for them to represent the brand appropriately.

- Share notable brand stories about your employees, and make it easy for your employees to share about the organization in meaningful ways.

Remember that we're all part of the same team and we're all brand ambassadors for our departments and universities. We have the opportunity to show others what our university stands for with everything we do. We represent not just ourselves as individuals, but the institutions we work for as a whole. ■



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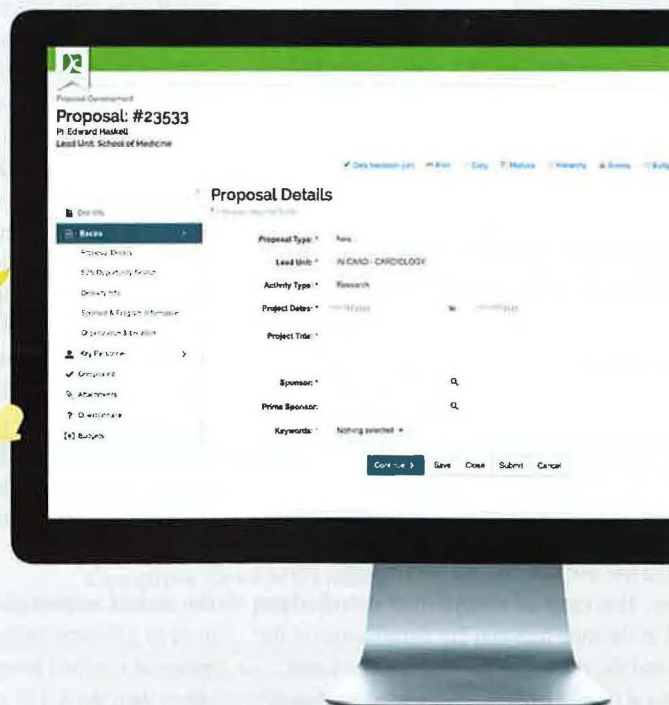
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