

**Service-Learning for *Branding Success*:**

# **A Case of Student-Client Engagement in Oklahoma State University's \$1 Billion Capital Campaign**

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"How do you define success at OSU?" The Oklahoma State University Foundation posed this question to encourage students to join the university-wide conversation about "success." Currently, the OSU Foundation is in the midst of a seven-year, \$1 billion campaign, "Branding Success." It is designed to significantly increase support in four areas: scholarships/graduate fellowships, faculty support, program support, and facilities (<http://www.osugiving.com/>). Branding Success began its quiet phase in December 2007, but the campaign publicly launched Feb. 26, 2010. The Foundation used traditional means to build the media and general public's agenda: media alerts, news releases, media interviews, advertisements, information to high-level donors, and other efforts. These strategies let key publics know that something historic would happen in the Student Union on the launch date. If someone couldn't attend the historic event, they could participate via the event URL, [www.witnessOSUhistory.com](http://www.witnessOSUhistory.com).

The Foundation wanted students to join the conversation, to generate campaign content, and to attend the event. However, the challenge became how to get the students talking, engaged, and actively participating before the campaign debuted. To jump-start the conversation, the OSU Foundation came up with the idea of giving away ten \$1,000 scholarships through a contest titled OSUccess (pronounced O-Success).

Together, the Foundation and the School of Media and Strategic Communications (SMSC) built on the idea, designing the scholarship program to serve several goals. First, the contest would inform students about the OSU Foundation. It also would educate them about the importance of giving. Additionally, the contest would engage students in the campus-wide discussion. And, ultimately, it would help generate awareness for and attendance at the Branding Success event where scholarship winners would be announced.

To help create the initial student dialogue a spring 2010 PR Campaigns course was brought on board. The client-student, service-learning arrangement would provide students with invaluable academic learning and hands-on experience in strategic message planning and implementation. In fact, the students would facilitate the conversation via both social and traditional media. At the same time, the Foundation would benefit not only from the manpower provided by the students, but also from the students' ability to communicate within their established networks and with the OSU community.

OSU Foundation staff and SMSC professors hoped, that by linking the competition with the comprehensive campaign, a synergy could be created where students would have a chance to win a scholarship and to learn about the Foundation. Thus, an overriding mission of OSUccess would be to increase students' awareness of the Foundation and the importance of donations. With heightened awareness, it stands to reason that attitudes toward giving and likelihood of future donations also might be enhanced.

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## CASE STUDY: BRANDING SUCCESS

The Branding Success campaign began its quiet phase in December 2007. Originally, OSU had planned to announce the campaign in October 2008 with a traditional black-tie dinner for top donors and supporters, estimated to cost \$300,000-\$750,000 (Masterson, 2010). When the stock market crashed, the plan was tabled and rescheduled to publicly launch in February 2010. Due to the recession, the decision was made to move away from an exclusive event to a public event in OSU's Student Union. The event would include a live-feed broadcast, an announcement of a \$100 million gift from alumnus T. Boone Pickens, and the announcement of the OSUccess contest's scholarship recipients. At least one winner would come from each of OSU's five campuses making the contest and "success" dialogue as inclusive as possible and to acknowledge Branding Success' impact on students across the OSU system.

To continue the "success" conversation, new questions will be posed until the campaign ends in December 2014. Students will be given the opportunity to win scholarships based on their creative answers to the question posed. To be eligible for the contest, students must be in good academic standing and enrolled in at least one class at an OSU campus.

In spring 2010, students entered by choosing one of three media to address the question, "How do you define success at Oklahoma State University?" Students could submit a 300-word essay, a 3M photo with caption, or a 30-second video. Entries were uploaded to the website and officials reviewed each entry to ensure eligibility. SMSC professors worked with the Foundation to develop contest rules, to solicit judges, and to blind-review submissions.

As previously mentioned, the OSU Foundation wanted to jump-start the conversation with students, to generate interest in and entries for the OSUccess contest, and to get students to attend the live-feed event. It was determined that participation in a service-learning partnership would be a win-win for both parties. The Foundation would benefit from the manpower and innovative student ideas. The 24 students enrolled in the course would benefit from professional advice and from first-hand planning and implementation.

One challenge would be client confidentiality as students would be privy to information that would not be released until Feb. 26. To help students understand the importance and significance of the client's project, the professor assigned students a case on "safeguarding confidences" (PRSA Ethics Case Study #4, [www.prsa.org](http://www.prsa.org)). After discussing the case, students were asked to sign a confidentiality agreement or to enroll in another course section.

On a subsequent date, the client presented an overview of the Foundation, its history, how it affects students, and how it supports OSU. They also detailed the Branding Success

campaign launch event. Key elements would include a video stream on web/satellite campuses, Branding Success theme/logo, scholarship giveaways, and a major gift announcement. The Foundation's secondary research indicated that "success" was a value that crossed generational lines. Next, the client described the OSUccess scholarship contest and [www.osuccess.com](http://www.osuccess.com) website.

The client asked students to brainstorm contest rules and to set campaign goals. With less than a month deadline, the OSU Foundation hoped for 100 entries total. However, students felt that they could generate greater participation. Thus, the class set the following objectives: To generate hits on the website ([www.osuccess.com](http://www.osuccess.com)), participation in the contest (100 entries per category/300 entries total), media coverage for the contest and event, and student attendance at the event.

The students defined campaign opportunities as the contest itself, the scholarships, and "success" at OSU. They identified potential challenges as generating contest participation, potential technical issues, and communicating with OSU branch campuses. Campaign target audiences included students at all campuses, media, and the OSU community. The class self-divided into communication teams and set up a class Wikis. The class Wikis encouraged student-centered learning as students shared message points, generated campaign ideas, and posted content.

The Message Points group created and confirmed campaign messages. They worked with the Foundation and the Promotions team to draft news releases on the OSUccess contest. Media relations efforts for the scholarship contest generated 10 hits in various media outlets, with a total circulation exceeding 109,000. Press coverage included three articles in *The Daily O'Collegian*, OSU's student newspaper. A front-page story featured a screen shot of the OSUccess website and the headline, "Easy Money" (Jack, 2010).

The Social Media group worked with the Foundation to set up a Facebook page (<http://www.facebook.com/pages/OSUccess/268845318434>). Students drafted email messages to notify their social networks, encourage contest submissions, invite others to "friend us" on Facebook, and ask them to pass on the email. The professor also sent emails to colleagues at branch campuses asking for their help in generating participation. An accounting professor at OSU-OKC posted the information on D2L and sent students an email with the subject "How to get FAST CASH!" Additionally, the Foundation sent a campus-wide email to all students with active email accounts on all campuses.

The class also set up a Twitter feed (<http://twitter.com/search/OSUccess>) to generate awareness of the #osuccess hashtag. One of the professors involved was the first person to post a link to the formal OSUccess release. A single #osuccess tweet generated 187 clickthroughs to the website. On Feb. 22, social-media expert Shashi Bellamkonda,

tweeted his followers, "Cool idea! OSUccess, a social-media driven student competition, send your text, pic or video <http://ow.ly/19Sd1>." Future campaign tweets, focused on the OSUccess contest. From Feb. 22 to March 1, 2010, the #OSUccess hashtag was used more than 246 times on Twitter, with a total reach of 20,488 people and 160,185 impressions. On the day after the Branding Success launch online mentions of OSUccess were more prevalent than mentions of the OSU basketball team, which upset No. 1 Kansas that day.

The Announcements and Promotions groups generated attention for OSUccess among the OSU community. Group members made announcements in classes, at campus-organization meetings, and over the PA system at OSU basketball games. Students got approval from the University to post fliers, set-up A-frame message boards, and to chalk the campus. Headlines on fliers and message boards read, "It takes only a few minutes to win a \$1000 scholarship." These were placed around OSU-Stillwater and at branch campuses. The group also created "Pistol Pete money." One side looked like a \$1000 bill with the mascot's image. The reverse side read, "Turn this into a REAL \$1000." These were distributed on all OSU campuses, in classes, and at sporting events.

The class happened to include a self-proclaimed "Superfan." During his college career, this student regularly painted his face and chest for OSU sporting events. At an OSU basketball game, he used black paint to add "OSUccess.com" to his orange chest. The broadcast cameras were quick to cover him, and the team saw a jump in website hits and media interest immediately following the game.

The client was extremely pleased with the students' innovative ideas and energy for the campaign. The service-learning partnership made it possible to pull off a major campaign in three-weeks. OSU Foundation staff visited the class to debrief them on campaign "success." The client and students brainstormed about ways to keep the campaign momentum up and the "success" conversation ongoing.

## RESULTS

Two months after the contest, a link to an online survey was emailed to all 588 entrants. The email thanked students for participating and invited them to complete a short survey. The survey attempted to gauge information levels, attitudes, and intended behaviors toward giving. Despite the somewhat low response rate (n=97, 16.5%), it is interesting to look at emerging themes.

When asked how they learned about the contest, more than 72% selected email. No other answer had more than 16.5%, despite such high-visibility promotional materials. On the question of whether entrants told their friends about the competition, 85.6% said "yes," although telling others about the contest actually diminished their chance of winning. Students also indicated that they

were more likely to enter when encouraged by a friend. This was especially encouraging as it shows a two-step communication flow. The survey also asked about motivation for entering the competition. Most respondents selected "To win a scholarship" (96.9%). "To share my story, photo, or video" was second at 33%. Other choices were each less than 7%.

As a visual way to examine what students think about success, a word cloud was generated based on the text entries. Emerging themes included OSU, involved, relationships, success, people, and new. Thus, themes echoed message points. Additionally, a Google Analytics report was performed looking at [www.OSUccess.com](http://www.OSUccess.com) from Jan. 13, 2010 (site launch date) through March 8, 2010 (two weeks after event). Results indicate that 18 pages were viewed a total of 23,649 times.

## DISCUSSION

The entire contest went from concept to the announcement of winners in three-weeks. Yet, there were still 588 entries (358 essays, 199 photos, and 31 videos). Thus, the campaign goal of 300 entries was surpassed. Although essay and photo entries surpassed the goal of 100 each, videos fell short. The lack of video entries was most likely due to technological difficulties with videos being both more time consuming and complicated to produce. In fact, there were several video entries that had to be disqualified for surpassing the 30-second limit. Additionally, students indicated that they selected other media due to ease of completion. The Foundation staff has worked to ease video entry for future contests.

The quantity of entries is impressive. However, the quality of the entries truly added to the "success" conversation. By crowdsourcing content for redistribution, the entries helped to create a long trail of awareness. There is story telling within the submissions and even actions after submission. For example, a story in *The Daily O'Collegian*, featured the "success" stories of several scholarship recipients. One student from OSU-Center for Health Sciences learned of the contest during a medical rotation in Kenya. He said, "The photo shows the culmination of my entire medical education, the pinnacle of medical school" (Bland, p. 1). In the spirit of "success," he donated his scholarship prize money. A non-traditional student from OSU-Stillwater began her essay, "Success at OSU is defined as catering to the evolving student" (Bland, p. 1). A video winner from OSU-OKC learned of her scholarship win via Facebook. She pays for her own tuition and indicated that the scholarship will further her "success" in the field of veterinary technology (OSU-OKC-News & Events, 2010).

It is difficult to gauge the success of the ongoing OSUccess campaign as much of it is aimed at informing students about the importance of philanthropy, with the hope that they will become donors at some point in the future. However, by

the measures available to us today, it appears the campaign is achieving its goals. Students are clearly hearing more about the importance of private donations and the services provided by the Foundation.

The agenda-building efforts clearly worked, as launch day saw the Student Union Atrium filled to its capacity of more than 1,600. Students occupied every available space not already claimed by a donor, university employee, Foundation staff member, or media representative. They filled out the crowd and projected the desired image to those attending the event, participating online, and viewing media coverage. The live-feed event was broadcast to each OSU satellite campus and over the Internet. An estimated 6,500 people watched online. According to OSU Foundation estimates, subsequent media coverage of the Branding Success event had a total reach of more than 1.9 million households.

Alumnus T. Boone Pickens announced a \$100 million gift at the event. President Burns Hargis announced that with Pickens' latest gift and other silent fundraising, OSU was about halfway to the \$1 billion campaign goal. Hargis noted that gifts of \$100 or less would still have a great impact and that \$500 million is earmarked for student scholarships/fellowships. Event strategies support research suggesting donations from high-status donors (Kumru and Vesterland, 2010), with a strong university affiliation who speak of the importance of small donations, are most likely to inspire subsequent donations (Baldwin, 2008; Stode, 2006). In a NewsOK report, sophomore Ryan Ramseyer, is quoted, "He [Pickens] sets the precedent for other alumni to be just as generous. He sets the example for people like me in the future to donate to the school" (Simpson, 2010, p. 1). To date, Pickens has donated over \$500 million to OSU.

An article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, featured OSU and other institutions that have kicked off campaigns online (Masterson, 2010). Considering the 2008 campaign launch was estimated to cost between \$350,000 and \$700,000, the more inclusive 2010 Branding Success campaign is a better fit with OSU land-grant mission. Although the OSUccess contest

isn't cheap, the initial cost for the contest and promotional efforts pale in comparison. The scholarships alone cost \$10,000. An additional \$3,400 was spent on promotional efforts (\$2,200 domain registration/hosting/programming; \$600 printing; \$200 supplies; \$250 advertising/promotional items; and \$100 food). However, \$13,400 seems a better allocation of resources than traditional advertising. Furthermore, as the contest returns and the website is always live, campaign messages will likely continue to resonate with students.

According to Sargeant (2001), the value of considering the giving potential of individuals in a lifetime is worth both the time and money invested in relationship-building activities. The Branding Success campaign and the continuing OSUccess contest attest to OSU's commitment to building and maintaining positive relationships with students and alumni. Continuing the conversation, the Foundation placed two articles about the contest and its winners in *STATE*, the official magazine of OSU and promoted the contest in its e-newsletters, DonorLink and Whitecoat. Based on the positive experiences from the initial service-learning project, the OSU Foundation committed to future client-course relationships with SMSC and with other Colleges. Thus, the message itself continues to spread among students and across disciplines.

The case presented represents just the first version of the scholarship competition that will continue until December 2014. As the campaign continues, strategic communication strategies and tactics will continue to be adjusted and revised. By linking the competition with the Branding Success capital campaign, a synergy is created. OSUccess increases students' awareness of the OSU Foundation and the importance of University giving. It also supports the notion that students should consider giving back to the University once they are able. The "success" conversation at Oklahoma State University continues to grow and evolve. Without doubt, others can learn from OSU's "success" to create similar campus conversations.

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