

Creating a Destination

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Marcom for Higher Education + Non-Profit + Brands on a Mission

Design Matters (More Than Ever).

As the diversity of competition in higher education continues to rise and the cross-channel playing field is further leveled by the ability for any marketer to gain impressions, today's differentiator is no longer in media budgets and volume of content, but in the quality of your content and the fidelity of its presentation. During today's coming-of-age of the Internet, just as we witnessed through the Bauhaus and Modernism movements for hard goods like housewares and architecture, we'll observe a push toward reduction in adornment, emphasis on usability and function, and a natural pairing of form with function as usefulness becomes vogue. Bad design leading to a poor brand interaction in any touchpoint will not only be faux pas, but will no longer be tolerated or accepted as a symptom of engineering constraints. No longer will it be the way of the technical world, to be either overly laden in whirly-gig "features", or to be kludgy in appearance.

“**The design of everyday things is in great danger of becoming the design of superfluous, overloaded, unnecessary things. -Don Norman**

We've witnessed this shift already with many head-to-head, consumer-facing product battles. Of course, the original Apple iPhone launch stands out as the megaphone (pun intended) that told the world a highly technical and complex device didn't have to be confusing or ugly—that it could instead feel natural to infants and the elderly. Since then, Apple and Google have both defined the barrier to entry for digital brand experiences, through their standardized, atomic UI (user interface) development kits. MySpace (remember them?) and their dancing GIF backgrounds were swiftly dethroned by a small startup project called Facebook, who launched with the most minimal and clean of interfaces, hyper-focused on only a few utilitarian features it did really well.

Today, a new startup called LetGo is finally pointing and laughing at the rot Craigslist has bestowed on itself through interface and experience design neglect, offering a

beautifully simple and intuitive, geolocated app to list and sell your stuff to people nearby. The minimalist Craigslist design, once great for desktop computers, reminds us a good interface isn't "timeless" as audience and ecosystems evolve. New experiences come through new devices, and old interfaces appear weathered when they don't keep up with new contexts—the device itself, where it's used, when it's used, and how it's used.

Recognizing that a great design serves as a foundation to a rich and positive brand experience is essential. Higher education in particular, already faces an up-hill battle in getting the eyes of prospects and donors. Squandering the opportunity to build a lasting relationship with each of those leads, when you finally grab their gaze is, well, a complete waste of marketing dollars. Similarly, harkening back to Apple and Google, it's important to step back from any single brand touchpoint and see it within the context of a larger brand experience. Brand is the way someone answers the phone or replies to an email. Brand is the ambient, on-campus experience including wayfinding signage, informational handouts, and environmental graphics supporting our touted value statements. Brand is everything before and after a specific transaction. Good design—great design—is thinking about that entire journey of many, intermingled brand experiences, to shape a larger, emotionally binding brand relationship that drives loyalty and leads to transactions. It's the filling of the proverbial trust bucket you'll need to lean on when you ask prospects and donors for something in return.

Fortunately, we don't have to upend our entire brand experience in a fell swoop to make positive differences in engagement. Instead we can select strategic touchpoints to attract new fans without upending our brand for our existing loyalists and, over time, shape our loyalist base like a topiary as we gradually unify our brand.

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Designing Killer Landing Pages

While our capstone web properties are juggling the wants and needs of many audiences, old and new, and a complete redesign is always at risk of upsetting those familiar with today's navigation systems and information locations, we have the benefit of flexibility when working to attract new audiences through onboarding touchpoints like landing pages. We have the freedom to lean on our past expertise to design great experiences, but to also use trial and error to discover new, better, and more innovative approaches for attracting and engaging prospects.

This freedom to experiment and to diversify our approach is critical, particularly as the entry points to a website multiply and the reasons for visiting follow. Today, our audiences arrive at our digital properties through search, integrated campaigns across innumerable media, and organically through social sharing. Today, every page on your website is a homepage and your brand face. Every page is someone's first and last impression. Gone are the easy days, when your homepage is the only page to put thought into. Similarly, websites have become inherently transactional. Pages and sites are no longer about telling, but about asking, listening, and personalizing content for each visitor. Websites are now conversational—used to collect information.

Recognizing these shifts in concert, we're able to test unique approaches with our new audiences—to begin selecting and designing entry pages that pull.

A killer landing page is one that:

1. Stops trying to be something for everyone, and instead focuses on being everything for someone.

Present and amplify only the core messaging, tasking, and calls-to-action. Challenge groupthink and don't water down your landing pages with secondary requirements;

2. Is accessible, usable, and appropriate for a specific context.

It dovetails into the part of a user journey and decision-making process it's designed for, leaning on a prospect's existing familiarity to provide next steps and brand reinforcement, without redundancy;

3. Trims forms to only the fields needed to make contact.

Unfortunately, forms are often the first place we add more fields, as departments impose their requirements, but it's well-known and time-tested that shorter forms increase the number of conversions;

4. Organizes forms and information requests to be personal first.

It seems logical to ask a prospect for their required contact information before asking about their interests, because that's how our Customer Relationship Management tables are structured. However, that approach feels just as cold and mechanical in a landing page as it would if we met the prospect in an elevator. Visitors want to be asked about their passions and interests, to imagine a conversation and become emotionally invested, before filling in the logical vitals;

5. Feels natural in the devices it's designed for, including in load time.

Not only does the content need to be trimmed, utilitarian, and goal-supporting, but the

technology does too. Landing pages need to be responsive to the devices and the networks they'll be used on. If a prospect is using the landing page on a park bench in the sun, pay attention to contrast and legibility. Think through real-world usage and validate designs;

6. Uses the voice of the reader, without losing brand authority. High education needs to sound smart, but also personable—not like a research paper. Cut back on the gimmicky “y’alls” but don’t be afraid to write like a human;

7. Presents verbs over nouns. Make it actionable! Using verbs in headlines allows a reader to envision their action. “Browse our programs,” “Join our newsletter,” “Follow us on Twitter.” This supports the writing like a human bit;

8. Has a clear call-to-action, and supports it. This is the one piece that should be repeated. State the purpose of the landing page clearly. Provide a button with a clear label. Add the call-to-action as an in-context text link within or at the end of a small paragraph of text leading into it. Try the [squint test](#) and run a usability test. Make sure your viewer knows in their brief glance what we want (need) them to do. All other content in the landing page leads to and persuades this action; and

9. Is A/B tested and measured. If you’re not sure, try it more than one way. It’s often easier to launch two landing pages than one. Track conversions in each for a brief period of time, then select the landing page that’s performing better to blanket

across all inbound visitors. A/B test multiple pieces of a landing page, from the button labels and colors to the order of content. Use this data as a means to win internal debates.

Within a larger brand or campaign effort, the role of a successful landing page is to summarize all the brand equity and positive experiences a prospect has shared with you, and to present an appropriate call-to-action at just the right time, with just the right amount of supporting content, to empower and encourage the visitor to follow through. In that light, a successful landing page needs to be precisely what it needs to be, without being bogged down by the department-by-department requirements often lathered on through groupthink. Your greatest challenge will be in advocating for the landing page’s trim physique in support of its sole purpose. The ammunition you’ll need in that charge is data—surveys, what’s worked (or hasn’t) in the past, and a clear understanding of a prospect’s decision journey.

A successful landing page is one that recognizes it’s a single lilypad in a much larger, 360-degree brand experience—and capitalizes on that recognition.

360 Degree Experience Design

Today's web is itself a great metaphor for where marketing and brand experience has gone. Prior to the iPhone, the Internet was composed of web pages. As designers, we conceptualized websites and web pages in much the same way we conceptualized a 150-page annual report. The larger taxonomy of a site was considered from a lofty view, the content organized logically, and each page or template wireframed architecturally into the optimal layout. We built it, and it was done—at least until it became old and needed to be done again.

That reality was all too simple, even if the technology seemed difficult and fickle. All of that went out the window when we had to begin considering mobile as an alternative, adaptive platform, then had our foundation further shaken when those polar platforms became a rainbow of devices of all screen sizes and capabilities—enter responsive design. Today, even the concept of a graphic interface is in question. Dubbed “the Internet of things” we have [screenless fitness bands](#) to track our body vitals and give us feedback, [buttons](#) on our washing machines to order more detergent by [drone delivery](#), nascent but inevitable emergence of [augmented reality devices and applications](#), and a [plethora of social app and hardware devices that communicate with us in the home and on the go](#). As interface designers and innovators, we're thinking [beyond the interface](#) and reflecting on what a brand experience is at its core—and how that translates to the online brand manifestations we will build next.

Even without knowing precisely where the Internet will go, or without having web “pages” already dissolved, this rapid evolution of online communication becoming ambient and intentionally

invisible is what's been happening with branding and advertising for more than a century. Building recognition of and emotional attachment to Coca-Cola red is in the same vein as both Nike and Under Armour entering the fitness sensor market to fill out their brand ecosystems—or Disney personalizing their in-park experience with badges identifying patrons to costumed characters and exhibit displays.

In higher education, attracting prospects—donors, students, faculty, partners—will require thinking beyond websites and landing pages even if we still use them as conversion touchpoints. Websites and landing pages will become the bridges between other brand experiences, including digital and interactive experiences in lobbies and campus signage, updated call scripts, improved workflow design (for example, designing the follow-up schedules with leads), and even considering how everything can be personalized and naturally social. The higher education brand needs to become ever-present and accessible precisely when a prospect needs it, building deep, emotional bonds in the in-between.

This broadening and unifying of the higher education brand—this 360-degree design experience—will come via a handful of intentional efforts, including:

Thinking beyond the “graphic” – Across print, broadcast, and digital, recognize your brand experience as everything in between. Rethink tangible touchpoints and design collateral to support and extend larger brand and marketing efforts. Consider how a brand experience can be crafted through in-person exchanges,

personalized environmental interactions like on-campus displays, and non-disposable take-homes utilizing the capabilities of apps and devices;

Conducting field research – Run usability tests on today’s applications to identify market and brand opportunities for improvement. Conduct prospect interviews, focus groups, and collaborative sketching studios with prospects and stakeholders, rather than following the higher education herd;

Understanding, mapping, and redesigning workflows – Use test findings to map out and understand internal and external workflows,

pick low-hanging fruit or particularly problematic engagement points, to develop new brand assets, new experiences, and better conversion tools one at a time. Avoid overhauling everything at once and encouraging failure.

Seasoned and experience designers will be the fuel for each of these efforts. Fill out your team with a blend of visual design skills, researchers and statisticians, interaction designers, and interface developers. A multi-disciplinary blend will be integral to innovating in the higher education space and to stop thinking about experience design as the next mailer or website refresh.

“**The ability to simplify means to eliminate the unnecessary so that the necessary may speak. - Hans Hofmann**

journeys, and processes. Understand the day-to-day pressures and decisions of recruiters to build campaign and tracking tools that aid their relationship-building. Understand the prospect decision-making journey and lifecycle inside and out, to minimize possible prospects from falling through the cracks and to sharpen existing touchpoints;

Establishing and extending atomic brand libraries – Build cohesive brand UI libraries to be used across digital applications and printed collateral—iconography, photography style, code components and widgets, grid systems and templates, and even content libraries to pick up brand language. A useful brand library is much more than fonts and colors. Build this library as a flexible brand foundation and not as a rigid, over-policed system, to make it easier for growth and refinement; and

Identify and update key touchpoints – Review what we know about the workflows and journeys to

Tomorrow’s successful higher education brand will step outside of specific deliverables to look at and understand their greater prospect wants and needs, to craft brand experiences and lasting relationships. Marketing budgets will be diverted to experienced designers and researchers, to create fewer but more potent prospect conversion touchpoints complementary to ambient efforts. Brand advocacy and social sharing will become your most valuable marketing properties, converted through your on-point, well-crafted pages that pull, presented right when they need to be.

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