

Standard Ten: Public Disclosure

Overview

At no time in history has information been more easily dispersed or widely available. New information technologies provide extraordinary opportunities for public communication: in an average month the Brandeis University homepage receives 400,000 hits. But those same technologies also heighten the demand for information and the competition for the attention of potential audiences. To meet these challenges, a reconfigured Office of Communications has assumed centralized responsibility for public communications at Brandeis, working closely with other offices and departments. This has enabled the University to exploit new information technologies and to make better use of public communications in providing information and in developing a clear public identity.

Description

Over the past decade, Brandeis has worked to harness its enormous energies, bringing greater self-discipline and foresight to all that it does. This extends to public communications. The position of Senior Vice President for Communications was created to centralize scattered efforts and responsibilities and to create an effective administrative office that could work directly with members of the President's senior administrative team. The Office of Public Affairs was renamed and reconfigured as the Office of Communications, bringing together responsibility for publications and public relations. A cooperative arrangement was established between the Office of Communications and Web Technology Services, with editorial and design responsibilities falling to the former, while responsibility for information architecture and technical support fall to the latter. Brandeis is now well positioned to exploit the possibilities and meet the challenges of new information technologies and to speak with a clear, consistent, compelling voice.

The Brandeis University website has become a principal source of information about the University, along with the *University Bulletin* and other official publications. Making information public has become extraordinarily easy—that is the great advantage of the web, and the great danger too. The challenge, then, is to get it right: the big picture, as well as the many details. Students who come here should find not only the particular courses and programs and teachers they were led to expect, but also the kind of institution—in current idiom, the brand—our public materials project. This is the ongoing challenge that the Office of Communications has embraced.

The Brandeis University home page (www.brandeis.edu) was remade in 2004. It has a clean, uncluttered look with a straightforward navigation menu to one side, portals for various audiences (students, faculty and staff, alumni, visitors, and families) along the top, and in the center various vignettes that help to convey the flavor of the institution. The home page also contains links to a directory, a

campus calendar, and a powerful search engine. Anyone coming to the home page should have little difficulty in finding the information they want or need.

Virtually every office and department has a website, easily found through an A-Z index. Click on the Registrar's Office and you will quickly find class listings, exam schedules, academic calendars, official forms, and other useful information; an electronic edition of the *University Bulletin* can also be found here. Go to the Office of Student Life and you can follow links to information on residence life, student activities, graduate student services, and other matters. Click on the Office of the Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer and you will find the University budget, financial statement, and business policies, along with information on capital projects and planning and other matters. Take a look at the Provost's website and you will find academic reports and policies, information on each faculty member and on the overall composition of the faculty, the *Faculty Handbook*, and the University's Diversity Statement, along with periodic updates from the Provost. On the President's website are the President's semi-annual letters, a complete listing of Trustees and the composition of Trustee committees, and various Integrated Planning documents. And, of course, there are many other websites with much additional information.

The University continues to publish a print edition of the *Brandeis University Bulletin*, which is a comprehensive source of information on the academic programs offered by the University. At the front of the *Bulletin* is general information about the University, including the mission statement, the accreditation statement, and required public notices, along with descriptions of various aspects of the University that cut across schools and programs, e.g., facilities, research centers and institutes, the student conduct system, and public safety. This is followed by sections on each of the schools within the University; each section describes the degree programs, the requirements for admissions, tuition and fees, the degree requirements, and academic regulations. The *Bulletin* also contains a comprehensive listing of courses, with their prerequisites (and other special conditions), brief course descriptions, the name of the instructor, and the frequency with which the course is offered. At the back of the *Bulletin* are listings of Trustees, administrative officers, and faculty.

A further important source of information for students is *Student Rights and Responsibilities*. This handbook contains the code of conduct for students, the relevant University policies, and the formal procedures for addressing allegations of misconduct. Every new student receives a copy of this handbook. It is also available on the website of the Office of Student Life. Students must indicate that they have received and read *Student Rights and Responsibilities*—and are prepared to abide by it—in order to register for classes.

Various other publications help to fill out the picture and provide background and context: *Brandeis University Magazine* (the alumni magazine); *Brandeis Reporter* (the in-house newspaper); *The Catalyst*, *Dialogue*, and *State of the Arts*, three new magazines featuring the sciences, the humanities, and the arts at

Brandeis; the admissions viewbook and other materials; and separate catalogs for the three professional schools.⁹³

Appraisal

Brandeis thrives on open discussion and readily disseminates information. The University's *Integrated Plan* is not a classified document, made known only to a select few; it is easily available on the University's website. Its budget, endowment, debt, cash reserves, and so forth are also posted on the web, and presented to the University community at an annual open forum. When special committees present reports to the Provost, these too go on the web. Public disclosure is not merely a requirement at Brandeis, but a deeply embedded value.⁹⁴

The challenge lies in gathering and organizing information. Brandeis does not have a centralized office of institutional research and does not yet publish a factbook, so there is no central source for institutional information. Bringing greater coherence and consistency to the University's public communications—including the multitude of electronic communications through the websites of departments and offices—is an ongoing task and an essential element of the larger strategic goals for admissions, resources, the academy, and others areas that are set out in the University's *Integrated Plan*.

The establishment of the Office of Communications was an important first step. Integrated teams of writers, designers, operations staff, and public relations specialists are now assigned to various offices and functions: admissions, development, the arts, the sciences, etc. Offices and departments are no longer charged a creative services fee for work on publications, and so they more readily seek out assistance. The Office of Communications is becoming the focal point for public communications by the various elements of the University.

The *Brandeis University Bulletin*, for example, is a joint effort of the Registrar's Office and the Office of Communications, with the assistance of various offices, departments, and schools. This annual process ensures that the information in the *Bulletin* is complete and up-to-date. The Office of Communications has also been working closely with the Admissions Office to remake the admissions website and its printed materials. *Brandeis University Magazine*, the alumni magazine, draws upon the continuing cooperation of the Office of Communications and Alumni Relations.

Ensuring coherence and consistency on the web is a special challenge. The Brandeis University website encompasses, of course, the individual websites of a multitude of offices and departments; and the University does not yet have in place a fully adequate system for managing web content. The new home page, with its navigational menu, was only a first step in gaining better control of the University's web presentation.

⁹³ See Appendix 10A for Brandeis Information Vehicles.

⁹⁴ See Appendix 10B for Table of Evidence.

In all of this, it is important, of course, that the University get the details right. But it is important, too, to get the larger story right: to convey to external audiences the particular character, the essential nature, of this University. This can be puzzling to an outsider: a research university with only 5,000 students, two-thirds of them undergraduates; a non-sectarian university, sponsored by the Jewish community. What sort of place is that?

To answer that question, the Office of Communication has been seeking to develop a brand. This remains a work-in-progress. The three new magazines, for example, help to demonstrate, in concrete and vivid ways, that this small University produces much original research, scholarship, and creative work. The vignettes on the home page also help to provide a taste, a flavor, of the University. Along with these efforts, the Office of Communications has been introducing consistent design elements, to give a particular look and feel to both electronic and print communications.

Projection

Over the past decade, new information technologies—most notably, the web—have transformed public communications. One inescapable task, then, is to master these new technologies, even while anticipating and adapting to newly emerging ones. The necessary organizational structure is now in place at Brandeis; but it remains an ongoing task to develop new ways of working together. In a complex institution of independent-minded individuals, external communications can become a cacophony, leaving the individual with a plenitude of information, but at a loss to know what to make of it. Yet to simply suppress the many voices, to impose a single note on all of them, would not be true to the character of this University. To steer a path between these two extremes is the essential task.

In this spirit, for example, the Office of Communications is proceeding in stages as it works to develop a brand. The next stage will extend the “brand mark” to design parameters beyond the fonts and seals that have already been adopted. A content management system is also under development for the Brandeis website. The University’s home page will also be further revised, in a cooperative effort of the Office of Communications and Web Technology Services. And the University will be creating a fact book, to be available in electronic and print versions.

Certain staffing challenges inhere in such tasks. Technical capacity must be built up and maintained, but at the same time writers and editors and graphic designers are no less necessary. These skills, moreover, are also in demand in the commercial world, and salaries must be reasonably competitive in order to attract and retain talent. Competing demands on finite resources is not a new story, of course, but the proliferation of electronic communications adds a new twist to that story.

It is the inescapable fate of the Office of Communications to serve two masters: the University of which it is an integral part, as well as the external audiences to whose needs and demands it must answer. So while keeping its eyes and ears on

those external audiences, the Office must also attend to the University's strategic goals embodied in the *Integrated Plan*. In working to enlarge and enhance the applicant pool, public communications play an essential part; public communications are no less important in seeking to increase support from alumni and other friends. And, in general, it is through public communications that the accomplishments and ambitions of Brandeis University are made known to the larger world.

Institutional Effectiveness

Brandeis has a well-defined system for annual review of the *University Bulletin*, the central source of academic information, which is available in both print and electronic versions. The latter version is also updated over the course of the year by the Registrar's Office. Management of the many websites of schools, departments, programs, and offices poses a new challenge, which the University is addressing through its recently established Office of Communications and, looking ahead, through the use of web content management systems.