LET’S TALK STRATEGY FOR BRANDEIS.EDU

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1. DISCOVERY SUMMARY
OUR WORK TO DATE
We visited campus on June 1, 2015. We met with more than 60 individuals representing academic departments, institutes and centers, web communications, information technology, admissions, and students.
OUR PROCESS

In forming our recommendations, we:

• **Talked with stakeholders from across campus.**

• **Consumed Brandeis background materials**, including print and email designs, institutional and communications strategy documents, and quantitative and qualitative research findings.

• **Reviewed Brandeis web properties**, including [brandeis.edu](http://brandeis.edu) and social media channels.

• **Reviewed peer and aspirant school websites.**
PROJECT GOALS

1. Create a series of responsive and accessible design templates that provide more layout and content flexibility than current templates.

2. Share recommendations and best practices for project success.

3. Examine your most critical academic program pages and recommend search optimization tactics (provided in a separate SEO report).

4. Improve the visitor experience for all members of the Brandeis community.

5. Ultimately, attract more best-fit students to apply to Brandeis.
WHAT WE HEARD AND LEARNED
“We don’t share the experiences and events that define who we are. There’s no one tagline. We’re not huge, not tiny. Not downtown, not suburbs. Jewish, but not too much. It’s challenging to position ourselves. There’s no cohesive message, there’s no way to ‘put us in a box.’”

— a staff member
You grapple with defining your identity and clarifying your positioning with respect to your competition:

• What is the role of your Jewish heritage?
• Should you highlight Boston or Waltham?
• Should you emphasize big research or cozy liberal arts?
But, there are universal elements that resonate:

• Excellent academic reputation and financial aid.
• Social justice and activism.
• People who are inquisitive, curious, and willing to tackle the enduring questions.
Your competition for the best students is fierce.

70% of your applicants applied to eight or more schools. The peer and aspirant sites we reviewed show what you’re up against. Sophisticated, thoughtful, modern websites with compelling content are table stakes. Our charge is to come up with something that stands out from an already impressive group.
Your current templates aren’t giving you the room you need to shine. This isn’t news to you — you’ve done your research, you know what the issues are, and you know that a new design suite is what you need.

**Key shortcomings:**

- The website is not responsive or accessible.
- The narrow width is too limiting for content variety.
- There are only two possible levels of navigation.
Not every area of Brandeis will implement the redesigned templates as part of the relaunch. Perhaps those areas will implement the new design and templates as part of a future project.

Ideally, all Brandeis web pages should share a similar look and feel, and the templates that are created will act as a catalyst for discussion of the following areas that are not changing:

- Undergraduate Admissions
- International Business School
- Heller School for Social Policy and Management
- Rabb School of Continuing Studies
- Brandeis Magazine
- Brandeis Now
- Institutional Advancement (hosted in iModules)
“The world presents enough problems if you believe it to be a world of law and order; do not add to them by believing it to be a world of miracles.”

— Louis D. Brandeis
Your web management is distributed, and will stay that way.

You told us you:

• “Had no choice but to have a distributed model,”
• “Want the site to be easier for content editors to manage.”

This isn’t the time to blow up your structure and process, but new content models and visual designs offer a chance to refine your current approach and improve the experience for everyone.
“It’s the people that draw people.”

– a staff member
You have an abundance of unique personalities and strong characters, but these aren’t always seeing the light of day on the web.

Our creative recommendations include a number of ideas on how to harness this value more effectively.
Your social media efforts are a strength.
You have a succinct but targeted social media strategy that is successfully executed. You use primary and secondary channels (*we love the Storify stories*) to great effect.

Well done!
The time is right for a redesign.

People want this, they are ready for it, and they’ve told you this again and again in conversation and through formal surveys. There is excitement, anticipation, and momentum for this project.

That said, there is also some risk inherent to your shifting leadership landscape.
KEY ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS
“America has believed that in differentiation, not in uniformity, lies the path of progress. It acted on this belief; it has advanced human happiness, and it has prospered.”

— Louis D. Brandeis
"The question about Brandeis' Jewish identity should not be down-played or up-played. It is what it is."

— a staff member
Be yourselves. True story.

Brandeis’ short history is full of interesting people and strong, unique personalities. Their story is the Brandeis story, and the more authentic, the better. It may be hard to put a finger on the identity of Brandeis because Brandeis is by its very nature a collection of very unique individuals. That’s okay and should be celebrated, but there are also unifying threads that tie each individual story together into a larger narrative.

For example, Brandeisians are:

• Personable and kind.

• Open-minded and interested in one another’s perspectives.

• Explorers on intellectual journeys who aren’t afraid to change their mind.

• Passionate about their work, their beliefs, and their causes.

• Active and activist, in the sense of working toward a better world through involvement in as much as they possibly can be while on campus and beyond.
Make this a collaborative process.

Community input is key for a project like this. We recommend the following efforts to build consensus and shared ownership:

• **Cast a wide net for testing** and include as many constituents as possible.

• **Encourage sharing web expertise** or even resources across departments and divisions. Current resources for the web vary significantly from school to school and department to department.

• **Create an informal, peer-based web communicators group** that can help people onboard to web roles, learn to write more effectively, and engage in mutual professional development.

• **Take a look at our picks for governance best practice resources** in Appendix B.
Focus on the organization and content of your academic program pages.

Brandeis students love to explore their academic possibilities, and changing or adding majors or minors is a frequent and encouraged occurrence.

Unfortunately, inconsistency of current template layout and content structure between program pages leads to a disjointed discovery experience. To address the template variance, we recommend that one of the template designs we create be specifically for academic programs.

We also recommend starting the content rewrite with the (very well done) major fact sheets. The content within is thoughtfully organized, focusing on outcomes and differentiators. The only problem? They are stuck in PDF. You need to convert this content into HTML and make a home for it within the academic program structure.
Use the terrific copy you have in print and email campaigns for your website.

For comparison:

Admissions web copy: “Thank you for your interest in Brandeis University, one of the nation's premier institutions of higher education for undergraduate, graduate and professional and continuing studies. We invite you to explore this website to learn more about the benefits of a Brandeis education and the university's application process.”

Admission email copy: “Change the world. Then have breakfast.”

Student life web copy: "What is a Brandeisian? An individual who is intellectually curious and enjoys a diversity of academic pursuits and extracurricular interests. One who thrives in a diverse vibrant community of individuals of distinct political, social, and ethnic backgrounds.”

Print student life copy: “It is you who runs this place. Brandeis will foster your potential by putting you in charge.”
“There are so many brilliant faculty who build very close relationships with students - this needs to be showcased. The relationships you can have here are unbelievable. You’re going to room with the next CEO of ____.”

— a faculty member
Convey the value of Brandeis.

Brandeis ranks strongly for academics, career preparation, personal attention, and extracurriculars — the top four characteristics identified by enrolling students in the Brandeis admitted student surveys.

Where Brandeis falls short is in conveying the value that it provides. Almost 70% of admitted students in the College Board survey said Brandeis cost of attendance was ‘Fair / Poor’.

Balance talk of costs with content focused on career outcomes, alumni success, added value from extracurriculars, student research relationships with renowned faculty, and the benefits of being part of the Brandeis family.
Integrate social media throughout the website.

This is an easy one. You have great social content, and we’ll make sure the new templates allow you to go beyond the static social icons you have now and pull in dynamic, fresh content in a variety of ways.
“For those who work (and live here), our campus can enhance or impede, enliven or enervate, build connections or impose separations. Buildings will not make Brandeis great, but buildings can help make it possible for us to become great.”

— Brandeis Strategic Plan
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— Adapted from Brandeis strategic plan
Together, let’s create a space that inspires exploration, introspection, conversation, collaboration, and ultimately, application.