

University Taglines and the “Polonius Syndrome”

Lessons from Hamlet

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To be or not to be? A college on the East Coast uses “The Place to Be!” as its tagline. And why not? Everyone has to be somewhere. But unless the school wishes to target modern-day Hamlets who haven’t decided whether to be or not, it has zero impact.

Another popular tagline is “Start Here, Go Anywhere.” It’s too popular, in fact. Dozens of schools use that same slogan or a close derivation. When an institution’s tagline is so generic as to be interchangeable among schools, it’s a sure sign that coherent strategy has “gone elsewhere.”



Why do so many colleges use contrived and inept taglines? More importantly, what is the proper function of a tagline, and what do schools risk in deploying meaningless or absurd slogans?

“HOW WEARY, STALE, FLAT, AND UNPROFITABLE” (HAMLET, I, II)

[AdGlossary.com](#) defines a tagline as “a slogan or phrase that conveys the most important ... [feature] or benefit that the advertiser wishes to convey.” However, emphasizing features in taglines is the hallmark of an amateur. Experts stress benefits instead.

An example of a feature-oriented tagline: “A Tradition of Leadership.”

A benefit-oriented tagline: “Where You’re a Name, Not a Number.”

Features are inward-looking and self-oriented. Benefits are outward-looking and focused on the target audience’s interests.

Sweet Briar College (Va.), a school for women, uses the tagline, “Think Is for Girls.” They even render the word “Think” in pink to emphasize the pun. As taglines, puns are usually problematic. But Sweet Briar’s slogan is brilliant.

Sweet Briar’s tagline is obviously a twist on the old cliché that “pink is for girls.” This combination of the familiar with the unexpected makes it memorable. Unmemorable taglines are a waste of potential. The best taglines capture the imagination and can go viral (“Got milk?”).

The power of taglines lies in their ability to arouse interest and motivate action.

Advertising guru and best-selling author Roy H. Williams says, “The risk of insult is the price of clarity.” Sweet Briar College is not concerned with whether boys approve of its tagline. The school is not for them. “Think Is for Girls” resonates because it speaks with clarity to Sweet Briar’s intended audience—even to the exclusion of all others.

The power of taglines lies in their ability to arouse interest and motivate action. Sweet Briar’s “Think” slogan is a good example: It piques curiosity and encourages further investigation.

“ENTER POLONIUS” (HAMLET, I, III)

Regrettable taglines amount to an opportunity wasted. Lifeless or pretentious phrases can even evoke skepticism toward the school.

Hamlet-like dithering and institutional navel-gazing cause or contribute to lackluster taglines. Some colleges (unlike Sweet Briar) hesitate to speak boldly for fear of appearing divisive. Others produce ponderous slogans when they try to compress their mission, vision, and values into six words or less. And, of course, committees can bury clarity under a profusion of process. These foibles produce an effect hereafter referred to as the Polonius Syndrome.

In Hamlet, the melancholy prince is not the only character who suffers. Consider poor Laertes.

The son of Polonius, Laertes is a young man about to embark on a long journey. At the last minute, his father detains him and delivers a litany of banal advice. Polonius concludes with this familiar adage, “This above all: to thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man.”

Polonius seemingly advocates the virtue of integrity. But Shakespearean scholars generally regard him as a meddler and pompous windbag. In fact, there is too much of a good thing in Polonius’ advice.

Putting self-authenticity “above all” can lead to arrogance rather than integrity. There is a fine line between virtuous self-authenticity and insufferable narcissism. People who play only by their own rules, who never bite their tongues, and who refuse to make small concessions to accommodate others have crossed that line.

A phrase or slogan should not be chosen because it "sounds good" to the administration.

If taken too literally, “to thine own self be true” can lead colleges to the Polonius Syndrome: Self-absorption rationalized as virtue, resulting in blithe disregard of others.

Poorly conceived taglines, and the flawed processes that produce them, owe their existence to the Polonius Syndrome—that overly fond regard for the school’s own tradition, mission, culture, reputation, or institutional interests that exist on some campuses even before the decision is made to develop a tagline.

“IN ONE LINE TWO CRAFTS DISCRETELY MEET” (HAMLET, III, IV)

Institutions of higher learning are relative late-comers to branding, positioning, and marketing. The prevalence of the Polonius Syndrome suggests that many schools engage in marketing out of necessity, but without enthusiasm. The result is weak tactics unsupported by effective strategy.

Marketing is strategic. Its purpose is to create a preference in the mind of the prospect and to motivate action based on that preference. Both coherent strategy and artful tactics are necessary. For tagline purposes, this means that a phrase or slogan should not be chosen because it “sounds good” to the administration. It should be selected based on its potential to engage and motivate the target audience. And it should be deployed how and where it will do the most good.

THE FINAL ACT

Some institutions avoid taglines altogether, usually because no single phrase seems satisfactory or their slogan of choice is already taken. Having no tagline is better than having one that’s dead on arrival. However, a skillfully wrought tagline is a lever capable of moving the minds of an intended audience. To be effective, they should be conceived strategically and deployed astutely (even competitively).

Guidelines for Effective Higher Education Taglines

- Align the tagline with mission statement, vision, and values.
- Emphasize benefits over features.
- Stick to a single concept.
- Be pithy, concise, and conversational.
- Include the tagline in all advertising, public relations, and marketing.
- Adopt a unique tagline that is specific to your institution.
- Make it memorable and appealing to the target audience.
- Do not allow process (committees, focus groups) to trump message.
- Beware the Polonius Syndrome.

And in tagline development, as in Shakespeare’s play, Polonius must be dispatched.

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