University Student-Run Agencies on the World Wide Web: Presentations of Strategy, Creativity, and Professionalism

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Abstract

Regardless of any specific focus on advertising, public relations, multi-media, or some other specialty, university student-run communications agencies make anecdotal claims that their work is strategic, creative, and professionally appropriate. This study is an initial effort to document work claims via a content analysis of 67 agency websites. Three research questions are presented. Results show 80% of student agencies had an active website, but many lacked content elements evaluators wanted or needed to see. Collectively, student agency websites were found to offer minimally satisfactory visual, operational, or informational content. Pedagogical and professional challenges often occur as agency faculty seek student autonomy in website creation while still meeting professional standards. Best practices recommendations are offered.
Introduction

The university student-run communications agency is a business that operates within an academic program, allowing students to gain conceptual knowledge and practical skills in public relations or similar fields. Students build and carry out events, campaigns or projects for real world clients to gain entry-level career experience. The agency’s work may be general in focus, or specifically framed in advertising, PR, multi-media or some other specialty area. Regardless of focus, the student agency is a high-impact practice (HIP) learning environment (Kuh, 2008). It fits within a paradigm in which students are active creators of their own learning (Tagg, 2003).

The first student-run agencies were established in the 1970s. There were only a handful of agencies through the 1980s and ‘90s (Avery & Marra, 1992). By 2011, 83 active student-run agencies were identified (Bush & Miller, 2011). By 2017, there were more than 150 student agencies in operation and others in development (Swanson, 2017).

Agencies claim to produce top quality work for clients. But a search of the scholarly literature reveals a lack of evidence. This study asks whether agencies actually demonstrate marketplace communication that is strategic, creative, and professionally appropriate.

The unit of analysis the student-run agency website, a primary public-facing communication. If the agency experience is preparing students with the skills needed to succeed in the professional workplace, agency websites created by students should consistently reflect best practice expectations for online communication.

This content analysis-based study is exploratory and a first step toward answering basic questions about strengths and weaknesses of student agency work. It concludes with best practices recommendations and ideas for further inquiry.
Literature Review

Twenty years of scholarly research and marketplace studies reflect substantial conceptual understanding of what websites do and how they promote businesses and nonprofit entities. The abundance of published work makes the website the ideal communication tool to examine when making an evaluation of an organization’s strategic, creative, and professional abilities.

Strategy is a plan for action. It is at the heart of everything that mass communication professionals do (Witmer & Swanson, 2016). In an agency environment, strategy relates directly to brand image, the mental impression held by people who may interact with the organization. Brand image helps build the story people tell about an organization (Huang & Ku, 2016). For nonprofits in particular, positive brand image contributes to people’s willingness to interact and make charitable contributions (Michel & Rieunier, 2012). Regardless of specific structure and service focus, a student-run cannot exist without recruiting and retaining engaged, motivated students and compatible, supportive clients (Swanson, 2017). It is essential for the agency to have a strategically sound, positive brand image.

The concept of positive brand image can be extended to encompass place branding. Physically and conceptually, the student-run agency is unique in academe and in the professional realm. It must balance student learning with client service. The objective of place branding, according to Zenker, Braun, and Petersen, “is to contribute to the efficient economic and social functioning of a place consistent with the wider goals have been established for the place” (2017, p. 17). Following this line of thinking, agency students are residents who disseminate communication about the wider goals of the place and become ambassadors for the place. In this respect, the agency website is a critical communication tool.
Creativity is the extent to which an organization embodies “efficient complexity” by being successful and innovative in the marketplace while satisfying key stakeholders (Dahlen, 2010, p. 41). Strategy and creative expression work together as plan and execution. In this way, a website is a strategic and creative communication tool, presented to facilitate interaction with stakeholders. It can have substantial impact on how users gather and use information about the host organization (Hood, Shanahan, Hopkins, & Lindsey, 2015).

Generally speaking, websites offering a strategic and creative balance of visual, informational, and operational content elements can target users with different media messages revolving around common themes (See Swanson, 2008). The totality of website content can then attract and retain the attention of potential consumers (Tang, Jang, & Morrison, 2012). It can motivate people to act (“Digital marketing research survey…,” 2016) and help consumers make appropriate decisions (Lee, 2012; McCluskey, 2013).

The student-run agency needs to communicate a variety of messages to stakeholder groups that include current and future students, current and future clients, university administrators, faculty, staff, and other members of the campus and local community. It is essential that the website’s content be balanced to show that the agency’s role in the campus community is oriented to both education and commerce.

Reputation describes “the genuine trust that can grow between a stakeholder and an organization” (Willems, Jegers, & Faulk, 2016, p. 456). In the context of a nonprofit organization, reputation has been identified as “the primary source of its power, which can allow it to enlist public support, build its autonomy, protect it from external attacks, and ultimately help ensure its survival” (Busuioc, 2016, p. 42). Although somewhat intangible and difficult to quantify, reputation can be recognized as a perception of professionalism among stakeholders.
Because this perception exists in the eye of the beholder, organizations should work to reduce differences between the way internal and external stakeholders see the organization’s communication (Davies, Chun, da Silva, & Roper, 2004). The student-run agency website would be a primary tool for establishing organizational reputation for professionalism because it is a forward-facing public communication through which students and potential clients learn about the agency.

Any website should tell a clear, compelling story (Nielsen, Tahir, & Tahir, 2002), communicate organizational mission and vision (Davies, Chun, Silva, & Roper, 2004), and establish leadership as competent and creative (Papacharissi, 2002). It should be visually, operationally, and informationally rich (Swanson, 1999), attractive in appearance, modern in structure, and accessible via mobile devices (Burrus, 2012).

The student-run agency is unusual in academe and might not be immediately understood by outsiders. An effective web presence can help overcome stakeholder confusion about what the agency does, who it serves, and how it serves them.

When studying student-run agency websites, it’s relevant to apply Selective Perception Theory (SPT). One of the earliest theories of communication, SPT postulates that media users control the flow of media communication they interact with by selectively processing a limited number of messages and ignoring many others (Taylor, Franke, & Bang, 2006). Media users select what media to be exposed to. They make conscious decisions about how much attention to give to that content. Then, their level of attention determines the extent to which they comprehend and retain relevant information. Users may subconsciously block messages that conflict with their preexisting beliefs (Ogunjimi, 2016). Under SPT, perception is affected by what people expect to see and what they want to see.
SPT has been used in studies involving advertising billboards (Taylor, Franke, & Bang, 2006), anti-smoking campaigns (Hwang, 2010), partisan political communication (Wang, 2013), and other strategic communication targeting specific publics and stakeholders.

Because it is difficult to change someone’s mind once an opinion has been formed, a student agency website should present the content that a variety of stakeholders might be looking for. Content should be thematically consistent but address specific concerns of stakeholders that include clients, students, prospective students and community members.

This study involves content analysis of media, an appropriate research strategy that is taught in an estimated 84% of the master-level research methods courses in journalism in the U.S. (Macnamara, 2005). Content analysis allows insight into media framing, the method through which media gatekeepers organize content so users can focus and adopt particular beliefs and make decisions. It has been argued that media users seek out order or “organization of experience” that carefully framed messages provide (Jah-Nambiar, 2002). Appropriate use of framing allows a media content creator to engage in “selecting and emphasizing certain aspects of experience or ideas over others” (Andsager & Smiley, 1997, p. 2) and isolate issues that are salient for targeted stakeholders or publics from those that are not (See Tankard, 1997).

A frame can organize key words, phrases, or themes (Scherer, 2002); audio/visual messages (Hung, 2001); graphic images such as photos or cartoons (Ragan, 1979); or sources from which information originates or to whom it is attributed (Entman, 1983). Student-run agency websites should, in the ideal, be offering professional presentations of consistently framed messages that target key stakeholders.
Research Questions

The analysis of websites conducted for this research was carried out in a systematic way. The research was guided by three questions:

RQ1: What types of visual, operational, and informational enhancements are commonly observed on student-run agency websites?

RQ2: To what extent do student-run agency websites reflect established best practices in presentation of Web-based content?

RQ3: What recommendations can be offered to student-run agencies to help them more effectively use website content to communicate about strategy, creativity and professionalism?

RQ1 leads to a comprehensive summary of what kinds of enhancements were observed on student agency websites. RQ2 identifies the extent to which observed enhancements were perceived as strategic, creative, and reflective of professional expectations for online communication. RQ3 allows best practice recommendations to be offered in ways that might enhance student agency practice.

Methodology

The study methodology follows that applied in earlier peer-reviewed published research that analyzed visual, operational, and informational content of websites targeting specific publics (Swanson, 2004; Swanson, 1999). Senior-level public relations undergraduates in a class taught by one of the researchers conducted website analysis. This decision was made in large part because university students being sought to become involved with agencies are in an ideal position to evaluate the effectiveness of that communication.

Twenty students were assigned in teams of four. All team members were provided
written and video-based training in content analysis methods. They were provided a coding sheet and instructions comparable to those used in previous studies. A coding exercise was conducted to verify student understanding and capability. The analysis and data collection that followed was conducted over a three-week period.

Eighty student agency websites were selected at random from a directory of 158 university student-run agencies (Swanson, 2017). From that initial sample, 13 websites had to be disqualified (16.25%), either because they were generic institutional websites inappropriate for analysis (8, or 10%), because they were not in service (4, or 5%), or because the listed URL took users to a social media account page incompatible with this study (1, or 1.25%). In total, 67 websites were subject to content analysis.

Evaluators individually visited each agency website assigned to them for a prescribed period of time, gathering information to complete a coding sheet. Evaluators were asked to search for presence or absence of eight visual enhancements, five operational enhancements, and ten informational enhancements. Evaluators were instructed to note only the presence or absence of each enhancement. Using a Likert-type scale, evaluators then individually rated their level of agreement to these statements:

- Visually, the website was attractive; I enjoyed looking at it
- The website showed me everything I expected to see about the student-run agency
- The agency website was easy to navigate
- The website allowed me to access to everything I needed to understand what the student-run agency is all about
- The website presented a persuasive story about the student-run agency
- The website allowed me to learn everything I needed to know about the agency and how
it works

The coding sheets allowed evaluators to make suggestions for website improvements. Upon completion of individual website visits, each team of evaluators collaborated on a narrative summary of findings identifying strengths and weaknesses of the agency websites visited and appropriate public relations strategies that could be applied to make improvements.

Results

Below is a summary of the findings. The summary addresses the RQs in the order they were presented.

RQ1: What types of visual, operational, and informational enhancements are commonly observed on student-run agency websites?

Of the eight visual enhancements included in the research plan, the most frequently observed on websites was a portrait photo of one or more agency students (58, or 87%). The least common visual enhancement observed was a photo of an agency instructor (30, or 45%). Figure 1 presents a summary of the observed visual enhancements.

Of the five operational enhancements included in the research plan, the most frequently observed was a link to at least one agency social media site such as Facebook, Instagram, or LinkedIn (49, or 73%). The least common operational enhancement observed was a link to another on-campus student group or organization (20, or 30%). Figure 2 presents a summary of the observed operational enhancements.

Of the ten informational enhancements included in the research plan, the most frequently observed was clear identification of the agency’s service focus (56, or 84%). The least common informational enhancement observed was information about whether client
work is done for a fee or at no charge (17, or 25%). Figure 3 presents a summary of the observed informational enhancements.

RQ2: To what extent do student-run agency websites reflect established best practices in presentation of Web-based content?

Website evaluators individually responded to a series of six questions to indicate the extent to which they agreed websites reflected best practices in that they were attractive, easy to navigate, and provided relevant information. Response options and corresponding scores were strongly agree (5), agree (4), unsure (3), disagree (2), and strongly disagree (1).

Student agency websites that received higher scores in these areas were interpreted by evaluators to be more strategic, creative, and reflective of professional expectations for online communication. Figure 4 presents a summary of the observed operational enhancements.

RQ3: What recommendations can be offered to student-run agencies to help them more effectively use website content to communicate about strategy, creativity and professionalism?

Evaluators made subjective comments on coding sheets and then met to share comments with their fellow team members. Each team then wrote a collective summary of findings, with the instruction that their report should be written with agency students in mind. The following 15 recommendations were gathered from the four team reports:

Recommendations for website visual enhancements:

- Be thematically consistent with fonts, colors, and use of illustrations
- Avoid building on generic templates that don’t allow for a unique presentation
- Avoid posting content that is incomplete or “under construction”
- Preference the use of photos of agency students at work, as opposed to photos of students
in social gatherings

• Make sure website visual appearance is fresh and appealing to digital natives (See Palfrey & Gasser, 2008)

Recommendations for website operational enhancements:

• Make the site easy to navigate

• Clearly indicate hyperlinked content

• Have sufficient linked content to be descriptive but not so much that users become overwhelmed

• Avoid linking to content in a way that takes users away from the site without warning

• Include videos and other multimedia content to show and tell the agency story

Recommendations for website informational enhancements:

• Tell a compelling and persuasive story about the agency

• Show how the agency benefits clients and students

• Include the agency Mission Statement and standards for ethical practice

• Include testimonials from clients, current agency students, and recent graduates

• Update content regularly, and indicate the date of update

Discussion

Existing literature on university student-run agencies has shown that agencies are valuable high-impact practice learning environments (Maben, 2010); they have strong and relevant learning outcomes (Bush & Miller, 2011); their success is dependent in large measure on the commitment of agency advisors and students (Haley, Ritsch, & Smith, 2015). While anecdotal claims have been made about the quality of work produced by agencies, evidence is lacking. This study using a random sample of agency websites is a first step toward affirming the
quality of agency-produced work.

This study found most agency websites meet minimal expectations for visual enhancements, but the stories websites tell are not as visually powerful as they could be. In their reports, the evaluation teams argued that they were ideally qualified to make this judgment. One team wrote, “Most students are accustomed to visually appealing, functional, and informational websites. Once they land on a page, they understand what they are looking at, what it does, and how it can help them or how they can use it. In our estimation, about 40% of these agencies did not fulfill those requirements.” Another team wrote, “We asked ourselves, how can we believe in the abilities of an agency if there is a lack of creativity on the first piece of work clients see? For this reason it is important to make sure the agency website is visually pleasing and as creative as possible to tie in both the operational and informational aspects of a student run agency.”

From an operational perspective, most websites were easy to navigate but many contained inoperable hyperlinks and calendars devoid of content. Some websites had not been updated in more than a year.

At the same time, other agency sites were current and technologically enhanced. One team identified an agency website that had “strong visual attributes that we all found appealing to the eye, which intrigued us to stay and search for more information. It also contained movement with flash images that cycled through on their own time, with bright and appealing colors.” Another team praised a site that linked to a blog that “set the agenda with interesting and engaging topics that are relevant to the advertising and public relations field.”

More than two-thirds of agency websites presented stories about their students, project work, and clients. At the same time, only one-third of agency websites included a statement on
ethical practice or a testimonial from a client or student. Only one in four agency websites identified whether client work was done on a fee or pro bono basis. Student evaluators were concerned about these omissions. “In order for a student or potential client to be interested, there needs to be accurate, trustworthy, and up-to-date information about the agency and services,” one team wrote.

Many student-run agency websites were observed to contain content that looked like school work, not client work. Evaluators found lots of spelling and grammatical errors.

In summary, the findings show that while student-run agencies may claim to be valuable learning environments for engaging students in strategically and creatively relevant work, websites created by agencies were not as professional as student evaluators thought they should be. It is unlikely that clients expecting quality work from a student-run agency would accept content that is thematically inconsistent, devoid of engaging photos, peppered with dead hyperlinks, lacking customer testimonials, or riddled with copy errors.

Conclusion and Best Practices for Faculty

This study found more than 80% of agencies in the sample use a public-facing website to reach key internal and external stakeholders. Most websites were observed to be visually acceptable, operationally functional, and informationally relevant. Still, important website content elements that university student evaluators said they “expected to see” and “needed to know” were often absent. Only a few websites had all the content elements evaluators were looking for.

Faculty supervisors of student-run agencies need to be aware of the results of this study and share the results with students who create and maintain agency websites. Given that the agency website is important to the success of the agency, faculty would be well advised to urge
student staff to follow one or more of the existing models for website content and design (Byrnes, 2010; Gevorgyan & Porter, 2008; Pavlik, 2016; The Research-Based Web Design & Utility Guidelines, 2006).

The existing models generally align with the best practices opinions of the student evaluators who participated in the current study. To have the greatest potential for success, university student-run agency websites should:

- Result from a thoughtful strategic plan for online communication
- Reflect development and management by a small team of students
- Incorporate consistent user-friendly navigational structure
- Balance the presentation of text and visuals to make a strong first impression
- Tell the agency’s story, simply but fully
- Encourage engagement with agency stakeholders
- Present accurate, frequently-updated content

These recommendations to faculty present a pedagogical and professional challenge. The agency ethic is similar to that of a student newspaper in that agency students are expected to work independently. The faculty member is a guide and mentor, not an overlord or content creator.

It is certainly appropriate students to put a personal imprint on agency communication. At the same time, the agency will be in business long after today’s students have departed. The faculty member must communicate to students how decisions made today must have permanence. The agency’s brand image must be consistent, and likewise, the agency’s website shouldn’t be redesigned every time students have a whim to do so. Every student in the agency shouldn’t necessarily have a say in the agency’s external communications (See Wilson, 2015).
In their work on the website, students may make strategic or creative decisions the faculty member disagrees with. The faculty member needs to know where to draw the line between student decisions that are not well thought out but acceptable versus student decisions that are not well thought out and not acceptable.

It may be appropriate at times for the faculty member to allow agency students to make mistakes. Strategic and creative errors that result in negative consequences can be excellent learning experiences. As students prepare for action that will ultimately be revealed as a mistake, the faculty member needs to decide whether to step in or stand back.

The faculty member who supervises a student-run agency will be challenged to find the balance that allows students to develop, learn, and be creative today while supporting the communication goals of the agency now and in the years to come.

Limitations

Agency websites were evaluated by 20 undergraduate PR students whose personal experience affected their perceptions. The academic term allowed just three weeks of time for data collection and no opportunity to conduct intercoder reliability testing. The data collection focus was on evaluators’ subjective perception of presence or absence of website enhancements. The team discussions expanded upon individual findings recorded on coding sheets.

The lead author on this project shadowed the student evaluators and reviewed all findings. The co-author joined the project after data collection had occurred and provided valuable contributions to literature review and communication of findings.

Despite limitations, both authors are confident of the conclusions reached by student evaluators. The authors are grateful to the students for their contributions.
Figure 1

Visual Enhancements on Student-Run Agency Websites

n = 67

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Visual Enhancement</th>
<th>Observed Occurrence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>At least one photo of an agency student.</td>
<td>58, or 87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The agency name presented in stylized font.</td>
<td>56, or 84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An agency logo, icon, or other graphic identifier of the agency.</td>
<td>49, or 73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least one logo, icon, or other graphic identifier of an agency client.</td>
<td>43, or 64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least one logo, icon, or other graphic identifier of the university.</td>
<td>35, or 52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least one photo of agency students appearing to work in a team.</td>
<td>35, or 52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least one photo of an agency instructor.</td>
<td>30, or 45%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 2
Operational Enhancements on Student-Run Agency Websites

\( n = 67 \)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Operational Enhancement</th>
<th>Observed Occurrence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Links to social media used by the agency, such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, or YouTube.</td>
<td>49, or 73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links to multiple pages of site content describing the student-run agency.</td>
<td>48, or 72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A link to a website of a client the agency has worked with.</td>
<td>35, or 52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A link to individual student-produced content such as a blog.</td>
<td>35, or 52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A link to a different on-campus student group or organization.</td>
<td>20, or 30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Figure 3
Informational Enhancements on Student-Run Agency Websites

n = 67

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informational Enhancement</th>
<th>Observed Occurrence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The agency’s service focus is clearly identified (advertising, public relations, etc.).</td>
<td>56, or 84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An agency client is identified by name.</td>
<td>47, or 70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency students are identified by name.</td>
<td>45, or 67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The agency mission statement is offered.</td>
<td>41, or 61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The academic program that supports the agency is identified by name.</td>
<td>38, or 57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An agency instructor is identified by name.</td>
<td>37, or 55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The agency makes a statement about its ethical standards.</td>
<td>20, or 30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A success story from a current or former student is included.</td>
<td>20, or 30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A success story from a current or former client is included.</td>
<td>20, or 30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The website tells whether client work is done for a fee, or at no charge.</td>
<td>17, or 25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 4
Evaluators’ Level of Agreement that Websites Reflected Best Practices

\( n = 67 \)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Best Practice Statement</th>
<th>Mean Average Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visually, the website was attractive; I enjoyed looking at it.</td>
<td>3.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The website showed me everything I expected to see about the student-run agency.</td>
<td>3.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The agency website was easy to navigate.</td>
<td>4.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The website allowed me to access everything I needed to understand what the student-run agency is all about.</td>
<td>3.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The website presented a persuasive story about the student-run agency.</td>
<td>3.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The website allowed me to learn everything I needed to know about the agency and how it works.</td>
<td>2.99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


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