2017

New Year, New Look: Communicating an Organizational Identity for the EIU Women's Basketball Team

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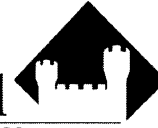# The Graduate School

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New Year New Look:

Communicating an Organizational Identity for the EIU Women's Basketball Team

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Abstract

The attempt to increase and maintain stakeholder engagement and interaction is one of the main pursuits for public relations practitioners today. With new and changing ways to reach and engage stakeholders through various social media outlets public relations professionals now more than ever have to find a way to make their products stand out among the multiple messages a person views in a given day. This public relations campaign attempted to increase engagement and interaction with the Eastern Illinois University's women's basketball team by giving the team a new organizational identity. This identity was conveyed through the team's social media accounts using a distinctive brand personality as well as visual communication to distinguish the team from comparable others. Over the course of the 2016-17 season it was found that the use of this distinctive visual communication and brand personality, utilized across Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat, had a tremendous increase in the number of stakeholder engagement and interactions with each post.

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Introduction

The Eastern Illinois women's basketball team was first established in 1973 and played their first season at the Division I level in 1982. During that span the women's basketball team has an all-time losing record, no OVC tournament titles, and only one NCAA tournament appearance. It has been particularly rough for the Panthers recently, with three straight losing seasons, capped off by last year's 3-25 record. Although considered one of the 'big six' athletic teams—the six sports that gain the most attention at a university throughout a given year—the EIU women's basketball team has historically not garnered significant attention from students, fans, or outside publics. The team's recent struggles have only quickened the decline of engagement and interaction with the team on EIU's campus, leading to a decrease in attendance and exposure of the team among students and Charleston locals.

The 2016-17 season marked head coach Debbie Black's final season under contract for Eastern Illinois. Coach Black entered the season, looking to turn the team around and create success both on and off the court. In this season, more than ever, it was important to generate awareness of the team and create fan engagement and identification from the Eastern Illinois campus and surrounding Charleston area.

This attempted increase in fan engagement and identification was done through the creation of a new team identity, promoted through an active social media campaign designed to bring in a wider audience by expressing a brand personality. The team's brand personality was created and sustained through the increased use of visuals on growing social media platforms such as Snapchat, Instagram, and Twitter. Identity was further reinforced by the usage of inclusive and informal language designed to create a

more favorable attitude towards the women's basketball team, while increasing fans' connection to the players and team.

This thesis was designed to showcase the positive effects that visual communication and brand personality, across various social media outlets, can have on a sports team's connection with its' fan base. To fully understand the roots of the project and why certain elements were used, this paper will first address the theories utilized during the development process.

Literature Review

Organizational identity refers to the central and enduring attributes of an organization that distinguish it from similar organizations (Albert & Whetten, 2004). It is often understood as the process of answering "who are we as an organization?" (Whetten, 2006). There are three distinct features of organizational identity: centrality, endurance, and distinctiveness. Corley et. al (2006) describe centrality as the central attributes of an organization that are considered to be essential and, without them, the organization would be completely different (p. 91). Centrality, thus, refers to the fundamental ideas and values that make up an organization and define what the organization is and how it interacts with the world.

The second feature of organizational identity is endurance or "the continuous nature of organizational identity" (Corley et al., 2006, p. 93). Endurance is an organization's ability to maintain its core values and identity throughout change (Corley et al., 2006; Albert & Whetten 2004). The notion of endurance relates directly to the stability of an organization's identity during times of cultural change and any ethical or

moral crises that may arise. An organization's endurance is the intentional perpetuation of its central and distinguishing features (Whetten 2006). The central and enduring features of organizational identity work together symbiotically as "organizations are best known by their deepest commitments—what they repeatedly commit to be, through time and across circumstances" (Whetten, 2006, p. 224). From this perspective, endurance can be seen as the communication of an organization's beliefs and values throughout time and across various external communication outlets.

The final feature of organizational identity is distinctiveness, which is defined as a "set of characteristics that sets an organization apart from others" (Corley et al., 2006, p. 93). The distinctiveness of an organization is found in any and all traits or values that emphasize the differences between itself and other organizations. One tactic used to create organizational distinctiveness is through the strategic use of branding and brand personality. Brand personality is described as giving organizations or products human-like characteristics or personalities in order to distinguish them from similar ones. The goal is to create a special emotional and symbolic connection between consumers and the brand (Goldsmith & Goldsmith, 2012). This brand personality is created by utilizing different forms of external communication, including public relations and the management of social media accounts.

Goldsmith and Goldsmith (2012) outlined five organizational goals of brand management: "(1) to distinguish their product from competitors and prevent it from being a commodity, (2) to give the product an image or personality, (3) to give the brand an identity, (4) to bolster the company's image and reputation, and (5) to facilitate

relationships with consumers that lead to long term value" (p. 12). These goals, similar to the core concept of distinctiveness, attempt to distinguish an organization's product from competitors by creating a unique personality. Brand personality plays an essential role in engagement and identification as "consumers seek brands that reflect their self-images" (Goldsmith & Goldsmith, 2012). This means that outside publics relate and engage more with products that seem to share similar personality traits.

The three features of organizational identity describe an organization's core attributes and how, through communication to outside audiences, it is able to differentiate itself from comparable others (Corley et al., 2006). The communication of organizational identity through external communication is vitally important as "a clear, consistent, and socially valued identity increases recognition of the organization (reputation); attracts employees, customers, and other business partners; and nurtures a feeling of trust" (Huang-Horowitz, 2014, p. 346). A clear and consistent message across multiple communication outlets helps to reinforce organizational identity notions of centrality and endurance. This outward projection of organizational identity is done through strategic external communication, such as advertising and public relations, including press releases which "remain one of the most widely used tools in PR" (Lane, 2016). In addition to press releases, it is extremely important to communicate identity through various social media accounts. The rise of social media has created an outlet for organizations to interact and engage with their supporters. According to Reitz (2012),

> Social media have changed the nature of everyday communications by providing a platform for individuals and organizations alike to engage with each other in a dynamic, synchronized, and multidirectional dialogue that represents varied voices. This type of environment is adherent to an open systems model because

the organization provides output and receives feedback from its publics; thus, the organization and its publics collect varied pieces of information while engaging in dialogue (p. 43).

Social media has become a cost effective medium that allows for interaction, collaboration, and the co-creation of messages and identities, while opening two-way communication lines between an organization and its publics (Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015). It also allows an organization the opportunity to collect timely information and feedback (Filo, Lock, & Karg 2015). Sartore-Baldwin and Walker (2011) argue that organizational identity is expressed through a company's projected outward image. According to a 2013 Pew Research Center study, 73% of adults in the U.S. actively engage in a social networking site of some kind. Therefore, social media has become essential to creating and establishing an organizational identity.

Filo, Lock, and Karg (2015) identify advantages that each social media site provides to an organization. In their study they reference Hopkins (2013) who stated "that different social media platforms allow brands to communicate and develop relationships with fans in different ways, specifying that Twitter provides a mechanism for real-time updates and interactivity, while Facebook provides a medium to enrich consumer experiences" (p. 170). Twitter feeds are more ideal for interactive and frequent communication with fans, allowing them glimpses into the personal lives of athletes or behind the scenes access (Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015). The use of Twitter also creates the ability for group interactions during events facilitating discussion among those sharing the same hashtag (Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015).

Social media outlets, such as Instagram and Snapchat, provide organizations with an opportunity to reach into the ever-increasing market of visual storytelling. Instagram,

according to Klie (2015), has already surpassed Twitter in terms of registered users and is

approaching Facebook's total users. Klie goes on to detail the unique attributes of

Instagram, noting that the central visual appeal of Instagram allows organizations to not

only highlight their brands through photos and videos, but also to show how supporters

interact with the organization and its products. Instagram not only caters specifically to

visual marketing, but is also more premeditated in terms of posting content (Klie, 2015).

The majority of Instagram users are very selective when it comes to posting content,

planning out not only which photos to publish, but also what filters and customization to

use, in order to make the photo more distinguished and appealing. This meticulous

planning of photo publishing makes Instagram a tool for less frequent publishing of

edited and posed pictures. With less and more purposeful postings the site creates a

greater opportunity for consumers to view and engage with an organization's content.

Snapchat is yet another quickly growing visual social media site that

organizations use to reach their stakeholders. Snapchat allows users to take pictures or

short videos and overlay them with text, filters, and unique geotags that can only be

utilized in certain places or during certain times. These pictures and videos only last from

1-10 seconds and can be sent directly to specific followers or shared with everyone via

the Snapchat Story option. This social media outlet is specifically used for quick unique

pictures or videos that last only 24 hours allowing organizations to highlight their daily

lives and provide users a glimpse into behind-the-scenes daily activities (DeMers, 2014).

Although Snapchat and Instagram are both used for visual storytelling, Snapchat is

geared towards a much younger audience with 71% of users under the age of 25 (Ally,

2016). Snapchat offers organizations a unique way to display their personalities through

the use of filters and text overlay. The application also allows users to hand draw cartoons or images over their pictures and videos. By injecting personality into your photos and videos, it helps people connect to your brand on a "human-like" level (DeMers, 2014).

The creation of a brand personality does not stop at the utilization of visual marketing. The creation of a verbal identity, to further distinguish a brand, is just as important. "Verbal branding is about adding a personality to communications so that consumers can distinguish between competing brands. It enables the public to connect with products and services based on language, tone of voice and stories that go beyond a logo or image and, importantly, touch all aspects of the business." (Chahal, 2016, p. 1). By supplementing an organization's visuals with unique language, a company can foster its individuality while continuing to engage and connect with its audience. Verbal branding helps to reframe organizational messages into a more direct conversation with their consumers by adding a human voice.

The theories of organizational identity and brand personality guided the creation of the following public relations campaign in which the EIU women's basketball team's new identity would be communicated visually across their social media accounts.

Campaign

The re-branding campaign for the Eastern Illinois women's basketball team began in late April of 2016 with discussions between myself, Head Women's Basketball Coach Debbie Black, and Athletic Director of Public and Media Relations, Rich Moser. The discussions were designed to create awareness of the new campaign and re-design and to discuss potential strategies and limitations. It was concluded that while creating these

new visuals and identity around the women's basketball team was important; it was also

necessary to maintain a sense of cohesiveness with the overall athletic department.

Therefore, any new graphics would include design elements similar to those used

currently by the EIU athletic department and incorporate the Eastern Illinois logo. The

same decision was decided, for the weekly press releases and game notes. While the

redesign would include more visual elements, it would also maintain a structure and style

familiar to the athletic department, making sure to highlight both the athletic

department's social media sites and the EIU women's basketball accounts. Finally, it was

agreed that the hashtag for the season, which would be used in various social media

postings, would continue to be #EIUBleedBlue to maintain continuity across all athletic

and women's basketball social media accounts. By keeping elements from the athletic

department and previous women's basketball team's themes; it helped to create a sense of

endurance. Endurance, as previously stated, is an organization's ability to maintain its

core values and identity throughout change (Corley et al., 2006; Albert & Whetten 2004).

Therefore, the continuation of characteristics from the athletic department and the EIU

women's basketball team from year's past highlights core attributes that stakeholders will

relate to throughout the new PR campaign.

Pre-Season (Visual Style and Graphic Creation)

The first step in the re-branding campaign took place over three months, as I

created multiple options for visual graphics as well as redesigned the weekly press

release game notes. The goal of the redesigned game notes was three-pronged. First, to

maintain certain enduring attributes of the athletic department and game notes from the

past, while creating a sense of distinctiveness from the men's basketball team. Secondly,

incorporate a more visually pleasing and aesthetic look in order to increase fan viewing

and engagement. Lastly, the game notes were redesigned to highlight the players on the

team and showcase the ambassadors of the team's brand personality.

The game notes were a key area of focus, due to its function as an athletic

department press release. Much like press releases, game notes are released to the public

to garner attention about upcoming events or noteworthy stories. Game notes function as

an individual game's press release, bringing attention to the upcoming basketball game

while detailing significant season statistics and storylines. Throughout the course of a

basketball season, anywhere between 25-35 game notes will be released. With such a

high frequency of these releases, the game notes were a key outlet to convey the team's

new identity.

The first page of the game notes (see Appendix A) was of primary concern since

it would provide the initial impression to both fans and media outlets who viewed the

notes. The EIU logo was enlarged and set inside a banner across the top of the page

distinguishing the team. The banner also highlights the various women's basketball and

athletic department social media accounts in order to increase audience traffic. The

banner used large logos and fonts in order to grab the viewer's attention. According to a

PR Newswire study, adding just one visual element of some kind—logos, photos, videos,

or infographics—increased the number of online views and engagement with a press

release by 92%. The same study found that visibility increases over 550% when including

multiple visual elements. With visibility increasing based on the use of visuals and the

prime position of the banner at the top of the first page of the notes, it was a superior

place to place key information about the team and its social media accounts. Key details

about the team, such as season records and important game information along with all of

its social media accounts and names, were placed near the top so that even quick views or

engagements would pick up these essentials. This was done in an effort to steer audiences

towards the team's various social media accounts and increase exposure to the brand

personality being displayed on those accounts.

      The use of visuals continued near the bottom of the first page as the standard text

depth chart that was used in previous game note releases was replaced by cutout

headshots of the women's basketball team's starting five players. Not only do the

headshots increase the visual nature of the notes, but it helped to foster a sense of

connection to the players by putting a face with a name. The players are the ambassadors

of the team's brand personality, helping to create and display the unique characteristics of

the team. By using pictures of their faces, as opposed to just listing their names, it helps

fans recognize and identify the specific players while being more visually aesthetic.

      This dualistic style of creating a more visual release with pictures and

highlighting the individual players was maintained throughout the game notes as each

player received individual pages. As opposed to previous press releases, which did not

contain individualized pages for players, the new game notes included pages designed in

a similar style as the first page of the release (see Appendix B). Each page highlights a

specific player, grabbing the attention of the audience with a large banner displaying the

player in action during a game. The page also contained all of their important career stats,

a headshot, a small bio of their attributes, and season highlights. This was done in order

to compile all the important statistical and season information about each player onto one

visually appealing page. Instead of flipping through the press release to find certain

details on a player, all information could be accessed on one easy to find page. The use of

a visual banner and headshot increased the visibility of each page and player, as the PR

Newswire study suggested, increasing the likelihood of those flipping through the press

release to stop and view the individualized pages. The pictures solidified the

identification of each player on the team, to increase fan recognition and identification

with the team and its players.

Over the summer, multiple options for potential graphics to use throughout the

season were created. Various graphics were designed that highlighted the team and/or

players while disseminating information about statistics for the season and players. After

the creation of various graphics, the visuals were analyzed until, ultimately, two graphic

templates were chosen for use throughout the season. These two graphics were selected

for multiple reasons. First, limiting the number of graphics created a sense of endurance.

Both graphics contained elements used in past athletic department public relations efforts

to help maintain a link across the various social media sites and the athletic department as

a whole. The use of only two graphics, also, helped to maintain consistency throughout

the season, not bombarding fans with new and ever-changing media during this

campaign. Secondly, these graphics were selected due to their simplicity and focus. The

goal of the created graphics was to grab the audience's attention so they would slow

down and engage with the social media posts. The pictures were meant to distinguish the

team from other organizations by standing out visually while highlighting the team and

brand personality. It was decided that the graphics should be simple and contain only key

written details so as to keep the focus on the player pictures. By keeping the focus of the

images on the team's brand personality ambassadors, the organization's core identity and

distinctiveness can be viewed by those who scroll through the various social media accounts quickly.

The first graphic template created was the "Game Day" template (see Appendix C). This template was designed for use on Instagram and Twitter. It would be posted each morning that the team would play a game. As with the front page of the re-designed game note press releases, the graphic was used to highlight the team and players while informing fans who the team was playing and the various social media outlets they could go to in order to follow the game. This continued the concept of grabbing a social media user's attention while steering them towards the team's various other social media accounts to increase awareness and engagement with those accounts. Each individual game day graphic highlighted the team and individual players by displaying color in-game action shots of a specific player with a black-and-white backdrop in order to make the player stand out. This design not only grabbed the attention of users scrolling through on Twitter and Instagram, but focused it on the players by making them stand out over everything else in the graphic. By highlighting the players, the graphic showcased the unique and central characteristics of the team, its players. The players define the team's core values and distinctiveness and they help set it apart from not only other sports at EIU, but other women's basketball teams across the nation. Making the players the main focus of each graphic became essential to displaying the unique organizational identity of the EIU women's basketball team.

The second graphic template created (see Appendix D) was designed to further showcase the distinctiveness of the EIU women's basketball team by displaying the unique personalities of the players. The template is simple, to keep the focus on

individual players by using the EIU athletic department's blue backdrop and logo with a

cutout picture of the individual player in an informal, fun pose. By using the athletic

department's blue backdrop, the graphic communicates a sense of endurance by utilizing

familiar visuals used throughout the athletic department in past and current media. This

displayed the stability of the organization's core identity throughout the change in public

relations tactics by highlighting central and distinguishing features (Whetten, 2006). The

informal pictures were taken before the season started. The girls posed in fun and unique

ways, smiling and laughing while posing with a basketball in their uniforms. It was easy

for me to work closely with the team due to my unique position in the athletic

communication department that granted me access to non-public areas and ensured close

interactions with the team. I have already established rapport and friendship with the

players and coaches after having spent one year traveling and working with the women's

basketball team. That relationship allowed the girls to feel comfortable around me and

share their true personality, in order to generate the fun and unique content for the various

social media sites. This was done in order to showcase the team's personality and give

fans a more personal and emotional connection with the team. By keeping the design

simple—only the blue backdrop, cutout of the player, and their name—the main focus of

the graphic would be the unique personality of each player. The simplicity and

distinctiveness was also a key to using them at certain points throughout the game to call

attention to a specific Tweet. This was done because "visuals surface story elements that

may be overlooked by readers, giving your messages second (and third) chances at

connecting with readers… calling attention to that theme with a visual – a video snippet

or image – can help connect that message with readers who care, and who might have glanced over the message initially" (PR Newswire, para. 6).

The above elements were created or redesigned in order to achieve Goldsmith and Goldsmith's (2012) five goals of brand management. While other schools may use graphics and visuals to highlight their teams, by using the players on the EIU team and their unique personalities; it helps to distinguish the product from competitors and prevent it from being a commodity. This visual campaign also helps to give the team an image or personality, in order to create a brand identity through fun and unique pictures highlighting the player's personalities. This, ultimately, bolsters the organization's image and reputation by increasing fan engagement and interaction in order to facilitate relationships with consumers that lead to long term value. The generation of this new and unique content for the team's social media sites is essential in the communication of the EIU women's basketball team identity working to increase the level of fan engagement.

Once school was back in session, the graphics and press releases were completed with the addition of the upcoming season's finalized roster and schedule. The team's and players' pictures were taken and incorporated into the new visual elements and the "season primer" graphics were released, beginning in mid-October. These primer graphics (see Appendix E) were created to increase fan awareness and anticipation for the upcoming season while re-establishing the players with the fans. Each primer graphic featured a certain player standing out against a darker background and used their jersey number to indicate how many days until the season started. By designing the graphics in such a way it continually reminded fans about the upcoming season while acquainting them with the players on the team and their jersey numbers. This was done to increase

identification with the players and the team before the start of the season and the full

campaign. By highlighting each player and their accompanying jersey numbers, it began

to create an association and recognition with the audience and the team. These primer

graphics were utilized to increase fans' identification with each specific player by helping

fans to distinguish them individually. This was intended to increase recall of each player

based on their photo and jersey number in future graphics. This association was key, in

order for fans to connect with the new organizational identity. The players helped to

define two tenets of organizational identity. First, they created and represented the core

values of the organization by being the ambassadors of the team, both on and off the

court. Who they are and how they act directly affects how fans view and understand the

team as a whole. Secondly, they are the distinct features of this organization. Many

schools have a women's basketball team and each has different ways of marketing them,

but what they do not have that separates the EIU women's team from other schools is our

players. They are unique to EIU alone and it is because of this distinction; they are the

main focus of all the created graphics for the campaign.

During the preseason, an EIU women's basketball team Snapchat account was

established and marketed throughout the various social media accounts already

established. This account was created and utilized to give fans a behind the scenes look

into the basketball team's daily activities. The overarching theme of the   behind-the-

scenes glimpses of the team's personality across different platforms, helped establish

identity notions of centrality and distinctiveness for the women's basketball team. By

giving audiences the chance to see the team in a new perspective off the court, fans can

engage and identify with the team's personality and everyday life during the season.

Seeing what movies the team watches on road trips or how they interact with one another during down times at a hotel or on the road highlights the distinctive personality of the team and distinguishes it from other organizations while creating connections with fans. Utilizing Snapchat allows fans to see aspects of the team they have not seen before thereby solidifying a team identity while bolstering its image and facilitating a relationship with its consumers as Goldsmith and Goldsmith (2012) detailed in their five organizational goals of brand management.

In-Season (Campaign in Full Effect)

The 2016-17 EIU women's basketball season officially began on November 11th as the team took on Millikin in its home opener. Starting with that game and continuing through the next three and a half months the re-design of the women's basketball team's organizational identity and brand personality was in full swing.

Scheduled game day graphics and game note press releases were distributed throughout the week during the season. Depending on how many games took place during a given week, this would happen between one and three times a week. In order to bolster the brand personality, each release and graphic was accompanied with a more informal voice and inclusive wording in text. As Chahal (2016) described, the use of personality in accompanying text not only continues to distinguish a brand from similar organizations, but also helps to create a deeper connection with the audience based on mutual language and tone. It rounds out a social media post so that each aspect communicates the distinctive identity of the team while conveying information and personality that may not be discerned from the pictures alone. Each Twitter and Instagram post used this informal personal text, to foster a more personal one-on-one

dialogue as opposed to general corporate speak (see Appendix F). By doing this,

audiences were more likely to interact and engage with the organization on social media

because it is seen as two-way dialogue. This type of verbal branding was continued

within the press releases with informal personal headings designed to mirror the fun and

good-humored nature of the team.

The text was also altered in all social media accounts to be more inclusive using

"we" or "the Panthers" as opposed to "EIU" or "the EIU women's basketball team." Sela

et. al. (2012) found that even minor language changes such as pronoun use in

organizational communication can have a tremendous impact on audience perception.

"That people rate both their own and others' interpersonal relationships as closer and of

higher quality when they are described using the pronoun "we" rather than "the other

person and I" (Sela et. al., 2012, pg. 645). This inclusive and personal language was done

to enhance brand personality and create connections and engagement with the team's

audiences. By using "we", it makes the audience feel like they are a part of the team

rather than simply an admirer or observer. As Sela et. al. point out, this small change can

increase the quality of a relationship between two people, or an organization and a

person. When a strong relationship exists, it is more likely that a person will engage in

that relationship. Fans are more likely to interact with a team's social media posts and

engage in dialogue if they believe they have a strong connection with the team.

In a given game week during the season, brand personality was bolstered through

the use of Snapchat and Twitter. Snapchat was used to showcase the daily lives of the

team during the season. Brief snaps were taken to highlight various aspects of travel,

practice, and subsequent "in-between" spaces that emphasized aspects of the team that

the majority of the public does not see. Each snap helped to create a continuous "behind

the scenes" look into the players' and team's personalities in order to establish a brand

and subsequently create fan engagement. Consumers seem to prefer brands with distinct

personalities because they can identify with the product and use it to express their own

personality, suggesting that the human-like characteristics given to a brand leads to an

emotional bond with consumers (Goldsmith & Goldsmith 2012). Snapchat allowed the

creation of this distinct personality by showing how the players act when off the court.

Most fans only get the chance to see the players while they play, but Snapchat allowed

fans to glimpse the players' real personalities. By seeing how the players choose to spend

their downtime on the road, it showcases their unique qualities and allows fans to connect

with the team on a more personal level.

     Twitter was utilized heavily to increase fan interaction and provide in the moment

updates during games since, as Filo, Lock, and Karg (2015) noted, it is ideal for frequent

interactive communication with fans. These tweets were used to highlight player

accomplishments with accompanying graphics. Twitter was also used to showcase brand

personality through the use of language, emoticons, and gifs. Periodically throughout the

season, tweets were sent out utilizing these small images and short video clips to increase

the visual output while also displaying the team's personality. These emoticons and gifs

were showcased with the new informal and convivial identity of the team to not only

distinguish the team, but create a special emotional and symbolic connection between

consumers and the brand (Goldsmith & Goldsmith, 2012)

Along with the regularly scheduled graphics, periodically, throughout the season, informal team and/or player pictures would be posted on the various social media accounts. Instagram was utilized for more posed team pictures at various points throughout the season, while Twitter was used for infrequent graphics. By posting these unscheduled pictures and graphics fans were able to connect to the team on an emotional by sharing in these captured moments previously hidden from fans. The advantage to capturing these moments for fans to share in is the ability to see in real time how the players interact with one another and their surroundings. It allows fans the ability to relate to the players on a more personal level thereby increasing identification with the team.

Results

Heading into the 2016-17 season, before the countdown graphics were posted to social media priming fans for the season, the EIU women's basketball team had 513 followers on Twitter and 118 followers on Instagram. The Twitter page mainly consisted of press release stories about game results and major accomplishments re-posted from the team's Facebook page. Very few tweets, 51 to be exact, contained a visual element with even less containing unique language communicating some form of team identity. The team's Instagram page contained only 75 posts since its inception in mid-July 2014 with each picture averaging around 15 likes per post. Tables A and B, along with the graphs, on the following pages, break down the campaign's impact on social media and demonstrates that even in the early portion of this campaign these figures began to rise.

In the month before the season began, 13 unique graphics were posted to the team's Instagram page resulting in an average of 24 likes per post. During the same span,

these graphics, along with other unique posts, were tweeted out on the team's Twitter page. The 24 tweets during the month resulted in an average of five likes and 12 link clicks per post. By using just one graphic, fan engagement and activity had a notable increase in the month preceding the season. By looking at the table on the following page and comparing the basketball team's social media engagement numbers from last season to this season, you can see that the audience response to the beginning stages of the campaign already surpassed even the best month's numbers from last year. Based on the data, it can be said that the countdown graphics were successful in showcasing the new look and tone of the team to its audiences and beginning the process of grabbing fan attention and engagement.

Throughout the course of the season, fan engagement with the team's social media accounts rose significantly compared to last season's numbers. After the initial look at the three graphs highlighting each month of the 2016-17 season, the number of unique posts to both Twitter and Instagram increased dramatically. In addition to utilizing the created graphics and pictures taken throughout the season, multiple tweets using verbal branding were sent out during games and sporadically throughout the season to highlight the team's personality. The increase in the use of these accounts may have helped to increase fan engagement as social media allows for interaction and the co-creation of messages and identities, while opening two-way communication lines between an organization and its publics (Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015).

With Twitter being the main outlet for this campaign, as well as the exceptional analytics the site offers, special attention was given to the Twitter account's interaction and engagement numbers. As each graph shows, apart from the significant increase in the

account's usage, the average likes per tweet increased by nearly ten times each month

compared to last season's totals. This same increase can be seen in retweets with the

biggest differences happening in the second and third months of the season. Last year's

total retweets in those months of the season did not get above 10 while this season's

number of retweets hovered around 100 each month.

An interesting pattern emerges when looking at the above graphs that both the 2015-16

and 2016-17 season share. In both seasons the team's largest number of engagements

came during the first month of the season and began to drop substantially in the second

and third months. This could be due to a number of factors including the attraction of a

new season, the progression of poor performances and team record, or even social media

fatigue. Despite the trend of social engagement dropping as the season progresses, the

average number of likes per day for the 2016-17 season remained above 10, while the

previous year's hovered around one.

Besides engaging with the team's tweets via liking or retweeting, the number of

replies from fans also increased throughout the season. During the 2015-16 season, there

were only a total of seven replies on Twitter throughout the three-month span. This

number took a massive leap during the 2016-17 season with 45 total replies to the

account averaging at least 10 per month. This shows that the fans were not only engaged

with the new visual communication, but also interacted with the account, responding to

the new team's new identity and opening a mean's of communicating that did not exist in

previous seasons.

Twitter Analytics Of The First Month Of The Season

■ 2015-16 Season   ■ 2016-17 Season

	Total Tweets	Avg. Likes Per Day	Avg. Retweets Per Day	Avg. Link Clicks Per Day	Total Replies
■ 2015-16 Season	16	4	1	9	0
■ 2016-17 Season	191	21	5	22	22

Twitter Analytics Of The Second Month Of The Season

■ 2015-16 Season   ■ 2016-17 Season

	Total Tweets	Avg. Likes Per Day	Avg. Retweets Per Day	Avg. Link Clicks Per Day	Total Replies
■ 2015-16 Season	18	1	0	3	2
■ 2016-17 Season	138	11	3	9	10

Twitter Analytics Of The Final Month Of The Season

■ 2015-16 Season   ■ 2016-17 Season

	Total Tweets	Avg. Likes Per Day	Avg. Retweets Per Day	Avg. Link Clicks Per Day	Total Replies
■ 2015-16 Season	19	1	0	3	5
■ 2016-17 Season	132	12	2	7	13

In total, 487 tweets were sent out during the 2016-17 season accounting for more than half of the total tweets before the campaign began. Of those tweets 171 contained some form of visual element which is more than three times the total amount before the season began. This led to 118 new followers throughout the course of the campaign.

In order to fully understand the effectiveness of the visual campaign on Twitter, the individual tweets were split into two categories and analyzed. This data, shown in Table A, was analyzed in order to establish the effectiveness of using visual elements in social media. It also helps to show whether or not the sheer number of tweets alone had an effect on the increase in fan engagement. The tweets were separated into those containing visual elements and those that contained some form of verbal brand personality but no accompanying pictures or graphics. The total numbers in Table A shows that this season's social media campaign averaged slightly more retweets per post but dropped in average likes. This may be due to the increased number of tweets during

Table A

	No. of Tweets	Likes	Retweets	Avg.
Containing Visual Element	171	1,261	321	7.4 likes 3.3 retweets
Containing Brand Personality	316	270	79	.9 likes .25 retweets
Totals	487	1,537	400	3.2 likes .8 retweets

the season as compared to last year. While the number of likes is dramatically higher compared to last year, there was nearly 10 times as many tweets this year and that may have diluted the average numbers.

Looking at the impact of a visual element in the Twitter campaign Table A shows a massive increase in engagement. When looking at per tweet averages, the number of likes per post nearly doubles the total number from last season. These tweets also average 3.3 retweets per post, which is five times as many retweets than the 2015-16 totals. When comparing tweets with visual elements to the 2016-17 season the, numbers are substantially different.

The number of likes and retweets for posts that contain some sort of graphic or picture accounted for 80 percent of the season's total number of likes and retweets, despite only accounting for a third of the total number of tweets. This shows that the addition of the visuals for this season had a massive effect on the interaction and engagement with fans through social media.

As for the tweets that did not contain any visual elements, they were utilized to keep audiences informed and updated using a conversation-like style. These tweets also

used verbal branding to communicate the relaxed and friendly personality of the team.

While the interaction and engagement with fans was significantly less than those tweets

that contained a visual, the total number of likes and retweets were still greater than the

2015-16 season. However, the average fan interaction per tweet is drastically lower than

the previous year, but this also may be due to the significant increase in total number of

tweets.

Throughout the course of this campaign, it was noteworthy to see the comparison

between tweets from the EIU women's basketball account and the EIU athletic

department. During the season I was required to tweet from both accounts simultaneously

therefore multiple tweets between the two accounts shared a similar structure. Both

tweets conveyed the same information, however the tweets posted on the EIU women's

basketball account were altered to incorporate the brand personality using informal

language and the inclusive "we" or the use of a visual element such as a graphic or

picture. In rare instances, the tweets on both accounts were exactly the same, but the

tweet on the women's basketball account contained one of the created graphics. When

this happened throughout the course of the season, fan interactions with each account's

tweet differed. Fans engaged with both tweets, but the tweets from the athletic

department account were liked by audiences while the tweets from the EIU women's

basketball account were retweeted. This shows that fans maintained a stronger connection

with the women's basketball account since they chose to retweet it on their own accounts.

While liking a post shows a fan's support of a tweet, retweeting demonstrates that a

person identifies with the organization because they are actively choosing to post the

organization's tweet to their own timeline, for their followers to see. It also shows that

audiences feel identified with the organization as they choose to use the tweets to communicate who they are and their likes to their own social circles.

As mentioned above, at the end of the campaign a total of 487 tweets were sent out with 171 containing a visual element. This resulted in 1,537 total likes, 400 total retweets, and 45 replies throughout the three-month span gaining 118 new followers. The Twitter campaign also earned 1,296 interactions with fans through further clicking on links and pictures resulting in nearly 200 thousand impressions, according to Twitter analytics.

Looking at Table B on the next page, the team's Instagram page also showed an increase in fan interaction and engagement throughout the season. The largest increases when comparing the account to last season came during the beginning of the season and the end of the season. In both instances the individual pictures on the account averaged over 20 likes per post which is a meaningful increase from the average of 15 likes per post before the campaign began. The noteworthy increase in fan interaction during these months may have been due to the increased attention the beginning and ending of a season garners. Nevertheless, the increase in fan interaction, especially when taking into account the increase in the total number of posts that had the potential to dilute the average, is still worth noting. Both pages garnered similar numbers during the second month of the season with this year's campaign, averaging only one more like per post.

When analyzing the Instagram posts even further the reason behind this pattern begins to take shape. The posts that garnered the most interaction from fans were either unplanned pictures of the team captured during off-the-court moments or designed graphics that showcased the team and players with accompanying text. Besides the

Table B

	Number of Posts	**Avg. Likes**
Pre-Campaign (Oct. 11, 2016)	75 Total Posts	15 likes per post
"Priming Month" (Oct. 11 – Nov. 10)	13 Posts	24 likes per post
First Month of Season		
2015-16 Season	7 posts	12 likes per post
2016-17 Season	20 posts	20 likes per post
Second Month of Season		
2015-16 Season	6 posts	18 likes
2016-17 Season	11 posts	19 likes per post
Final Month of Season		
2015-16 Season	0 posts	0 likes
2016-17 Season	12 posts	22 likes per post
End of the Season Numbers	130 total posts (55 new posts)	21 likes per post

unplanned posts that showcased the team's unique personality off the court, the majority

of created graphics that received 20 or more likes had accompanying verbal branding.

Throughout the season, the graphics posted to Instagram shared a similar structure but

they varied in terms of who the focus of the graphic was and the accompanying text. The

posts that garnered the most likes were those that highlighted the personality of the

players off the court, compared to in-game action shots. For example, the two most liked

graphics on Instagram are those shown in Appendix C. These two graphics showcase the

distinctive personality of the players on the team while including verbal branding in the

accompanying text. This type of post was more prevalent during the first and final month

of the season which may explain why those months had a much higher increase in fan engagement.

At the end of this public relations campaign, a total of 55 graphics and pictures were posted to Instagram. These posts gained a total of 1,156 likes resulting in an average of 21 likes per post.

The final part of the public relations campaign came in the use of Snapchat to showcase quick videos of the team "behind the scenes" when traveling or off the court. The one flaw to Snapchat is the ability to collect data on fan engagement and interaction. Snapchat is still a growing social media site with one of its key concepts being that whatever you post gets deleted after a few hours. With no saved data bank on pictures and videos posted to Snapchat as well as no analytical software on the site, knowing Snapchat's true impact is hard to verify. Before the season began, the team did not have a Snapchat account and at the end of the season, the account had gained 35 total followers. With followers able to see pictures and videos of the team posted to their "story" whenever they please up to when the post is deleted, I was only able to see brief shots of who had seen the post when I periodically checked the account. Throughout the course of the season each picture and video posted to Snapchat averaged 15 views each with highs of around 20 views.

Conclusion

The above data demonstrated the increased engagement and activity this campaign earned throughout the 2016-17 women's basketball season. The new brand personality was well received, but the major factor in the increase in fan engagement and activity was earned through the use of visual elements. The data in Table B clearly

demonstrates that the use of created graphics or photos has a direct influence on fan interaction and identification. Table B also shows that while having a unique brand personality via text can garner fan interaction through likes and retweets, those numbers increase dramatically when coupled with some form of visual imagery. Since one of Goldsmith and Goldsmith's (2012) five goals of brand management is to facilitate relationships with consumers that lead to long term value, the use of visual imagery, especially on Twitter, is essential to increasing fan interaction and engagement.

With the growth of Instagram and Snapchat as social media outlets it was important to see whether the new organizational identity had any impact on those accounts. This campaign was able to discover what worked best for each individual social media account and whether or not those accounts should be utilized in the future. In Instagram's case, the increase in fan engagement was significant enough to warrant its use but with minor changes to future campaigns. The Instagram page had its highest interactions when posting captured moments or created graphics that focused on off-the-court personal reactions and pictures. Since Instagram has already surpassed Twitter in the number of users according to Klie (2015) it is important to continue use of that account, but tailor it more towards personalized images as opposed to created graphics to create the most impact.

While the campaign did garner fan engagement through Snapchat, without a previous year's comparison or proper analytics from the account we are unable to determine if the campaign was successful or not. Snapchat is still a growing market, especially among youth, but it can be difficult to verify its reach and impact.

In total, the re-design of the EIU women's basketball team's social media accounts and the creation of a new organizational identity through the use of a brand personality and visual elements was very successful. Fan interaction and engagement with the team's accounts rose significantly across the board, with Twitter earning the highest results. This suggests that the incorporation of visual media and a unique brand personality not only separates the organization from comparable others but also increases audience engagement and interaction leading to increased identification with the team's stakeholders.

Further Study

While this campaign illustrated the positive effects of using visual elements and brand personality in social media, there is still plenty more that can be done. In order to gain the maximum benefit from social media to increase fan engagement, there must be someone whose sole responsibility is the maintenance and performance of the team's brand personality. While I was able to utilize visuals and accompanying text to communicate the team's core identity and unique personality, there were many opportunities that I was unable to exploit. I had the behind-the-scenes access and established relationship with the coaches and players, but I lacked some time. In addition to the creation and execution of this public relations campaign, I also had to fulfill my normally assigned work responsibilities. This included multiple in-game duties such as radio broadcasting, creation and distribution of statistical information, writing of press releases, and utilizing the athletic department's social media accounts. The performance of these duties often interfered with my ability to capture more unique moments for use across the team's various social media accounts.

If I were to continue this public relations campaign, another change I would make would be to the graphics themselves, particularly the Game Day graphic. While this graphic did a good job of grabbing the attention of viewers and pulling the focus towards the players, it did not convey as much information or personality as I had intended. The inclusion of the team's social media accounts along the bottom part of the graphic was essential for this first stage of the PR process in order to increase awareness of those accounts. By listing those accounts across the press releases and graphics, it made sure that audiences would be directed towards the team's other accounts. This was effective in the early stages of the campaign in order to grow each accounts followers and increase interaction and engagement, but did not demonstrate the same effect after a period of time. While the press releases are ideal places for the listing of the team's social media accounts, the overuse of them in consistently used graphics could lead to ignorance. With most viewers already knowing the team's social media accounts there is less of a need to fully interact and engage with that graphic. Instead, that space should be utilized for important game information such as start time, location, TV/Radio outlets, etc. By including useful information such as that in the graphics, it creates a need for audiences to view and fully engage with the graphic. This enhances the sharing of the team's identity and personality. The inclusion of that information also frees up the accompanying text in the tweet or Instagram post to use Chahal's (2016) concept of verbal branding, displaying the team's unique voice and tone instead of having to write game information.

The final addition I would make in future campaigns would be to include the players and their personalities more. While this campaign scratched the surface of the

team's personality through the use of pictures and social media accounts, it was still done with me as a gatekeeper. In order to fully create and communicate a brand personality the players must be utilized to a greater degree. What I mean to say is that the players should be the ones using the social media accounts at certain times. Whether that is a Snapchat takeover where one player handles the team's account for a day on a road trip, or a player answers fan questions via Twitter or a live video stream. Utilizing the players that the team has to offer is the best way to get personality across to viewers while increasing engagement because the audience gets to interact directly with the team.

This public relations campaign was very effective in multiple ways such as the incorporation and utilization of visual media and the creation and communication of a brand personality designed to establish relationships with the audience. As the figures listed earlier in this thesis show, the employment of these elements had a positive effect on audience engagement with the EIU women's basketball team. While there is plenty of room to learn and grow from this, the initial campaign was successful in the establishment of a new identity for the team and it is vital to continue these tactics in the coming years in order to consistently cultivate relationships with the team's audience and establish a team identity.

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Appendix A

Game Notes Press Release pg. 1

2015-16 Game Notes

2016-17 Game Notes

Appendix B

Game Notes Press Release Individual Player Page

2015-16 Game Notes

2016-17 Game Notes

Appendix C

Game Day Graphic

Appendix D

In-Game Player Graphics

Appendix E

Season Countdown Primer Graphic

Appendix F

Verbal Branding Examples

eiuwbb   Following

25 likes   3w

eiuwbb Grace is excited. Are You? It's
Game Day! We take on UT Martin tonight at
6 p.m.

Eastern Illinois WBB
@EIUWBB   Following ⌄

Grace Lennox for three! She ties it up 25-25 as
we head into halftime... Lennox and Smith each
with six points to lead the team.

eiuwbb   Following

15 likes   13w

eiuwbb Check your calendars Panther fans
it is Game Day! We take on Illinois State
tonight at 7 pm on ESPN 3.

Eastern Illinois WBB
@EIUWBB   Following ⌄

Jennifer Nehls makes the bucket on one end
and gets the block on the other... EIU 68, JSU
65... 38 seconds left to play. #EIUBleedBlue

eiuwbb   Following

17 likes   6w

eiuwbb Looks like someone is going to
need a bigger shelf. Congratulations To
Allison Van Dyke on her fourth OVC
Freshman of the Week award!

Eastern Illinois WBB
@EIUWBB   Following ⌄

Count the bucket and one! Jalisha Smith with
her first career double-double now with 12
points and 11 rebounds.