



Walsh College relies on a **spare but creative ad campaign** to raise its profile in a crowded market.

BY SHARON SHINN

**C**an a small business school in a highly competitive market carve out a strong identity for itself, even against one of the most well-known universities in the U.S.? It can if it has the right advertising campaign. At least, that's been the experience of the Walsh College of Business and Accountancy in Troy, Michigan, a suburb of Detroit.

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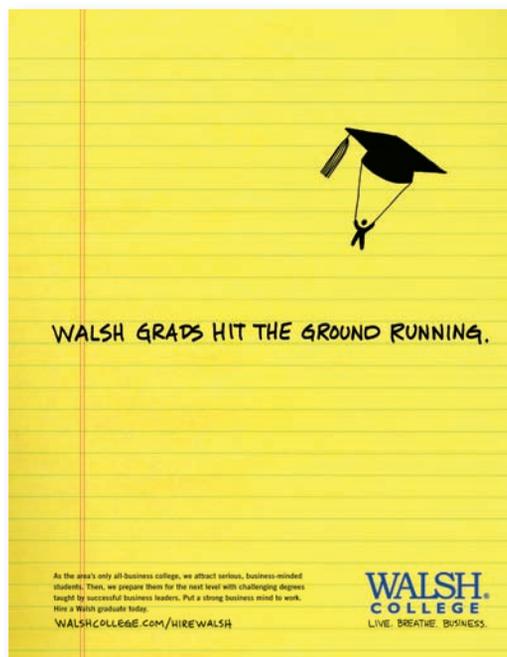
In 2008, when the school wanted to improve its positioning in the community, it hired Perich Advertising + Design of Ann Arbor, Michigan, to create an integrated ad campaign. First, the agency conducted perceptual studies, calling Detroit residents and asking them to name the top business schools in the area.

“We wanted to evaluate the market in general as well as Walsh’s position in the market,” says Brenda Meller, director of marketing for the college. Unsurprisingly, the University of Michigan came up first. Walsh College was in the fifth slot.

At the same time, the school and the agency conducted interviews with faculty, alumni, prospective students, and existing students to discover what they thought were the school’s strengths. It was soon clear that Walsh’s stakeholders were passionate about the school’s focus on educating working professionals who were looking for better jobs.

“Walsh students aren’t thinking about football games,” says Ernie Perich, CEO and creative director of Perich Advertising + Design. “They’re thinking, ‘Where can I get a great degree and advance my career to the next level?’”

But outside of Walsh’s faculty, students, and alumni, says Meller, not many people knew about the school’s real-world focus and practical education programs, bolstered by faculty who work in their fields by day and teach at Walsh by night. “Going through this exercise highlighted the things we knew about ourselves, but it also highlighted the fact that we had a great opportunity to generate more awareness about what we offer,” she says.



These print and billboard ads feature the hallmarks of Walsh College’s ongoing “Live. Breathe. Business.” campaign: a background of yellow legal paper; drastically simple stick figures; and hand-written messages tightly focused on business, but laced with humor. To see more ads in the campaign, including television commercials, visit [www.walshcollege.edu/marketingcampaign#.ULfTqI7T3ao](http://www.walshcollege.edu/marketingcampaign#.ULfTqI7T3ao).

### All Business

Perich wanted to design a campaign that would mimic Walsh’s fierce focus on business—and look nothing like a typical b-school ad. The agency first audited the types of campaigns other business schools used and found many similarities.

“There were a lot of diverse students smiling and standing in front of a landmark building on campus,” says Perich. “But those kinds of ads don’t differentiate a school.”

Perich designed a campaign—“Live. Breathe. Business.”—that’s spare, direct, memorable, and easily translated to a variety of media. All the ads feature yellow legal paper as background for hand-written blocks of type and unornamented stick figures, which come to life in television and online commercials. The blunt, simple messages include sentiments such as “Friends don’t let friends study French” and “Honk if you love briefcases.”

And they’ve been wildly success-

ful. An annual brand tracking study finds that, since the ads started running, the school has consistently enjoyed strong brand awareness, says Meller. In fact, shortly after the campaign launched, Walsh had moved up to the No. 2 slot for top schools in the area, according to perceptual studies. Additionally, the school tripled brand awareness, quadrupled direct and Web inquiries, and experienced its highest levels of enrollment.

### Secrets to Success

Even apart from its effectiveness, the “Live. Breathe. Business.” campaign offers many advantages to Walsh College, Perich believes. First, it’s so different from the photo of smiling students that it instantly catches the attention of the audience.

Second, it’s so simple that new ads can be created almost instantly. “I get a Sharpie and a piece of paper, I write a new ad, we scan it, and the next thing you know, it’s



up on a billboard,” Perich jokes.

Third, the production costs are so low that the school can spend more of its advertising money buying space in a variety of media, including magazines, billboards, other outdoor media, Pandora, Facebook, and LinkedIn. “It’s important to realize that people are active and mobile,” says Perich. “They have short attention spans. They might not be watching TV, but they might be listening to Pandora or surfing the Internet, so you have to have ads online. They might be sitting in your

they’ll say, ‘Business!’ They see that as their slogan.”

Over the past four years, the school has kept the same basic look for the ads, while occasionally adding new phrases, and Perich expects that pattern to continue. “In our next bit of messaging, we’re going to focus on the fact that students don’t come to Walsh because they want to keep their same jobs. They want better jobs, and we’re doing everything we can to make sure they get those better jobs,” he says.

photo shoot that every one of your competitors has already done.”

**Don’t be boring.** Meller observes, “My predecessor used to say, ‘Safe is death.’ If you do what’s predictable, you’re just going to blend in. Don’t be afraid to do things differently.”

“Find something unique to your school and reveal that truth in an interesting way,” Perich adds. “Potential business students are bright people. They’re intuitive. They want to lead businesses. Keep in mind that you’re trying to recruit leaders.”

**Tie all the pieces together in look and feel.** “It’s hard enough to occupy a piece of someone’s brain,” says Perich. “If you fragment your message, it’s harder for people to latch onto you. You know that when the guy in the brown uniform shows up, he’s from UPS. If he started wearing a tan uniform one day, a blue one the next day, you might wonder, ‘Who’s delivering my boxes now?’ That’s how advertising works, too. We want to make sure that every time somebody sees that yellow legal pad, they know the message is coming from Walsh.”

**Use a mix of media.** “You have to reach people in interesting ways in interesting places,” he says. “For instance, say you’re sitting in traffic and you see a billboard that talks about being stuck in your career like you’re stuck in traffic. You think, ‘These people get it. They get me.’”

Like his campaign for Walsh College, Perich’s formula for success is simple: “Look deep inside. Figure out what truly makes you tick. And deliver it in a simple, compelling way that differentiates you from everyone else.” 

IT'S SUMMER.  
TIME TO WATER YOUR BRAIN.

WALSH  
COLLEGE

parking lot, so why not have a cool sign in your parking lot that reinforces your message?”

Fourth, the background is so distinctive that it quickly became emblematic of the school. “I wanted the college to own something—a color or a device—and it ended up being this yellow legal pad,” says Perich. “These days, any time you see that legal pad in this marketplace, you assume it’s an ad for Walsh College.”

Walsh constituents have adopted the slogan and the yellow pad as their own, notes Meller. Some sport bumper stickers featuring the yellow notepad; others use the print ads as posters in their offices.

“Everyone knows the tagline,” says Meller. “If I’m speaking to a room full of students and alumni, I’ll say, ‘Live—breathe—’ and

#### Advertising Advice

Perich and Meller offer four tips for other business schools planning to launch advertising campaigns:

**Don’t try to say too much.** If schools cram excessive information into their ads—about their programs, their students, their faculty—the audience tunes out. “When schools try to check off a lot of boxes, they just create white noise in the marketplace,” explains Perich. “There’s too much sameness among ads in the business school category, so schools have a hard time getting noticed.”

A stripped-down campaign has the added advantage of being less expensive, a big consideration for cash-strapped schools. Says Perich, “Spend your energy coming up with a simple, striking campaign. Don’t waste money doing the