

CAMPAIGN SPOTLIGHT

# Go Tell the Spartans: Upload Your Video

By STUART ELLIOTT  
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A university is hoping that a campaign evoking its athletic prowess can help educate the outside world on its other types of achievements — not to mention reminding alumni about the importance of supporting their alma mater.

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The campaign is promoting [Michigan State University](#), which is perhaps best known outside the Wolverine State for the accomplishments of its sports teams, known as the Spartans. The campaign, created by an agency named 160 Over 90, carries the theme

“Spartans will.”

The campaign refers to all students, faculty, staff members and alumni of Michigan State as Spartans, to portray the campus as a community of doers and achievers as well as scholars.

“There are nearly 500,000 Spartans on earth,” begins a video clip on a microsite, or special [Web site](#), where members of the Michigan State community are being asked to upload videos that demonstrate what they or a Spartan they know is doing in terms of “making a difference.”

In addition to the microsite, the campaign includes commercials, on television and [YouTube](#); print ads; posters and signs in airports; and online ads. The budget for the media spending is estimated at a thrifty \$478,000. ([Watch a video from the campaign here.](#))

The campaign is indicative of how institutions of higher learning are trying to sell themselves in the marketplace with the kinds of tactics more commonly used to sell soap, soup or sedans.

In fact, academia accounts for about 30 percent of the clients at 160 Over 90, which is based in Philadelphia; others, current and former, include Loyola University Maryland, the [University of Dayton](#) and Wilkes University in Wilkes-Barre, Pa.

The agency’s client in this instance, Heather Swain at Michigan State, recalls that when she joined the university in East Lansing, Mich., in 2006, Lou Anna K. Simon, the president, told her, “I want to build a brand.”

Research conducted by SimpsonScarborough — a company that

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works on marketing with public and private colleges and universities — found that “we had a brand,” says Ms. Swain, who is assistant vice president for university relations. “We just had to put some definition around it to convey it in a more consistent way.”

Different parts of the university were communicating different things, she adds, and all the pitching was taking place “loudly, all at once,” leaving some potential students, business partners and research partners confused about the Michigan State brand.

The research results were shared with executives at 160 Over 90 after the agency was hired in the spring of last year, Ms. Swain says, and “they did their own due diligence, interviewing about 200 people on campus” before starting to work on the campaign.

The term the agency developed to describe what is at “the core of the brand” is “hard-working excellence,” she adds, and the main message is that “Michigan State is addressing some of the world’s most challenging problems.”

Ms. Swain acknowledges the risk of centering the ads on the image of the teams that play as the Spartans.

“Many schools are reluctant to associate academic enterprise with athletic enterprise,” Ms. Swain says, but “I’m a very big fan of assessing what assets you have and leveraging them.”

“People all over the world say, ‘I’m a Spartan,’ so we have something we can take advantage of,” she adds.

Besides, “my marketing budget will never come close to the exposure athletics gives to this institution, and it’s almost all positive exposure,” Ms. Swain says.

“It’s like pole vaulting,” she adds, “using that as a springboard or departure point to talk about the messages that you want to stick with people over time.”

And, of course, bringing up the Spartans aids the campaign in resonating with “the large audience of our own alumni,” Ms. Swain says.

“The more that alumni feel proud, feel that they’re leaning into the institution, the more likely they are to be supportive,” she adds, and that can help to “plow the ground” for the next big alumni fund-raising drive, which is likely to start in 2012.

The commercial that appears on television, which can also be watched on [YouTube](#), seeks to embody the concept of “hard-working excellence,” in Ms. Swain’s words, by showing everyday campus scenes as an announcer discusses in a low-key manner the amazing things that take place at Michigan State.

“The day we created a cancer drug that saved millions of lives began like any other day,” the announcer says, and the day “a new way” was discovered to purify water supplies “it might have been a Tuesday, or possibly a Thursday.”

“And whether it’s alternative energy or better [food safety](#),” the announcer declares, “the next time we help create a solution one of the world’s great problems, we’ll be proud, then we’ll get back to

work.”

“Michigan State University,” the announcer concludes. “Spartans will.”

The other ads take a similar tack, albeit in a somewhat less matter-of-fact manner.

One ad, depicting [James Cameron](#) and his wife, Suzy Amis Cameron, at the Academy Awards carries this headline: “When a Spartan designs a red carpet gown it doesn’t just turn heads, it changes minds.”

“Thanks to a Spartan’s ingenuity,” the text reads, Ms. Amis Cameron “made the red carpet on Hollywood’s biggest night a little greener” because a Michigan State design major, Jillian Granz, won Ms. Amis Cameron’s “Red Carpet [Green Dress contest](#), and more than 30 million people saw what’s possible in sustainable fashion.”

Another ad, showing a mother and her infant, carries this headline: “What drew G.E. Healthcare to help Spartans save lives in Malawi? Something positively magnetic.”


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“Malaria kills as many as three million children a year in sub-Saharan Africa,” the text begins. “That’s why Michigan State University and G.E. Healthcare brought the first-ever Magnetic Resonance Imaging (M.R.I.) unit to Malawi, helping bring life-saving treatment to patients and the possibility of finding a cure in the future.”

And a third ad, depicting parka-clad people standing before a giant ship, carries this headline: “Spartans have been known to go the extra mile. Sometimes they go the extra 7,953 miles.”

“From Antarctic expeditions to research across every continent, Michigan State University is everywhere,” the text reads. “We’re at the forefront of knowledge.”

“We’re helping to fight [climate change](#), poverty and disease,” the text continues. “We go above and beyond. Because that’s what it means to be Spartans.”

All the ads, and the commercial, end with “Spartans will” and the Web address of the Spartan Sagas microsite, where the videos contributed by Spartans, and some produced by Michigan State, are to be available for viewing beginning in July.

“The higher education marketplace is beginning to realize the value of what a brand means,” says Darryl Cilli, chief creative officer at 160 Over 90, which also works for advertisers like [American Eagle Outfitters](#), SoBe and [Sony](#).

Branding a university or college is “fascinating,” he adds, likening it to “trying to create a brand for a city.”

“The story has to be honest, the story has to be simple, the story has to be direct, the story has to be engaging,” Mr. Cilli says.

And while an institution of higher learning may borrow the sales tactics of consumer products, “we’re not selling sugar water,” he adds, but rather “something that’s a transformative experience in someone’s life and the second largest purchase after a home.”

In this instance, Michigan State is “the eighth-largest higher-education campus in the country,” he adds, but “it was suffering from limited public knowledge of its achievements and their impact” outside of the realm of sports.

And what communication the university was doing suffered from “a lack of cohesiveness,” Mr. Cilli says, as a result of campaigns with different messages from departments like undergraduate admissions and research.

The campaign talks about “a community going out every day and doing amazing things,” he adds, “not just playing football and basketball.”

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And it eschews a braggart's voice to reflect the "humble Midwest sensibility" and "quiet confidence" among so many of the people at Michigan State, Mr. Cilli says.

The commercial has been running in local markets like Chicago and Orange County, Calif., on affiliates of networks like ABC, [CBS](#) and [NBC](#). The spot has also been appearing on local cable systems in those markets, during shows on channels like Bravo, the Big Ten Network, [ESPN](#) and ESPN2.

Print versions of the ads have been running in magazines that include [Newsweek](#), Sports Illustrated, Time and The Week. The signs have been posted in airports like Midway and O'Hare in the Chicago area; [John Wayne](#) International in Santa Ana, Calif.; and [Bob Hope](#) in Burbank, Calif.

The campaign has been present online as ad banners and video ads. It has appeared on Alloy educational Web sites like [CareersandCollege.com](#), [FindTuition.com](#) and [InsideCollege.com](#); [Tackle.com](#); Web sites that are part of the 24/7 network like [Answers.com](#), [FantasyPlayers.com](#) and JumpTV; and Web sites that are part of the YuMe network like CBS College Sports, CcsmoGirl, FunnyorDie.com and [Seventeen.com](#).

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