Maximizing Brand Impact: The role of Integrated Marketing Communications in Higher Education-Based Programming

Based upon Praxis Experience with Service-Learning Program at the University of Cincinnati

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Introduction:

As a renowned educational institution, the University of Cincinnati holds discovery and success to the core of its promotional agenda. Within the large organizational umbrella of the university lies many divisions and units. One of these units is the Service-Learning program, an initiative designed to shape real-world experience for ambitious students in a way that benefits both themselves and the surrounding community. In my role as a Digital Content Creator for the Service-Learning team, I was challenged with navigating various facets of promotional strategies and concepts to create unique content and public relations materials. Maneuvering the balance between adhering to the promotional standards of UC's central marketing office and carving out a distinctive space for students, faculty, and partners to view our program's excellence was no small feat.

Uplifting the Service-Learning unit while maintaining the expectations of the broader organization allowed me to peer into the lenses offered by the Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) model for guidance and continued understanding of promotional strategy techniques. IMC offers an excellent tool for highlighting the ways in which individual units and departments could distinguish themselves from the larger organization. The importance of approaching promotion and campaign strategy with a cohesive network through the IMC framework is emphasized by Larson & Potter (1995). Through discussions in implementing data analysis and innovative approaches to promotional strategy, Larson & Potter lead important research into how IMC framework can benefit organizations in conducting brand-forward campaigns.

This praxis will begin by reflecting on my praxis experience, followed by an exploration of Service-Learning as a program, an analysis of applicable literature, and the application of the IMC model to my praxis journey. Join me as I highlight my experience in applying promotional

strategy literature to my public relations experience with the Service-Learning program at the University of Cincinnati.

What is Service-Learning?

Service-Learning is a form of experiential learning in which students can harness the skills allocated in their prior years of education to put forth real-world efforts inside and outside the classroom. Often working with non-profits in local communities, service-learning programs have the goal of forming an organizational reciprocity standard that centers three main targets: students, faculty, and community partners.

Programs such as those like Service-Learning afford students the availability of earning course credits while also allowing them to experience hands-on interaction with situations that may aid in the overall progress of advancing their careers. Organizational leaders in higher education can ensure that their students exit the institution having engaged with real-world initiatives, collaborated with professional leaders, and faced authentic situations by offering service-learning courses in various areas of study.

The Service-Learning program at the University of Cincinnati started in 2013 and its presence has now reached over 300 courses and all of the colleges within UC. In addition to implementing Service-Learning courses, the initiative at UC also provides a Service-Learning Co-Op which grants students of all major access to partake in a paid, professional experience. These professional experiences range from part time (5-20 hours per week), full time (35+ hours a week), to project specific roles. Service-Learning Co-ops are particularly beneficial for those interested in marketing, social media, event planning, communications, or IT fields, as this specific Co-op opportunity works with non-profits who often desire extra public relations assistance.

Not only do Service-Learning Co-op experiences and courses lead to an increase in students building professional skills to add to their resumes and portfolios, but the servant leadership and civic engagement lessons offered through service-learning initiatives also look to broaden the worldview of participating individuals. Greater promotion efforts by the University of Cincinnati of the courses and co-op opportunities provided by this program could greatly add to the reputation and overall credibility of the university aiding in the prosperity of the surrounding community through non-profit connections.

Praxis Experience

Between May 5th and August 15th of 2023, I worked with the Service-Learning Program at the University of Cincinnati as a public relations student-employee with program head, Dr. Michael Sharp. The Service-Learning team, whose core staff was comprised of three individuals, was reliant on myself and two other student workers assigned with the task to uphold and promote the Service-Learning program as part of the College of Cooperative Education and Professional Studies (CCPS), with the final goal of having the program appear in the U.S. News and World Report.

I was assigned to various digital storytelling efforts that would raise the profile of Service-Learning to the forefront. My responsibilities included the development of a digital marketing plan including 10 videos by the end of my term that would focus on the lived experiences of individuals who took part in the Service-Learning program. By visualizing with my superiors and my fellow team content creators, a plan to create awareness of the program through student voices was conducted. To see how the program is functioning and offer beneficial statistics to spread to the admissions and funding boards who are core elements to supporting the program financially, I knew our primary target would need to be the student body.

Engaging with students and enrolling a substantial amount to the program would serve as well-Bonafide evidence to prove its value and its contribution to the school's functionality and prosperity.

To captivate the student audience, my team and I delegated various means of digital content creation efforts that included website management, video creation, and flier distribution. (See Figure 5,6) In addition to the brainstorming process of these efforts, I was also tasked with the responsibility of upholding university branding efforts while still highlighting the uniqueness that the service-learning program offered to students, faculty, and community partners.

Utilizing my background in digital media, I spearheaded the scheduling, shooting, and editing of promotional video that would be further used to entice discussions around UC's service-learning department within the walls of campus as well as create commotion in the U.S. News and World Report. The U.S. News and World Report was a vital step in securing the program's legitimacy to the world and campus itself. By securing a place in the U.S. News and World Report, my supervisors hoped to reach the attention of other universities and prove to our funding sites that the program was making strides in offering aid to the local Cincinnati community while also creating positive experiences for students and faculty involved in the service-learning courses. These videos would allow for students and faculty to share their experiences with the program while also giving our team marketing collateral that could be used immediately and in years to come. In scheduling these videos, I chose faculty who had personally experienced the benefits of incorporating service-learning aspects into their curriculum as well as students who had experienced positive effects of a service-learning course to which they were either currently a part of or had past involvement in. These videos laid groundwork for future marketing material possibilities and served as some of the first in-person storytelling videos for

the program. The goal for this storytelling content was to create advocacy and awareness around service-learning, inspiring others to get involved and advocate for the program.

By collecting marketing collateral for the program, my goal was to set up a small team of program leaders with digital content that could move their organization forward in gaining student, community, and faculty partnerships. Maintaining the branding requirements of the University of Cincinnati placed additional barriers in our promotion plans. Working with university branding was beneficial for viewers to see the program as credible, yet the walls it placed on our branding capabilities made it so that the program lacked individuality and personal identity.

Our team, offering immeasurable ideas for an individualized social media account and forming a distinct website image, struggled when being turned down by central marketing's efforts to keep our program solely underneath the College of Cooperative Education's university identity (See Figure 2). Multiple frameworks from that of communication and public relations scholars can be employed to better conceptualize how I executed my objectives and the outcomes I achieved or failed to procure.

Literature

Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) promotes a broader ecosystem in which a corporation intends to reinforce a brand's core message by employing cohesive branding elements to discourage the individualization of public relations departments. IMC has proven to be effective in reducing the cost of media creation while also expanding the exposure of a business (Csikosova et al., 2014). IMC explains the phenomenon of the fusing of promotional materials amongst various tiers of a broader organization (Kitchen et al., 2004), often resulting in

lower-tier groups belonging to the overarching organization having a diminished personal identity (Madhavaram et al., 2005).

Understanding the different dimensions of IMC can be illustrated through five primary models of integration: vertical, horizontal, internal, external and data. These models provide a conceptual framework for understanding how corporations choose to include or exclude smaller departments and campaigns in their central marketing goals. Aligning marketing efforts in an organizational hierarchy is known as vertical integration. By ensuring that all departments are supporting the overarching corporate mission, businesses benefit from a vertical integration approach for enriching brand acknowledgement and identity (Hulbert & Morrison, 2019).

This top-down form of consistent brand messaging may be beneficial for ensuring hierarchical identity, but it lacks in allowing smaller departments to hold a unique identity. In addition to vertical integration, IMC supports horizontal integration, which places a focus on departmental communication, emphasizing a joint mission of promoting strategy (Kitchen & Shultz, 2009). While vertical integration exemplifies one chain of command enforcing smaller departments to support corporate missions, horizontal integration proposes the joint mission of communications material stemming from central communications offices as well as smaller departments and programs within the company (Csikosova et al., 2014). Internal integration, often used by large corporations to forge strong bonds with their employees, involves aligning communication efforts within an organization to form a cohesive brand culture through the adoption of training courses and internal communication channels. External integration, however, emphasizes the alignment of strategy efforts with external stakeholders. Companies can benefit from having a shared identity by maintaining consistent messaging with customers, partners, and suppliers (Percy & Rosenbaum-Elliott, 2016).

By leveraging data and analytics to emphasize customer insights and market data, data integration of IMC speaks to companies hoping to earn the attention of target specific audiences to strategize and personalize campaigns. This integration model can be especially beneficial for companies to measure the success of their branding and public relations campaigns (Smith & Taylor, 2004). As the university utilizes a vertical integration approach to their branding efforts as an institution, departments and tiered organizations belonging to the overarching company have been trained by central marketing staff to adopt university branding requirements.

While vertical integration offers a fantastic opportunity for smaller departments to capitalize on the name that the university protrudes, it also leaves these departments with branding constraints. This hit of brand equity forces tiered organizations within the university to apply university branding only, which restricts the possibility of brand equity. Peering into the utilization of IMC models of communication in higher education institutions (HEIs) is especially important for understanding the dynamics and structures of a university organization. Departments are left without the ability to capitalize on unique branding efforts and are then held to central marketing's pre-procured logos and branding requirements. Programs, however, seem to suffer the most, with these integration methods restricting programs of the ability to own a logo as a method of identification on communications assets. In addition, the Service-Learning program among many other programs are restricted from acquiring personal social media accounts via Instagram, X, and other platforms.

IMC has proven to be a valuable integration tool with social marketing techniques (Hawkins et al., 2011). Social media has provided a useful landscape for programs within HEI's to retain students, attract stakeholders, and communicate with various communities. Peruta and Shields (2016) claim that frequency and the media type have proven to be significant factors in contributing to consumer engagement. The social ties and personal connections attributed to

social media presence are an important aspect for higher education programs to take advantage of. Service-Learning is missing out on a huge opportunity to connect with community partners, students, and build a personal brand alongside the university.

While many higher education institutes automatically enforce the vertical model of IMC, Gordon-Isas, et al. (2020) believe there to be a high need for re-examination into what strategies are most suitable for brand integration and identification. There has also been limited research performed regarding the organizational use of IMC technique through the lenses of unit and program employees and heads.

Communication Issues to be Addressed: SWOT Analysis

Performing a SWOT analysis is a vital step in gathering an entire picture of how an organization is currently functioning. Identifying the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats allows for a broader perspective (Figure 4). By peering into Service-Learning's internal team management, the university's branding guidelines, and the day-to-day functions of the program, I have conducted a SWOT analysis to better articulate how Service-Learning at the University of Cincinnati is successful and where there is room for growth.

Deploying a variety of public relations strategies, I was combated with the challenge of maintaining program individuality while remaining considerate of the institutional branding regulations. Incorporating tailored messaging into our promotional goals allowed my team to highlight the personal achievements and impact stories that aligned with the overall mission of service-learning without undermining the branding guidelines prepared by the university.

The various backgrounds and perspectives that became a beacon in our storytelling promotional endeavors allowed for the service-learning initiative to emphasize the impact of

community inclusivity for not only the program's heartening efforts, but also the institution's mission. It was important for these personalized stories to align with the broader communication strategy of the university to reinforce Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) efforts. By implementing IMC practices, companies aim to present their values and missions in one direction which can prove to be extremely beneficial for the overall growth of the corporation at large. However, this practice often alienates departments like service-learning from harnessing individuality that may allow them to stand out amongst the large departments that linger above. It is important to consider how IMC can be both effective and harmful to units who may not stand out as much as others and belong to an overarching department or office.

Understanding the different dimensions of IMC can be laid out in five main models of integration: vertical, horizontal, internal, external and data. These models serve to conceptualize how corporations choose to include or exclude smaller departments and campaigns in their central marketing goals. While vertical integration exemplifies one chain of command enforcing smaller departments to support corporate missions, horizontal integration proposes the joint mission of communications material stemming from central communications offices as well as smaller departments and programs within the company (Csikosova et al., 2014).

Strengths

Service learning has many applicable advantages, many of which have led to the program's current climate of success and will continue to facilitate the achievement of long-term goals. With the University of Cincinnati having a proud, loud, and determined promotional presence among the nation, it is vital for the Service-Learning program to take favor of the UC branding efforts and guidelines placed upon their initiative. While the desire for distinctive brand identity is ever-present among many departmental leaders, especially for those in units of higher

education, the opportunity to lean on the lockups, slogans, and other branding guidelines from the overarching organization most likely has and will continue to undeniably contribute to the growth of the organization (Figure 1).

The Service-Learning program at UC finds many strengths residing in the guidelines provided by the university. The ever-present public relations presence and legacy of the university lends the unit an inherent sense of formality and admiration. The 200+ year presence of the university is a fantastic tool to increase the likelihood of the program being respected and expected to grow as well as endure amongst other universities and amongst the surrounding community.

Weaknesses

While the Service-Learning program has many advantages due to its connection to a large university, the newness and size of the program faces many challenges. First, the program runs based upon the funds received by donors and administration. In order to maintain the current success the program has seen, S-L staff must ensure a consistent flow of income. This of course, takes up time and resources as many team members focus on finding funding and maintaining consistent numbers to ensure donor return and administration content. The program also relies on the cooperation of faculty and students to ensure there are enough service-learning courses being taught to hold the respectability of the program, and ensure organizations are wanting to stay involved and doing their part to ensure a positive student experience as well.

Making matters additionally troubling, the campaigning of the program can be difficult to captivate new audiences due to its lack of individuality from the UC branding restrictions. While these restrictions may add a sense of respectability for the program itself, the lack of brand equity may force the program to have to put in more effort for their organizations to rise beyond others.

Finally, the Service-Learning team lacks the ability to view the analytical data that comes from their website and search engine. Not having access to this data is a limitation to the team's ability to curtail their ongoing campaigns and future engagement techniques to best adhere to the previous and existing public relations assets (i.e. website pages, UC Press Manifold site, etc.). This is an example of how the vertical IMC approach of the university may be more harmful than beneficial to the growth of smaller programs within the overarching organization. By tracking performance metrics, Service-Learning can refine their public relations approaches to students, faculty, and community partners as well as provide a means for better allocation of resources.

Opportunities

Moving forward, the Service-Learning team could take advantage of the emerging trends in higher education and public relations strategies. Trends like community-centered partnerships, diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, and flexible learning formats may all lead to future opportunities for faculty and student engagement.

Collaborating with specific academic units within the university may also lead to greater traction for the program. Incorporating information about professional opportunities within the service-learning program may lead more students to turn towards the opportunities offered with S-L. Many colleges do not mandate internship or co-op experience from their students. Perhaps service-learning could be involved in the process of making these internship opportunities more common inside the classrooms of colleges such as CECH and Arts & Sciences.

Service-Learning can continue to collaborate with faculty to incorporate non-profit organization's work into the classroom, but it could also continue to take advantage of classrooms for the program itself. The program currently works alongside students enrolled in a Public Relations course within the College of Arts & Sciences. Maintaining and expanding

resources such as public relations sources is an excellent means of solving financial and staffing issues while also encouraging student minds to learn from and create new ideas for strengthening the brand of Service-Learning. Another course section that may prove to be extremely beneficial is the Digital Media Collaborative program. It may be incredibly beneficial for Service-Learning to work with these colleges and the faculty within them to develop set course structures and provide well-worded course descriptions to encourage student enrollment. Service-Learning at the University of Cincinnati could benefit from looking over ow previous Service-Learning courses have benefitted from instructional framework to build upon instructor and student success (Wilson, 2008).

Taking advantage of the contacts offered by the availability of the campus environment may be incredibly beneficial to gain traction and support for the program Making use of the digital monitors around campus to target the student body could lead to more desire. The trick is to ensure you are harnessing the right kind of material to cater to your specific audience. Storytelling material is a fantastic way of spreading information for non-profits, faculty, and students alike, however, it is the students that will be more likely to be moved when viewing storytelling initiatives as the younger generation becomes more geared towards validating real-world experiences and concern for social justice issues.

Threats

I identified two major threats affecting the growth of the Service-Learning program: A lack of program individuality and graphic identity as well as the absence of complex program initiatives due to the university's vertical IMC approach.

While maintaining IMC efforts may forge a strong overall brand identity, this could also prove to be detrimental for smaller programs and units as they sink below the surface of larger

and stronger departments. The solution to this issue may lie in the utilization of the various models of IMC branding. Organizations like UC use the top-down approach of IMC's vertical communication model to encourage a single brand identity.

IMC impacted the individuality the program could have obtained through various means of promotional tactics. By curtailing these promotional materials, IMC takes the promotional power out of the program leaders' hands and into the university leaders. One of the largest threats faced by the Service-Learning team in correspondence with the vertical IMC approach used by university leaders is the inability to acquire a graphic identity or social media account. By not allowing the program an individual logo or social media access, it constrained the program's individuality and opportunity for growth in certain digital spaces that could have served as major promotional resources.

The overarching department the Service-Learning program belongs to is the College of Cooperative Education & Professional Studies (CCPS). (See Figure 4) Due to the public relations regulations of the university, the program of Service-Learning was constrained to only be using the CCPS's acquired logo as a program located beneath its services. So, while the program which I was promoting was supported by the vertical branding efforts of the university, it proved to have extreme limitations in my own branding ideas and strategies in promoting service-learning. By understanding the diverse benefits of integration types offered by IMC, organizations can have a better comprehension of how to put forth their best use of promotional efforts. Vertical integration also meant a limitation as to what information can be found via the university's site regarding service-learning.

In order to combat this, the program formulated a manifold account through the University of Cincinnati Press where there would be a collection of storytelling material, links to videos, and articles that detail service-learning efforts at the University of Cincinnati. This

account was a means of navigating the murky waters of central regulations and allowed the program to place community partnership updates and helpful information in a platform much more forgiving of outside logos, non-UC approved type, and formatting. The manifold account is an excellent source for the program to add a unique identity while still adhering to the rules sanctioned by the university, although it is still a challenge for the team to truly make this account their own as they do not have personal editing access or the ability to view webpage analytics without going through UC Press.

Working with these constraints also meant the digital content to which I was tasked with creating had to follow university branding requirements. As part of following university branding procedures, all students, faculty, and partners involved in any digital content creation were required to be clothed in plain or UC-related attire. If plain or UC-related attire was not worn, my team and I were not able to use the content created as part of their participation. Mockups attached to flyers and ending screens of videos had to be college or university centered.

All these individual instances serve as perfect examples for explaining how Service-Learning seems to lack individuality and may serve as partial reasons for the program's struggles in acquiring renewed student, faculty, and non-profit presence.

Looking to the Future of IMC

While there is much literature on the present benefits of IMC implementation, the adoption of new public relations strategy is vital as the future welcome's organizations with fresh challenges and dynamic possibilities for promotion opportunities.

Initially constructed by Don Shultz (1998), IMC has continued to evolve as a vital integration of strategic communication as technology continues to progress. Shultz's introduction the conceptual framework of IMC sheds light on the importance of bringing forth the framework

into the future. The IMC framework, once a new way of thinking, must adapt to the new age technologies and challenges standing before it.

IMC becomes an additionally invaluable tool for adhering to and evaluating consumer satisfaction. Formulating a cohesive promotional strategy allows for audiences to have an increased understanding of the content they may be engaging with and promotes a strong organization-based identity to be formed for users. Viewing IMC in this light adheres to the consumers perspective and increases the likelihood of audience trust and brand reliability.

The coordinating efforts accompanying the implementation of IMC gives organizations the opportunity to have an in-depth analysis of public relations materials and consumer loyalty. makes room for organizations to understand engagement patterns of consumers. The integration of new technology into the platform that exists as IMC is vital for the survival of organizations. Adapting to the world around us includes the understanding of and adapting of technology. IMC, like many other marketing strategies, is not immune to changes of life, and because of this, it is important to understand how future technologies may interplay with the usability of IMC. As digital platforms such as social media, email, and mobile applications become of necessity for most individuals, it is important to understand how IMC may be of use with the impact of these technologies. While these specific tools may be of common use, it is important to note the upcoming technologies starting to appear in everyday life. Virtual experiences and interactive content are making its way to the surface of daily use for many individuals. Whether it is something as simple as online surveys or as complex as VR, it is important to understand how IMC may guide brands in adapting to the landscape of various digital assets. Lastly, the comprehension of data analytics and tailored messaging systems is important for networking with IMC under your belt. A data-driven approach to marketing may aid in improving the

effectiveness of communication messaging and allow for personalized campaigns to target specific audience demographics.

To solve the issue of creating a unique brand identity for smaller departments and programs within an overarching organization, businesses and corporations could go beyond just sharing centralized branding guidelines and provide pre-approved templates for departmental use. These templates and digital assets would facilitate the incorporation of centralized branding, while also providing units with the availability to edit or change information and detail from template to template. Lastly, feedback mechanisms could be put in place to offer units a location to share, learn, and create brand-inclusive promotion designs. These feedback sources could come from company-sanctioned group messaging systems that would allow for users to input their promotions and receive input, ensuring their unit-focused promotion meets brand standards, but also meets the consumer eye. A system like this could be sourced within already-existing platforms within the university such as Microsoft Teams and allow creators and project managers of smaller units, department, and colleges to gain the perspectives of colleagues within other departments, ensure their content is up to central marketing's standards, and welcome recommendations, examples, and templates for open-use.

Conclusion

During my time with the Service-Learning program at the University of Cincinnati, I had the privilege of implementing my skills in photography, videography, and digital design to supplement both current and future public relations campaigns. By taking, editing, and uploading refreshed content to websites and YouTube platforms, I hope that my presence with the program has made a lasting positive impact.

Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) serves as a catalyst of transformative power for small and large corporations alike. The balance between the enforcement of brand standard adherence while also acknowledging the departmental urge to remain unique can be a taxing attribute to fine-tuning branding efforts. This idea only highlights the need to fully understand the potential and limitations within brand-identity techniques and the power held within IMC as its guideline leader.

As units strive to distinguish themselves as a unique brand, it becomes imperative for them to grasp the advantages within the IMC discipline. It becomes exceedingly crucial for central marketing services to listen to the voices coming from smaller units and make necessary adjustments to their efforts by accommodating the needs of the structures holding up their larger organization. Corporations have the opportunity to create inclusive branding refinements by offering pre-approved templates, slogans, and website servers for unit use. Providing a selection of resources for units to engage with templates that adhere to brand identity but also make room for some aspects of brand equity is vital for not only the central marketing department to be respected, but also for the growth of limited-funding and short-term programming.

The Service-Learning program could benefit from resources from the central marketing team to increase brand identity and create room for equity to meet their goal of grasping the attentions of other universities and non-profit contributors. The utilization of the resources could go a long way in adopting newfound popularity and engagement with aspiring students.

The most important thing: Don't forget where you came from. The mechanism behind vertical IMC implementation is a valuable attribute for maintaining a structured and strong overall identity of an overarching organization. While it may be difficult to not challenge the tight constraints typically existent within an overarching organization, it is more important to not stary too far from the overall objective and brand.

Future Work

Future work could be carried out to understand the dialectical tensions managed within brands by dissecting the effects of organizations holding individualistic versus collective brand identities. By studying how various organizations, specifically those in higher education, carry out their branding techniques and IMC model implementation, it could provide vital information on the best practices for overarching organizations to implement in their future public relations endeavors.

Finally, conducting additional research on the impact of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) immersion from the lenses and perspectives of department heads and program staff can provide invaluable insight. The continuation of studying how various department and staff positions may be affected by various IMC modes of communication strategy would offer effective approaches to organizational design moving forward.

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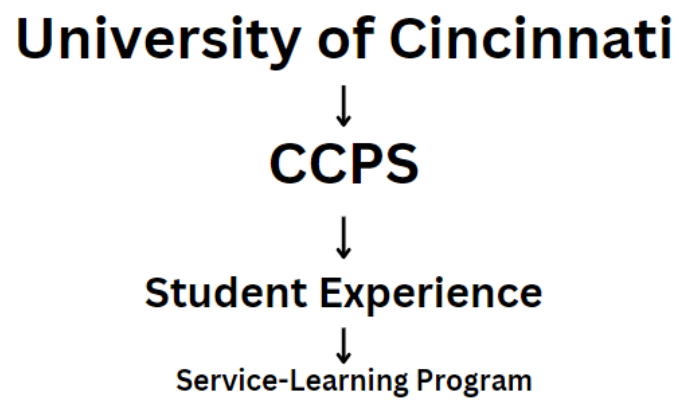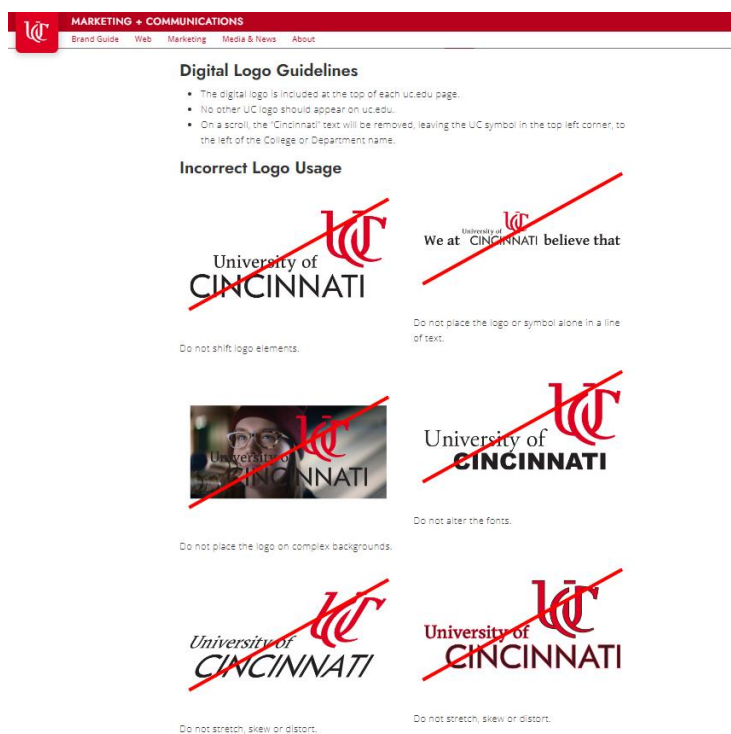
Appendix

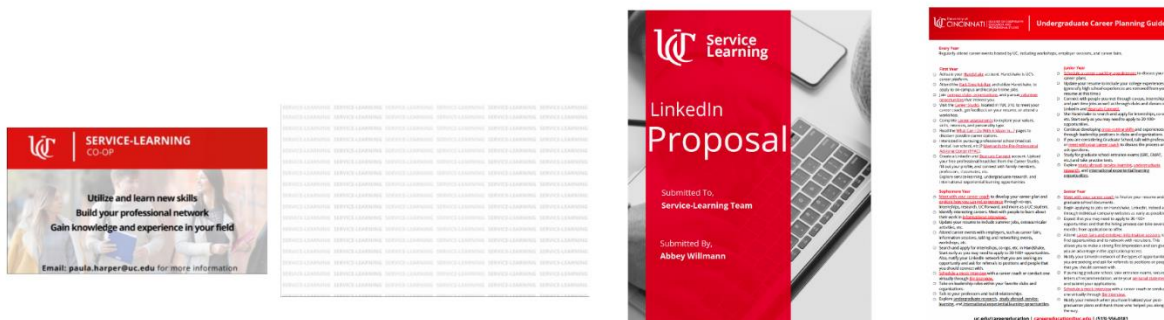*Figure 1*

Figure 2

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Figure 4

Figure 5