6 Tips on Creating a Unique Online Brand for your ESL Program

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by Jennifer Wingate & Nadine Baladi

In this brave new world of online teaching and learning, how do we differentiate ourselves? For decades, we've been recruiting ESL students to our programs by proudly sharing the highlights of our campus and the unique immersive experience students will get if they choose "us". As we already know, the most critical influences on the international student's choice for study abroad in the USA are:

- expected quality of education,
- reputation/ranking of the university and individual departments/programs,
- safety/security,
- cost/affordability.

We also know that the most critical influences on our ability to retain international student are quite different than what it took to attract them. Key retention success indicators include friendships forged in year 1, students' sense of immersion and integration, and their academic success. And all these years, we've shaped our branding to address these elements, when and where we could.

But now…

In this brave new world of online teaching and learning, how can we differentiate ourselves without a unique campus that sets us apart? Without promising potlucks, the homecoming game and intercultural friendships? In short, what happens to branding that relied on campus character, safety, friendships, location and immersive experience?

Here are some ideas we've tested, or will test in next few months:

1. Higher Ed programming first

Whether we are an IEP located on a university campus or a stand-alone IEP with pathway agreements into various universities, we must recognize that our target student population has practical and long-term English needs. Our future online ESL students are the ones who dream of coming to the USA to complete their undergraduate or graduate degrees, know which program they want to study in, and need to get started on their English as quickly as possible in order to stay on top of their timeline.

From a student-attraction perspective, it is crucial to focus on ESL programs as high-quality gateways to our university's unique academic programs. Our ESL documentation and marketing materials should also touch on co-curricular concerns such as safety, affordability, academic support and academic success. Remember: students interested in your online ESL program are probably more interested in eventually landing on your campus and matriculating into a degree option.

From a student-success and student retention perspective, the structure of the online ESL program requires additional student-centered support processes that ensure the eventual academic success, retention, and graduation of the student once on campus. These opportunities include the addition of academic etiquette/culture coursework, academic integrity modules, small group tutorials, and more. Students can get EAP anywhere, but can they truly understand the local academic cultural nuances that only a local can explain?

If your ESL program offers such unique connections to the campus, make sure you share this information with them through your student recruitment channels.

2. Online brand presence is a must

International students increasingly rely on search engines and social media to decide on their program and school of choice. According to www.educations.com, students are 8% less likely than before to learn about study abroad through fairs and events. In 2020, they are 15% more likely to rely on search engines and 72% more likely to use social media to learn about the process.

For students to think of you, they must be able to find you easily and to recognize your brand. How do you build a strong digital presence and a consistent online brand?

- For most small programs and institutions, this starts with your website (your home base). Your website (or web page if you are part of a larger organization) is your hub: a centralized place where future students can go to learn more about what you have to offer, contact you, and interact and engage with your content. Things like a clear message (what your program is all about), easy-to-use navigation, an opt in tool/assessment/giveaway (so you can start building your email list), a contact page, an about page, and some type of valuable content are required.
- Create an engaging, personalized community: Whether it's via your website, your Facebook page, your podcast, a YouTube channel, or via other social media channels, you should always be looking to provide consistent, valuable content first. Ask yourself: who is your audience and what do they care about? Don't forget that a community goes two ways: give your readers and listeners plenty of opportunities to dialogue with you.
- There are many resources on how to build an online presence. Here are a two straightforward ones:
  - https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/online-presence
  - https://digitalmarketinginstitute.com/en-us/blog/8-ways-to-create-an-effective-digital-strategy-that-engages-students

And the good news: you don't have to travel to accomplish any of these. We're talking 100% arm-chair recruitment.

3. Highlight some of basic-but-key advantages of your program

In focusing intently on what makes our program unique, especially in an online context, don't forget some of the basic elements that will attract international students. These are oldies but goodies, and now more than ever, so if you do any of these particularly well, do not omit these basic facts from your branding:

- Flexible Start Dates and/or rolling enrollments (i.e. more than 3 starts/year)

- Competitive Pricing - Identify your competitors and make sure you are aligned with their pricing. To properly brand your program, you should not have to lower your tuition but rather increase the value of the program: be clear on your inclusions, your student support, some cool delivery platform feature you might offer, etc.
- Rapid admission turn-around – Create a sense of genuine relationship from the first contact. Ensure your communication plan acknowledges students every step of their process.
- 1-step ESL program registration - If students are taking your ESL program online, do you need students to go through your regular admission channels? Remember: no need for an F1 for now, no need for passport information, for bank account balances, etc. Students should be able to enter their credit card information and enroll. Boom!
- Highlight Ranking of high-demand or unique programs on international student-facing web pages and materials – This can be as simple as utilizing photos or videos of international students participating in those popular degrees.

4. Highlight the human

Naturally, administrators, faculty, students (and their parents) fear that the personal connection between our students and our faculty might be lost in an online environment, so we must make every effort to extend all elements of humanity, care, and compassion over the ether. Students could easily go to Babel or Duolingo to stay on top of their language needs but they will choose an IEP program if they value the human touch and guidance. A few ideas on this:

- Highlight your star instructors! If they can provide short videos about their upcoming course, or how they've adapted their style to online teach, this will provide an immediate connection with the potential student.
- Be clear on the type of instruction you are providing and the support around it: is it all live? When will the student have to attend live classes? Is part of it asynchronous? What if they need help while self-pacing? What kind of tutorials do you provide for technology to increase accessibility? Ask your students if they'd be willing to talk on camera about their favorite aspect of the online experience.

5. Optimize for a unique immersive experience – online style

While we may feel challenged to offer a fully immersive experience to our online students, there are a number of items that you may already integrate in your regular face-to-face ESL program and that transfer easily to an online context:

- Conversation partner assigned to each pathway student - For programs that already have well established conversation partner programs, you can bring these experiences online through synchronous meetings, or create meeting spaces where partners can connect outside of normally scheduled classes. If your campus is bringing events and activities online for students, find a way to have mentors participate with your students, acting as a bridge and cultural guide. These events can be school affiliated or online events sponsored by the community.

- Mentoring/Buddy system specifically woven into the fabric of the program. Utilize tutoring! This is a great opportunity to increase integration with other departments and develop mutually beneficial programming. One example of such programming will kick off Fall 2020 at SDSU. In collaboration with the Wintrode Student Success Center, the English Language and Culture Institute has implemented mandatory success coaching where Graduate Students who are seeking counseling degrees meet weekly with students enrolled in the language programs to promote a positive and meaningful learning experience. During success coaching meetings, students and coaches will practice conversational English, work to identify and utilize the student's strengths, values, and interests to meet his/her goals and the coach will encourage the student to implement success strategies and/or use campus resources.

- Access to faculty – Most faculty are happy to have students visit classes to observe future classes in students' majors. One idea for synchronous meeting time is to invite faculty or even advanced degree students to your classroom, utilizing breakout rooms to divide within fields to discuss questions. Faculty may be willing to share recorded content for listening practices as well.

6. Best practices in Online Delivery

Cutting edge instructional design can optimize the virtual learning experience. Here are a few guiding principles when thinking about your online delivery:

- 100% mobile accessible: The average person is spending 5 hrs/day on their mobile device. 92 per cent of that time is spent using an app instead of a web browser.

- 100% responsive learning activities: Even in an asynchronous online learning experience, it is important for students to experience an interactive learning structure.

- Having a set start date and end date with approximate progression timing: Self-paced learning is declining in demand and show poor success rates. Community and group progression is the key to success.

- Interactive student activities using tools such as VoiceThread, Portfolios and Forums: Aside from the discussion boards that are common in online learning, collaborative activities can be embedded into LMS by using shared documents such as Microsoft suites (PowerPoint, OneNote) or Google suites (google slides, docs)

- 24 hour or less feedback on all coursework, graded or not.

Why is it that we are now, finally, adopting this world of online teaching? It could it be that the uncertainty of these unprecedented times enables more flexibility and openness to change. This uncharted territory will require assessment, testing, and continuous improvement based on student, faculty and administrator feedback, ultimately resulting in a brand ready for a new age of teaching and learning.

Founding Partner of The Parliament Group, Nadine Baladi, and ESL 7 Pathway Program Coordinator, Jennifer Wingate, have created a unique bond over curriculum and the planning of SDSU's newly approved pathway program and online ESL program. Baladi has worked in IEPs and Pathway programs for over twenty years in Canada and the USA, served as President of EnglishUSA and is currently a commissioner at CEA. Wingate serves as Member at Large Elect for the PAIS interest section of TESOL. Her passion for teaching began in the 90's as an Assistant Language Teacher in the JET Program.