

12-1-2010

## Branding the Land Grant University: Stakeholders' Awareness and Perceptions of the Tripartite Mission

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### Recommended Citation

Abrams, K., Meyers, C., Irani, T., & Baker, L. (2010). Branding the Land Grant University: Stakeholders' Awareness and Perceptions of the Tripartite Mission. *The Journal of Extension*, 48(6), Article 9. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol48/iss6/9>

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**December 2010**  
**Volume 48 Number 6**  
**Article Number 6FEA9**

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# **Branding the Land Grant University: Stakeholders' Awareness and Perceptions of the Tripartite Mission**

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**Abstract:** Several land-grant institutions have adopted a name to encompass the teaching, research, and Extension components of the university, creating a brand identity for those public services. But, in the mind of stakeholders, has the connection between the tripartite mission and the brand name been made? The study reported here sought to determine agricultural producers' and community leaders' awareness and perceptions of the mission of a land-grant institution. Both groups were informed and held positive views about the research, education, and Extension activities of the university, but, unaided, did not connect these activities with the brand name.

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## **Introduction**

Land-grant and other agricultural institutions of higher education have long benefited from a close association with stakeholders. But, as traditional agricultural production and academic programs have

changed, fewer members of the general public, opinion leaders, and legislators are intimately aware of the tripartite mission of the land grant and how these large, complex institutions are structured to provide public value to the citizens in their state (Kellogg Commission, 1999).

Generating awareness about an organization's programs and services takes a branding effort focused on integrating elements of the marketing mix and focusing on clear, core messages that resonate with stakeholders in a consistent way across media (Kelly & Jones, 2005). Higher education institutions have begun such branding efforts at the university level, but the teaching, research, and Extension elements of the traditional land grant extend beyond the university's campus. As a result, land grants have begun to explore ways to develop a consistent and cohesive brand message of their own.

Due to the uniqueness of the land-grant mission, which seeks to serve all citizens, developing a brand name and image that "fits all" can be complex. Some institutions try to brand the teaching component separately from research and Extension, while others try to combine all three. One case in point is the Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS), a brand name that is meant to encompass all aspects of teaching, research, and Extension at the University of Florida (UF). The IFAS identity has been marketed as both a brand name and an acronym due to its existence as a separate line item in the state legislative budget. Internally, and among traditional clientele, the acronym has served as a shorthand version of a long and fairly unwieldy name. Externally, however, and even on campus, the name (spelled out or contracted into an acronym) has very little brand recognition (University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, 2002).

## Literature Review

The demographic makeup of the general public that the land-grant institutions originally served has shifted from dominantly rural to more urban and suburban populations. This shift has consequently affected awareness, and the level of understanding of the land-grant tripartite mission of teaching, research, and outreach may have since dwindled even among stakeholders (Kellogg, 1999). In a report assessing the adaptation of land-grant colleges of agriculture to the public's changing needs and priorities, one of the major recommendations was the need to create "stronger linkages among the equally important functions of teaching, research, and Extension" (National Research Council, 1996, p. 3).

The University of Florida uses the name "IFAS" to demonstrate the link among the three parts of the land-grant mission. Other land-grant institutions have also created a brand name to encompass all parts of the mission. For example, Oklahoma State University has its Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources (DASNR), Texas A&M University has AgriLIFE, and Louisiana State University has the AgCenter. These names, like IFAS, could, and probably are, intended to mirror corporate marketing communications models by creating a brand to differentiate services and generate memorability and preference. In terms of marketing theory, research has shown that the services provided by a university can be examined through marketing principles just as with any other service organization (Stewart, 1991; Mazzarol, 1998).

## Brand Equity Theory

Brand equity is the value of the brand from the consumers' perspective, meaning a measure of the strength of the consumers' attitudes, familiarity, and associations with the brand (Keller, 1993; Wood, 2000). Academics and practitioners in marketing have focused on measuring and defining consumer brand equity to help determine the marketing mix (i.e., product, price, communication, and distribution). Clear and consistent messages and brand attributes conveyed through the marketing mix are essential elements to enhancing brand equity (Erdem & Swait, 1998). "Although education is different from most consumer products, integrated marketing can build and extend brand equity in the information marketplace" (Maddy & Kealy, 1998, para.

16).

Discussions of branding Extension and the land-grant institutions have emphasized the importance of identifying key audience segments, assessing awareness and status of current image, and marketing both services and image (Boldt, 1988; King, 1993; Jenkins, 1993; Maddy & Kealy, 1998). Theories and principles in marketing about branding provided insight into the assessment of stakeholders' awareness and opinions of all three parts of the land-grant mission as branded under IFAS.

## University Image and Reputation

Because universities, like corporations, have a wide range of publics, another body of literature related to investigating the land-grant image or brand is found in studies on corporate identity and reputation. Brown, Dacin, Pratt, and Whetten (2006) identified several viewpoints for potential research related to corporate branding across disciplines. Relevant to the study reported here are: 1) what does the organization want others to think about itself, and 2) what do stakeholders actually think of the organization? These viewpoints are called "intended image" and "reputation," respectively. The intended image of IFAS, which is not unlike that of the other land grants mentioned previously, is to serve as the state leader in providing knowledge in agriculture, human and natural resources, and the life sciences to enhance the quality of life (UF IFAS, 2008).

Reputation management in public sector organizations, like land-grant institutions, is an emerging trend and not without unique challenges. Public sector organizations understand the importance of reputation, "as many of its benefits are vital for their survival; a good organizational reputation among the stakeholders is understood as reputational capital" (Luoma-aho, 2007, p. 124). The caveat is that almost anyone who has anything to do with the public sector can be considered to be a stakeholder.

## Purpose and Objectives

Acting on request of the UF Board of Trustees, researchers evaluated public awareness and perceptions of IFAS' name and its teaching, research, and Extension mission. The objectives were to assess key stakeholders and their 1) awareness of IFAS and its teaching, research, and Extension components; 2) opinions of the tripartite mission of the land-grant institution; and 3) perceptions of the IFAS name and current branding efforts.

## Procedures

As a first step in this process, a modified Delphi study of IFAS administrative leadership was conducted to identify key audiences that could be sampled and surveyed. IFAS administrators, unit heads, and senior faculty (N=48) were mailed a three-item instrument which included two questions that asked respondents to identify and rank key stakeholder groups. Findings identified four main audience segments: agricultural producers, community leaders (including city and county government professionals), local and regional media, and state legislative aides. Once the audience segments had been identified, the next phase of the research effort focused on assessing perceptions of the top two ranked audience segments, agricultural producers and community leaders. The results of data collection with the other two groups will be reported in the future.

Descriptive telephone survey methodology was used to determine agricultural producers' and community leaders' levels of awareness and perceptions of the tripartite mission of the University of Florida and the brand name IFAS. To collect data from representative samples of agricultural producers and community

leaders, a list of names was developed from several existing data sources. For the producers group, these data sources included databases of commodity association members, stakeholders, and clientele, supplemented with a purchased list of agricultural producers. For leaders, database sources included Extension advisory councils, institutional stakeholders, city/county professional association members, and local chambers of commerce members drawn from 10 Florida counties. The counties were chosen via a weighted index according to rankings as to population, growth, and value of agricultural sales. As a result, a total of 2,452 producers and 2,030 leaders were included in the accessible sample.

Researchers used computer-assisted telephone survey methodology to collect data from the samples. Interviews were conducted by the University of Florida's Survey Research Center using the CATI system. Trained telephone interviewers followed a researcher-developed questionnaire that was the same for both sample groups. The 24-item survey instrument was developed using questions from a previous survey of IFAS stakeholders and a national study of Extension awareness (Warner, Christenson, Dillman, & Salant, 1996). The instrument was reviewed by a panel of experts for face and content validity.

The producers' accessible sample had 1,411 usable numbers, with 352 survey completions for a response rate of 24.9%. Interviewers contacted community leader respondents from August 21-September 4, 2007. The sample list had 1,766 usable numbers, with 355 survey completions for a response rate of 20.1%.

## Results

Respondent demographics were similar for both sample groups. The majority of producers were male (68.5%, n=241) and white (93.8%, n=330). The majority of leaders were also male (62.8%, n=223) and white (91%, n=323). The average age of producers was 53, while the average age of leaders was 55. The sample of producers was similar to the state's 2007 population of agricultural producers, which is about 74% male, with an average age of 58 (USDA Economic Research Service, 2010). The greatest percentage of both producers (32.1%, n=113) and leaders (42.5%, n=151) had attained a 4-year bachelor's degree.

About 15% of respondents were University of Florida alumni, with 14.8% (n=52) of producers and 16.3% (n=58) of leaders receiving their 4-year degree from UF. About one in 10 respondents were alumni of UF's College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, which is part of IFAS, with 10.2% (n=36) of producers and 8.2% (n=29) of leaders earning a degree from the college.

The majority of respondents had used IFAS programs or services (including the website), with 74.7% (n=263) of producers and 71.0% (n=252) of leaders indicating they had done so. Respondents also indicated the specific areas of information they sought (Table 1).

**Table 1.**  
Areas of IFAS Information Sought by Respondents

Topic	Producers		Leaders	
	n	Percent (%)	n	Percent (%)
Agriculture	257	73.0	214	60.3
Environment	160	45.5	176	49.6
Families & Consumers	46	13.1	97	27.3

Lawn & Garden	146	41.5	183	51.5
Sustainable Living	39	11.1	91	25.6
Disaster Preparation & Recovery	77	21.9	109	30.7
4-H Youth Development	97	27.6	148	41.7
Other/Don't Know	9	2.6	19	5.4

### Objective 1: To Assess Key Audience Segments' Awareness of IFAS and Its Teaching, Research, and Extension Components

To address this objective, respondents were asked a series of questions to determine their level of awareness of the University of Florida, IFAS, and the subject areas on which IFAS focuses. When respondents were asked how informed they were about the research, education, and public service activities of the University of Florida, 82.6% (n=291) of producers and 79.7% (n=283) of leaders said they were either somewhat or very informed. However, when asked unaided what organizations in Florida conduct research and/or provide information about food, agriculture, and natural resources (Table 2), only 9.7% (n=34) of producers and 13.8% (n=49) of leaders answered the Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences. A greater percentage of producers (28.1%, n=99) and leaders (23.1%, n=82) used the acronym "IFAS" or "UF/IFAS" instead.

**Table 2.**

Respondents' Awareness of Organizations in Florida That Conduct Research and/or Provide Information About Food, Agriculture, and Natural Resources

Location	Producers		Leaders	
	n	Percent (%)	n	Percent (%)
IFAS or UF/IFAS	99	28.1	82	23.1
County Extension Office	35	9.9	54	15.2
Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences	34	9.7	49	13.8
Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services	23	6.5	33	9.3
Other Florida Universities	20	5.7	34	9.6
Agriculture Experiment Station	14	4	13	3.7
County Agents	11	3.1	10	2.8
Florida Cooperative Extension County Office	10	2.8	16	4.5
Local/City/Municipal Agencies	10	2.8	15	4.2
Research Education Center	9	2.6	7	2

If respondents did not mention IFAS unaided, they were then prompted as to whether they had ever heard of IFAS or the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences. This resulted in a greater percentage of awareness, with 79.5% (n=280) of producers and 75.7% (n=269) of leaders indicating they had heard of IFAS.

Respondents who expressed aided awareness of IFAS (producers: 79.5%, n=280; leaders: 75.7%, n=269) were then asked what subject areas IFAS focuses on (Table 3). The greatest level of awareness in both groups was for agriculture and lawn and garden subject areas.

**Table 3.**  
Percentage of Respondents' Awareness of IFAS Subject Areas

Topic	Producers		Leaders	
	n	Percent (%)	n	Percent (%)
Agriculture	219	62.2	205	57.7
Lawn & Garden	67	19	85	23.9
Other/Don't Know	46	13	51	14.4
Environment	36	10.2	85	23.9
Families & Consumers	18	5.1	56	15.8
4-H Youth Development	15	4.3	45	12.7
Sustainable Living	8	2.3	19	5.4
Disaster Preparation & Recovery	5	1.4	6	1.7

## Objective 2: To Assess Key Audience Segments' Opinions of the Tripartite Mission of the Land-Grant Institution

Nearly three-quarters of producers (73.5%, n=259) and leaders (74.7%, n=265) were either very or somewhat familiar with IFAS' research, education, and Extension work. The remaining quarter of each of the sample groups said they were not at all familiar. Respondents indicated that they view the research, teaching, and Extension work conducted by IFAS to be of high quality, valuable, and something they would use (Table 4). In both sample groups, the characteristic of "high quality" received the highest level of positive agreement.

**Table 4.**  
Respondent Opinions of the Research, Teaching, and Extension Areas of IFAS

Area		Producers			Leaders		
		n	Mean	SD	n	Mean	SD
Research	High Quality	274	1.65	.543	254	1.57	.527

	Valuable	275	1.69	.582	259	1.64	.583
	Useable	284	1.73	.631	256	1.63	.599
<b>Teaching</b>							
	High Quality	239	1.65	.609	229	1.55	.524
	Valuable	249	1.69	.600	238	1.69	.599
	Useable	256	1.66	.544	237	1.66	.600
<b>Extension</b>							
	High Quality	283	1.63	.552	255	1.52	.546
	Valuable	281	1.68	.564	257	1.62	.561
	Useable	283	1.66	.556	256	1.63	.574
Note: 1=strongly agree, 2=agree, 3=disagree, 4=strongly disagree							

Respondents were then asked to evaluate the relative importance of several program areas within IFAS using a 5-point scale, with 1=very unimportant and 5=very important (Table 5). Agriculture was ranked as the most important by both producers ( $M= 4.75$ ) and leaders ( $M= 4.74$ ). Family and consumer sciences received the lowest average ranking by producers ( $M= 3.87$ ) and leaders ( $M= 4.08$ ); however, this ranking is only slightly lower than the other program areas.

**Table 5.**  
Respondent Ratings of the Importance of IFAS Program Areas

Area	Producers			Leaders		
	n	mean	SD	n	mean	SD
Agriculture & Food	351	4.75	0.647	352	4.74	0.581
Natural Resources & Environment	351	4.53	0.82	353	4.64	0.682
Youth Development	342	4.13	1.099	347	4.30	0.929
Family & Consumer Science	340	3.87	1.098	348	4.08	1.007
Note: Five-point scale with 1=very unimportant and 5=very important						

### Objective 3: To Assess Key Audience Segments' Perceptions of the IFAS Name and Current Branding Efforts

To assess this objective, respondents were asked if they thought the name "University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences" is a good fit for the mission of providing teaching, research, and Extension services. On a scale of 1=excellent to 4=poor fit, producers gave the name a mean score of 1.87, while leaders gave the name a mean score of 2.03. Several other name options were provided, with "Institute of

Food and Agricultural Sciences" receiving the most positive rating.

## Conclusions and Implications

In general, the study reported here provides support for the value and importance of marketing a brand that attempts to convey the tripartite mission of the land grant. Findings suggest that respondents were generally aware of the research, education, and public service activities of the University of Florida, but were not able to tie these activities to the actual IFAS brand identity on an unaided basis. Results indicate that even stakeholders tended to tie the equity inherent in the land-grant mission more to the university than to the actual land-grant enterprise. This implies that, in this case, what little recognition of the land-grant brand does exist can be potentially compromised by too-casual use of "alphabet soup" acronyms that are not used consistently.

Another key finding of the study is that aided awareness (i.e., communicating what the brand is and does) not only produces much greater overall recognition of teaching, research, and Extension activities, but also, for those who are thus made aware, enhances their level of familiarity and their brand attitudes. Of those who were made aware via prompting, nearly three-quarters of producers and leaders said they were either very or somewhat familiar with IFAS' research, education, and Extension work. Respondents also indicated that they view the research, teaching, and Extension work conducted by IFAS to be of high quality, valuable, and something they would use.

For both producers and leaders, the characteristic of "high quality" received the highest level of positive agreement. Implications from these findings suggest that brand attitudes toward the land-grant mission, once activated, are positive. Further, respondents viewed the brand's "products" as being of high quality, in particular. Both producers and leaders also identified agriculture and lawn and garden as subject areas within IFAS of which they were aware. In Florida, environmental horticulture is an extremely fast growing industry, accounting for \$15.24 billion in total industry sales in 2005 (Hodges & Haydu, 2006), and one that connects directly to consumers. Within IFAS, all of horticulture is seen as part of agriculture. Externally, this may represent an opportunity to tie traditional production agriculture and more consumer focused enterprises together in the minds of stakeholders and the public at large.

The finding that respondents ranked the agriculture program area as most important and family and consumer sciences as least important also has some branding implications. This finding should be interpreted with the caveat that this sample included agricultural producers, who undoubtedly value the agriculture component of the land grant. Community leaders, on the other hand, would not necessarily have the same bias, so it was notable that this sample also rated family and consumer sciences as the least important and agriculture as the most. While agriculture represents a point of differentiation for IFAS as part of an academic institution, many other government and non-government agencies offer similar family- and consumer-oriented services. Also, because 4-H youth development brands itself separately in the consumer's mind, this may create some difficulties in articulating a clearly differentiated message for the "family" aspect of this program area.

With respect to brand name and potential slogan use, it is good news for this land grant that the existing brand name received the most favorable response from both producers and leaders with respect to fit with the teaching, research, and Extension mission. A key implication here is that articulation with the university brand is the most preferred and thus potentially the most effective strategy for brand name recognition. The authors of this article speculate that any land-grant entity would benefit from association with an existing, strong university brand.

Although the study reported here is limited in that it represents a case study of one land-grant institution (and a relatively low response rate limited to the sample of producers and community leaders), these findings may

have some impact for the land-grant system as a whole. Certainly branding of higher education, and land grants themselves, is an important issue, and the study presents findings that may open the door to larger scale studies of brand equity and the land-grant mission in general.

Brand equity, which can be viewed as a form of public value, is a precious resource that can help sustain the viability of land-grant institutions and their teaching, research, and Extension services. Brand equity research explains that salient attributes will resonate with target audiences if communicated effectively (Erdem & Swait, 1998; Raggio & Leone, 2007). It may be time to look more closely at how modern communication methods and technologies can be used to extend the public value of the land-grant enterprise, by applying brand marketing strategies aimed at developing and maintaining strong brand recognition among new and traditional audiences.

## Recommendations

Based on the results of the study reported here, recommendations include developing a strong focus on further research in this area. Agricultural communications and Extension education faculty and practitioners are uniquely positioned to enhance the body of knowledge and develop crucially important strategies and programs in this area. A natural extension of the study would be to construct similar studies at other land-grant institutions and to focus on other stakeholder groups—local, regional and national media, legislators and aides, regulators, trade partners, industry, environmental groups, and others. Additional research should be conducted with members of the public the land-grant institution is attempting to reach. This would provide more insight into brand identity and reputation.

An important implication of the study is that, in times of budgetary cuts, staff layoffs, and changing clientele demographics, land-grant institutions cannot remain complacent with an assumed perception of stakeholder awareness and support. Much could be gained from developing a body of research designed to help land grants understand how to market themselves in these changing times.

While the land-grant purpose is not financial gain for profit, corporate image and reputation models (see Alessandri, 2001) may be helpful to position the university as a leader in providing knowledge in agriculture, human and natural resources, and the life sciences. As the study reported here found with IFAS, community leaders and producers hold positive views about the organization's image and reputation, but, unaided, were unable to make a connection between research, education, and public service activities and the brand name. Using image and reputation models along with brand marketing strategies would create a stronger connection between the land grants' reputation, image, and brand name.

For Extension agents and communication practitioners, developing strong branding campaigns that focus on integration of message, image, reputation, and brand name that articulate with the university brand seems to be a potentially efficient approach, although more research is need in this area. Awareness of a brand stems from the continued promotion of the brand in addition to the products and services it offers. Service-oriented organizations, like land grants, actually benefit more from branding than product-oriented businesses (Balaji & Hartline, 2001; Brady, Bourdeau, & Heskell, 2005). Therefore, university administrators should encourage and support branding and marketing research and/or communication campaigns for their land-grant components because the study showed that once stakeholders have greater awareness of the brand, positive attitudes are activated.

While no attempt was made to compare sample groups in this report, it was interesting to note how similar the responses of producers and leaders were. This implies that land grants can perhaps benefit from focusing on communicating their message to community leaders as well as traditional clientele. This is especially important in tight budgetary times, when consumer mass marketing is not feasible and county-level funding

of Extension programs is on the increase and state-level funding is on the decrease.

Although brand development and branding research are relatively new to the land grant, many other service and knowledge oriented organizations face the same issues and opportunities. Research shows it is possible to effectively brand other types of knowledge organizations, institutions, and universitiesâ why not the land-grant enterprise itself?

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