

Two Perspectives on How WCAL Benefits St. Olaf College

Since St. Olaf got its FM license in the 1970s, quite a number of devoted St. Olaf administrators within and beyond the WCAL hierarchy have been responsible for considering how the institution might best capitalize on the impressive opportunities afforded it as the owner of a high-caliber, professional, major-market public radio station. A number of tools have proven helpful in facilitating insight.

Like a University Press

An example is a useful analogy that emerged early on—the university press. We know from extensive contact with friends and family in the business that a university press is a strange, challenging beast and often something of a millstone. Prompted by a blend of frustration and marked financial drain, many schools have chosen simply to get out of the game. Some, however, even some at institutions other than major research universities, have stayed with it, and not simply through unexamined momentum.

What sorts of gains do they realize that lead them to continue? They could approach this kind of evaluation with a reductionist, diploma-mill perspective, perhaps asking, “How does our having and even supporting this publishing enterprise contribute to our mission of getting our students to earn degrees?” After all, any serious examination of a higher learning institution’s reasons for being leads to an awareness of deeper purposes. The school doesn’t simply grant degrees for their own sake. For example, one of the fundamental purposes of offering the curriculum has to do with the classic notion that an educated electorate fosters a better democracy.

Even if its curriculum focuses on a narrow range of students such as undergraduate Bachelor’s candidates, the school doesn’t serve a one-dimensional constituency. If it is not an inordinate drain on resources, the academic press can abet the purposes of the institution and help it reach that multifaceted clientele. To justify operating the press, the school need not insist that it print textbooks for direct use by its enrollees. Rather, if the quality, values, and reach of its publications are suitable, the press will afford its parent institution a wonderful range of benefits. Through the offerings of its press, the school will participate in and affirm the benefits of a life of learning and understanding and cultural substance. With products that reflect well and suitably on the school, it will engage a range of communities that matter to its success such as circles of scholars, colleagues at sibling institutions, newspapers and journals, workers in government and industry, and the public at large.

A major-market public radio station, its consequence augmented by a visionary, robust production capacity, can afford an institution the same kinds of critical opportunities for public relations. The ubiquity of the phrase can lead to overlooking its wonderful and challenging possibilities—the promise of relating effectively to a range of the quite indispensable publics the institution must serve and please.

How WCAL Listeners Understand the St. Olaf Connection

In the current St. Olaf Fiscal Year (2005), WCAL is acquiring more than \$170,000 worth of display advertising space in a variety of media. Twin Cities Public Television does not permit its underwriters to show more than one logo in their on-air graphics, so the WCAL acknowledgments on Channels 2 and 17 include only the Classical 89.3 logo. Every other WCAL placement, however, includes the St. Olaf logo, thus explicitly associating the audience service of WCAL with the parent institution.

St. Olaf administrators have occasionally taken exception to the proposition that the advertising that WCAL purchases benefits St. Olaf, pointedly citing especially those occasional station promotional placements that do not specifically mention St. Olaf. Even if well-intentioned, such objections shortchange an informed discussion of effective brand management.

For example, if a subsidiary product of Kraft Foods is being advertised, depending on the intent, target audience, and communication channel(s) for a particular ad, those managing the brands involved may well determine that a given execution should not include the parent Kraft logo.

One of the findings produced during WCAL's landmark audience research initiative of 1997 and 1998 may be instructive here. In the quantitative phase of the project involving hundreds of randomly chosen audience members, nearly all regular listeners to WCAL, without prompting, identified the station as unmistakably a program of St. Olaf College. In the focus groups assembled for the qualitative phase, this percentage rose to a full 100%.

In that questionnaire and in the focus groups, WCAL listeners were asked to choose whether they saw the station as a self-serving promotional activity or as a public service. Again, nearly 100% said they clearly saw it as a public service.

Selected Verbatim Comments From 1997 WCAL Focus Groups

WCAL and KSJN are equal in their professionalism and quality...

KSJN and WCAL are very different; you really have the sense that WCAL is a college station. Also, it's a Lutheran college and they have a chapel service every day and a Sunday service. I'm not Lutheran, but I'll listen to it, because it's peaceful—it's nice. You can tell it's coming from a college.

[In contrast] *KSJN and KNOW sound corporate.*

[WCAL has] *a wonderful, adventuresome quality—and it's informative, educational.*

WCAL is more openly connected with a college, and it's a good one, St. Olaf.

WCAL is primarily a public service of St. Olaf College and secondarily a public relations activity, but it does work somewhat on promoting St. Olaf with those little blurbs. But I don't mind, because they don't overdo it.

[responding to previous person's comment] *Yeah, but learning a little about St. Olaf has sure made me think about sending my children there now!*

When I first moved here three years ago, I sampled the public stations and pretty quickly I got a feel for them. It was as though KNOW and KSJN were like people I met and didn't care if I ran into again. But WCAL became a good friend in a very short period that I wouldn't want to lose track of. It wasn't that I disliked the other two. But I found WCAL actually attractive, like a friend.

WCAL broadens my view of the world more than any other station.

WCAL seems to be an honest, listener-supported station, less commercial.