



DESIGNING YOUR
BUSINESS SCHOOL
BRAND

STACY BLACKMAN
CONSULTING



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YOUR BRAND STRATEGY:

How to Market Yourself to the Top Schools and Outshine the Competition

MARKETING 101

Every year business school applicants who possess all the qualities that the top programs are searching for aren't accepted. Meanwhile, candidates who may be less qualified, objectively speaking, take their pick of the elite schools. Why? The reason is that the successful candidates did a more effective job of marketing themselves to the admissions office. This may seem unfair, but is it? One of the first things they teach you in Marketing 101 is that the superior product doesn't always prevail in the marketplace. Many factors determine a product's success but marketing - the ability to target the right customer, differentiate one's product from the competition, and effectively communicate those positive differences -- is one of the primary drivers of success.

At Stacy Blackman Consulting, we encourage our clients to view their application as a multi-faceted marketing campaign aimed at winning a spot in a leading MBA program. The application isn't the product in this marketing campaign - you are! Your business school application is the marketing medium you will use to communicate a message that persuades your buyer, the admissions committee, that you have the qualities and capabilities they are looking for. Your buyer is in the enviable position of having thousands of other "models" to choose from. Therefore, your marketing campaign must convince them that you are a better fit for their program than all those other candidates.

THE PRODUCT IS YOU

When we first introduce some of our clients to the idea of the business school application as a marketing campaign, we are met with blank looks if not outright resistance. "I'm not a product," they tell us, "I'm a person. I'm me!" or "I don't want to come across as some slickly packaged product -- I want my application to show them who I really am!"

So do we! Thinking strategically is not mutually exclusive with producing an application that is creative, distinctive, and the best representation of who you are. In the brand management world, a marketing strategist formulates the strategic messages, collectively "the brand," then works with the creative team to devise ways to communicate those messages in ways that are imaginative, memorable, and even entertaining. The most powerful brands are built based upon a successful collaboration between brand strategy and creative communication, and your application will be too.

BRAND STRATEGY: HOW TO MARKET YOURSELF TO THE TOP SCHOOLS

By following the strategic branding approach described in this guide, you will markedly increase your chances of being one of the lucky candidates who wins an "order" (i.e., an acceptance letter) from one or more of the top MBA programs. In our work over the years with hundreds of successful candidates, we have determined that producing an exceptional application requires effective strategic planning, clear branding, and integrated communication. This guide will take you step-by-step through the Plan and Brand process shown below. Once you have completed those stages, you will be ready to Communicate.

PLAN	BRAND	COMMUNICATE
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Assess Your Competitiveness 2. Segment the Market 3. Formulate an Application Portfolio Strategy 4. Select a subset of MBA programs 5. Learn about your buyer: the admission committee 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Complete the brand exercises 2. Generate Potential Possible Brand Messages 3. Authenticate Brand Messages with Reasons to Believe 4. Refine and Finalize Your Brand Identity 	<p>Communicate your brand identity and reasons to believe across all mediums</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Essays • Recommendation Letters • Interviews • Resume • Data Forms

Do you need to utilize every exercise in this guide?

Do you need to follow every step?

No, you don't. And you probably shouldn't.

Every individual has different styles, approaches and timelines. As you read through the guide, some steps may resonate with you. Others will not. Feel free to adapt this plan to work best with your personal style and within your timeline. There is something for every applicant here.

So without further ado...If your goal is to outshine your competition and earn a spot in a highly competitive MBA program, then let's get started.

STEP ONE: PLAN

"One thing many applicants miss in the essay section is that success in this section is dictated more by strategy than creativity...Creativity is important but it will never trump strategy." (Chicago Booth Admissions Director)

Strategic planning is one of the most important skills a business school education will cultivate. Strategists are concerned with allocating the resources available to the company to achieve a defined set of goals. Consider for a moment that a single application, done right, can require 40 hours of your precious time. By carefully planning your attack and focusing your resources from the start, you will not only save yourself time in the long run, but you will also generate some important insights about yourself, your competition, and your "buyer" that might make the difference between an acceptance letter and a rejection letter. Unfortunately, many applicants rush through the strategic planning process and some don't plan at all. Like foolhardy generals, they dive into battle without surveying the terrain, assessing their core strengths, or studying their competitors.

The steps that you will go through to formulate your business school marketing plan are the same steps a marketing strategist would go through at the outset of developing a new marketing campaign. She would begin by assessing her product's competitiveness at a macro level. Next she would determine how the market is segmented and make a strategic decision about which segment or segments to target. After identifying her target segments she would study the buyers in each segment to understand what they value with an eye toward figuring out how she will differentiate her product in those markets via a marketing campaign.

In application terms, the planning phase is the time to take an objective look at what you have to offer and how competitive you might be and to begin to formulate what we call an Application Portfolio Strategy. Your Application Portfolio Strategy is simply a decision about the competitive dynamics of the portfolio of schools you will apply to. Will you apply to only the most competitive programs? Would a balanced portfolio of competitive and less competitive schools make more sense? Should you hedge your bets and apply to one or more of the less competitive programs to increase your chances that you will be accepted to at least one school next year? Answering these questions in the planning phase will allow you to narrow your choices to a subset of possible programs that you are interested in applying to. What we are advocating you do is:

1. Assess Your Competitiveness
2. Segment the Market
3. Formulate an Application Portfolio Strategy
4. Select a subset of MBA programs
5. Learn about your buyer: the admissions committee

ASSESS YOUR COMPETITIVENESS

After helping hundreds of applicants win acceptance to top MBA programs we've learned that the only rule for who is accepted is that there really are no rules. If you ask an admissions officer what the school is looking for you are likely to hear them use the adjective "fit." Ultimately, the admissions committee is trying to decide if who you are, what you've experienced, and where you want to go in your career is a good match with their program. It would be nice if there was a formula to calculate your "fit" on a school-by-school basis. You would simply enter your information into a worksheet and your "fit" score would pop out. Wouldn't that be nice?

Sadly, no formula exists for calculating "fit" just as there is no scientific way to measure how competitive you are relative to your competition. On the other hand, there are certain variables that correlate positively with success. We've assembled a list of these variables so that you can develop a rough measure of how competitive you are, at what strategy consultants often call "a 10,000-foot level." By reviewing the range of average numbers at your target schools, and studying successful profiles, you can often get a feel for the level of competitiveness and how you fit in.

- Overall GPA (how do you measure against average GPA at target school?)
- GPA trends: up or down (how did your GPA fluctuate year-to-year, did you improve?)
- Caliber of undergraduate institution (how rigorous was your school?)
- Undergraduate major, courses selected (did you challenge yourself?)
- Activities as an undergrad (impact and leadership more important than quantity)
- Activities during summers (did you play or make the most of your free time?)
- Years of work experience (enough to be able to contribute to the class)
- Career progression (can you prove you grew, or did you stagnate?)
- Companies worked for (helps adcomm understand your work environment)
- Management experience (helpful to prove leadership abilities)
- Extracurricular involvements (impact and leadership more important than quantity)
- Interesting elements of family background (family hardship, traditions, education level of parents)
- International experiences (how have you reacted to new environments, different types of people?)
- Strength of recommendations
- Strength of interview
- Overall GMAT or *GRE*[®] *General Test* scores (how does this compare to range(s) at target school?)
- GMAT or *GRE*[®] *General Test* Quant percentile (how does this compare to range(s) at target school?)
- Demographics (do you come from an underrepresented group?)

SEGMENT THE MARKET

Marketing strategists are often faced with a perplexing number of choices when deciding what customers to target. To simplify their work they begin by segmenting (i.e., subdividing) the market into groups of buyers that share common characteristics.

Every individual applicant will segment the market differently. For some, a school that is regularly ranked between 15-20 might be a “reach school”. For others, it will be a “good bet”. Based on your assessment of your own competitive profile, you will decide where you fit. This is often a good place to seek outside help. You can ask knowledgeable and objective friends, or experts, to weigh in.

FORMULATE AN APPLICATION PORTFOLIO STRATEGY

As we mentioned above, measuring how competitive you are in the business school application pool is an art not a science. That doesn’t change the fact that you are going to have to make some difficult strategic decisions at this juncture about which subset of schools you want to investigate further.

Ultimately, your portfolio strategy will be a combination of your competitiveness and your risk profile. Your risk profile is determined by your appetite for risk and your degree of urgency about attending school next year. Some applicants are determined to go to business school and cannot accept any level of risk. These applicants will definitely want to apply to a range of programs. Others are only willing to invest in business school if they will be attending a highly coveted program. These applicants may only apply to one or two most competitive programs, knowing that the risk is high.

The following table illustrates potential portfolios based on self-assessment of competitiveness and risk.

PROFILE	PORTFOLIO
Highly Competitive, High Risk Tolerance	Top-Ranked Schools
Highly Competitive, Highly Risk Averse	2 Top Schools, 2 Mid-Tier Schools, 1 Less Competitive School
Mid-Range Competitiveness, High Risk Tolerance	2 Top Schools, 2 Mid-Tier Schools
Mid-Range Competitiveness, Highly Risk Averse	2 Mid-Tier Schools, 2 Less Competitive Schools
Less Competitive, High Risk Tolerance	1 Top-Ranked School, 2 Mid-Tier Schools

It’s completely up to you, but one thing to keep in mind is that applying to any more than about six schools during a single application season is probably impractical. Therefore, we recommend that you focus on a core portfolio consisting of about four to six schools.

SELECT A SUBSET OF MBA PROGRAMS FOR IN-DEPTH RESEARCH

Many variables factor into your decision about the MBA programs to which you choose to apply. Another daunting array of variables determine whether the programs you apply to will choose you. There are over 700 MBA programs in the United States alone and there simply aren't enough hours in the day for you to study them all or to apply to more than a handful.

Selecting the right target markets is as important for business school applicants as it is for marketing strategists. To put a finer point on the comparison, you must select a set of schools where your profile and qualities will be competitive. If not, even a brilliantly designed creative campaign is likely to flop.

Your Application Portfolio Strategy will help you to generate a short list of programs, probably at different levels of competitiveness, that you can research in depth. It would be helpful for you to select a subset of eight to ten programs that you can refine. In order to narrow down your list to a shorter list that you can actually apply to, you need to reflect upon "fit", but in a very personal way. What are YOU looking for in a business school and which programs best fit with your criteria? Some of the many criteria you might want to consider are listed here:

- Location
- Culture
- Companies that recruit
- Size of program
- Academic specialties
- Strength of alumni network
- Teaching style
- Special programs
- School prestige

Once you have narrowed down your list to a handful of target programs, you can go about developing a marketing plan that maximizes your chances of success. Ultimately, an admissions committee is trying to decide if you fit: if who you are, what you've experienced, and where want to go in your career is a good fit with their program. The exercises you will go through to learn about your buyer in the next phase will help you to define what constitutes "fit" so that your brand messages and indeed your entire application communicates the qualities and strengths that are relevant to the decision-makers you are trying to persuade.

LEARN ABOUT YOUR BUYER: THE ADMISSIONS COMMITTEE

It would be great if each school told you exactly what they were looking for. Representatives of the program from admissions officers to current students certainly provide plenty of clues but there is no definitive source that you can refer to determine what these qualities might be. For that matter, there is no single thing each program is looking for. If there was, then every student in the class would be a carbon copy of his or her classmates. Even so, it's fair to say that there are certain fundamental qualities that almost all members of the class will manifest. Before you begin formulating your own brand in Step Two of the guide, it is critical that for you to form some opinions of what qualities the programs are looking for both universally and specifically.

There are three things you will want to know about your buyer:

1. Who makes the buying decision?
2. What is their decision-making process?
3. What does your buyer value?

WHO MAKES THE ADMISSIONS DECISION?

In prior years, the application to MIT's Sloan School of Business has required applicants to begin their essays with a cover letter to Rod Garcia, Director of Admissions. Sloan is unique in this sense, but we believe it is a helpful reminder to all applicants to always keep your buyer in mind when crafting your application. If you do so, your application and essays will be clearer and more relevant to your target audience.

The marketing strategist wants to understand his buyer and to familiarize himself with the decision-making process this buyer goes through when selecting a product. In application and essay terms, this is akin to familiarizing yourself with your audience in order to shape your messages to address the central questions that will influence these decision-makers.

Each program has its own unique evaluation process, but in general the decision whether or not to admit you is a consensus decision made by an admissions committee. Members of this committee include the program's admissions officers, deans, professors, student representatives, and, in certain cases, an alumni interviewer.

Like a good salesperson, you can gather information in advance about to whom you will be selling. The most visible member of the admissions committee is the director of admissions. We recommend that you do some background research to learn more about this individual because his or her philosophies and preferences will influence the team of people he or she is leading. Listen carefully for everything this person has to say about what his or her program is looking

Some of the things you might want to know about the admissions director include:

1. How long he or she has been in this position?
2. What is his or her educational and professional background?
3. This person's personality, opinions, and preferences as conveyed in letters to applicants, interviews, video presentations, blog postings, etc.

WHAT IS THEIR DECISION-MAKING PROCESS?

Companies spend huge sums researching the buying behavior and decision-making processes of their target customers. By understanding the buying process they hope to garner some advantage that might make a difference and influence the buyer in their favor at key decision points.

By the same token, we feel it is helpful to educate yourself on the decision making process of your buyer. The admissions officer of one top ten program described the application evaluation process as follows:

1. The day following the application deadline the entire application is printed out and given to an admissions fellow, a second year student who has been hired by the admissions committee
2. The admissions fellow reads the application and recommends whether or not to grant the candidate an interview.
3. The file is then given to an admissions officer who reviews it and also recommends whether or not to invite the candidate for an interview.
4. If there is a disagreement between the two recommendations, the dean of admissions reviews the application and breaks the tie.
5. At the midpoint, the applicant is either invited to interview or is sent a rejection letter.
6. Those invited to interview are offered a choice of whether to interview on campus or to interview with an alumnus in his or her home city. The interviews are standardized and equally weighted whether the interview is conducted on campus or off.
7. Once the interview results are received, the file is passed to a director of admissions, who has not previously reviewed the file. He or she makes a recommendation whether to admit, committee, or deny the applicant.
8. If all recommendations match then the candidate is sent an offer of admission. If not, the file is sent to a committee, the applicant's merits are debated and a recommendation is made to the dean of admissions whether to admit, waitlist, or deny the candidate.

So we see now that it may be necessary to persuade at least four different "buyers" that your qualities and capabilities are an excellent fit for their institution: a current student, an admissions committee member, an interviewer, and the director of admissions. You'll need to factor the point of view and preferences of each decision maker into your application design. For example, the current student will be asking himself whether or not you would be the type of classmate that he would like to have in class. You not only need to "wow" your evaluators with your impressive achievements, you also need to persuade them that you have a personality and team player attitude that your future classmates will welcome. This leads us to one of the most important questions you must answer during the planning phase: What is this customer looking for anyway?

WHAT DOES YOUR BUYER VALUE UNIVERSALLY?

One of the fundamentals of effective marketing is to feature the strengths of your product in terms that are relevant to your buyer. We've assembled a list of some of the universal qualities that the top MBA programs value. Familiarizing yourself with this is a great start. The more difficult thing to define is the combination of qualities that are deemed an excellent "fit" for a particular program. After you have studied the universal qualities carefully, we will suggest an exercise you can do on your own to further define which qualities the specific programs you are interested in value most. The Stacy Blackman Consulting Essay Guides also delve into this issue more deeply on a school-by-school basis.

THE QUALITIES BUSINESS SCHOOLS VALUE

Every year our clients ask us to shed some light on what the top MBA programs are looking for. The qualities that MBA admissions committees are looking for are fairly well-known and intuitive.

- Leadership - Evidence of accomplishing things through others, challenging the status quo, instilling a vision, facing challenges, standing up for what's right, prioritizing the needs of the organization above personal needs, and uniting people behind a goal
- Rationale for an MBA - Demonstrates sound reasoning for returning to business school, enthusiasm for the program, and persuasive evidence of a perfect fit between the program and the candidate's values and goals
- Diversity - Elements of background, values, experience, and personal qualities that prove the candidate will add something new, exciting, and different to their community
- Self-Awareness - Takes responsibility for actions; understands how those actions impact others
- Intellectual Horsepower - A love for learning and a desire for mastery of new subjects; ability to handle the program's rigorous academic demands; quantitative abilities
- Interpersonal Abilities - The ability to advocate, persuade, and negotiate compromise; charm, charisma, and exceptional social skills
- Emotional Intelligence - Evidence of team work and team building; creating clear goals, building a sense of urgency, identifying the unique talents of team members, motivating teammates, managing a complex project, and resolving differences
- Determination - The ability to overcome setbacks and hardships; determination and courage in the face of adversity; drive; the desire to make an impact personally and professionally
- Humanitarian Values - Service to a community, selflessness, generosity
- Integrity/Ethics - A clear sense of principles and values; evidence of putting principles into action
- Career Progression - Evidence that you have distinguished yourself from your peers and increased your level of responsibility
- Ambitious Career Goals - Clear career goals and a convincing, achievable action plan for achieving career objectives
- Global Point of View - Awareness of the global nature of business; evidence of adapting to new cultures and working effectively with a diverse group of people

WHAT DOES YOUR BUYER VALUE SPECIFICALLY?

The brand messages you generate in the next section of the guide won't necessarily change drastically from school to school but the degree of emphasis on any one message might change based on your knowledge of what each program is looking for and help you to build a compelling case that you "fit."

Is your combination of qualities in sync with what the program is looking for? Will you thrive in the program? Will you grow as a businessperson and a human being during your two years and leave the program ready to realize your full potential? Will you make the community stronger through your contributions and unique point of view?

You'll be learning everything you can about your potential buyer, the admissions committee, so that you can assess how competitive you are and how well you "fit" with their program. Your goal is to create a clear idea of what qualities each of the programs values most highly. The research you do in the planning phase about what your buyer values will be crucial in the next phase of our process: formulating your brand messages.

EXERCISE: VOICE OF THE CUSTOMER

Voice of the Customer (VOC) is a term used in business to describe the process of capturing a customer's requirements. Specifically, the Voice of the Customer is a market research technique that produces a detailed set of customer wants and needs, organized into a hierarchical structure, and then prioritized in terms of relative importance.

CAPTURING THE VOICE OF THE CUSTOMER

We recommend that you keep a notebook of every signal you hear about what your buyer values. In market research terms, what you are trying to do is to capture the Voice of the Customer.

During online research, school visits, and information sessions you will hear many opinions about what each school is looking for. Here are a few examples of signals that one candidate gathered in his Voice of the Customer notebook:

VALUE SIGNAL	PROGRAM
"We encourage candidates who can benefit from—and contribute to—a transformative education in which students challenge and learn from each other as they test their growing leadership abilities."	Harvard Business School
"We're looking for outstanding individuals, and the very qualities that define you make the GSB a stimulating place to learn. We Evaluate All Applicants In Four Areas: Intellectual Vitality, Leadership Potential, Personal Qualities, and Contributions."	Stanford Graduate School of Business
"We look for people who will contribute in a meaningful way to our community ...We don't just look at one thing - we look at the whole picture. And think about the fit."	Wharton Business School
"Although we do consider test scores, scholastic ability and work experience, we are also interested in learning more about each candidate's values and motivations. We also assess characteristics such as maturity, leadership and potential to contribute to the Kellogg community."	Kellogg School of Management

DEFINING AND PRIORITIZING CUSTOMER WANTS AND NEEDS

After you've completed your research, look for consistency in what is being said and identify the qualities that are mentioned most frequently by the representatives from each program. Try to identify patterns and consensus about what qualities are prized most highly. If one speaker says that Columbia Business School values an entrepreneurial spirit then it doesn't mean as much as if you've consistently heard this message in numerous interactions and information sessions. Specifically, you are looking for "buzz words" that your buyer uses frequently. Through repetition and reinforcement they are trying to communicate to you what they value in an applicant. If the term, "team spirit" comes up again and again in your research about a particular school then it's fair to assume that you had better emphasize your collaborative abilities in your application.

Create your own list of definitive qualities for each of your programs. There will probably be some overlap between programs but it's important for you to have a feel for the blend of traits and the emphasis on particular qualities. The following examples of qualities are not meant to be definitive; only to give you an example of what your own list might look like.

Harvard: Transformational, Strategic Thinkers and Doers who thrive on new challenges

Wharton: Analytically-Adept, Innovators with a Global Perspective

Stanford: Game-changing, Courageously Unique Leaders who will make a lasting impact

Kellogg: Collaborative, Selfless Contributors who lead with Integrity

CONCLUSION: FROM PLANNING TO BRANDING

Ideally, by now you have four to six programs identified and you are now prepared to design a persuasive marketing campaign that will make you stand out from the other candidates. The knowledge you generated in the planning phase will be critical when it comes time to craft your "brand messages" -- the qualities and capabilities that differentiate you from your competitors. Thus we see that the application and essays are not just there to torture you or make you jump through hoops. The entire application process is testing to see if you have a strategic mind, an ability to tailor your message to you audience, and ultimately, a talent for persuading that audience to believe in you and "accept" you.

STEP TWO: BRAND

When you apply to business school, you are in the unique position of being the marketing strategist and the product. As mentioned earlier, some of our clients don't immediately take to the idea of viewing themselves as a "product" or of thinking of their strengths and characteristics as a "brand." The point is not to strip you of your humanity, quite the contrary. The point is to encourage you to take a step back and examine your qualities, values, and aspirations from another point of view -- that of the admissions committee. The brand development process you will go through in this section of the guide can actually be a very rewarding and enriching experience that can pay dividends well beyond the business school application process.

After educating yourself about your buyer and formulating your own definition of what constitutes a good "fit" with each program, you are ready to begin creating your brand messages. Your goal is to identify and communicate the qualities you possess that correspond most closely with what your target programs are looking for. If you were tasked with creating a marketing campaign for a new car and you decided to feature the car's extensive number of bells and whistles while your potential buyers were more interested in fuel economy then your marketing messages would miss the mark. The pitfalls in formulating your application brand messages are similar. You'll want to avoid these pitfalls in the application process. The last thing you want to do is to tout your ability to lock yourself in a room and solve any problem on your own when the admissions committee is looking for evidence that you can harness the collective intelligence of your team when confronted with a problem.

First, you will complete a series of brand exercises that will help you to identify your unique strengths. Next, you will test potential messages for authenticity by matching them with reasons to believe. Finally, you will refine and finalize the brand messages that you want to communicate in your application:

1. Complete the Brand Exercises
2. Generate Potential Brand Messages
3. Authenticate Brand Messages with Reasons to Believe
4. Refine and Finalize Your Brand Identity

If you devote time and energy to the branding exercise now, the rest of the application process will go much more smoothly.

COMPLETE THE BRAND EXERCISES

As you embark on creating your brand messages, objectivity is important but modesty is counterproductive. Very soon you will converge on a set of messages that you want to convey to the admissions committee, but it's time now for some divergent thinking, also known as brainstorming. Below, we have proposed a series of exercises that will help you to generate a litany of potential brand messages. At this juncture, only person who will see your notes is you, so feel free to brag. In fact, what you want to do now is a combination of brainstorming and bragging: "Brag-Storming!"

Your goal is to come up with as many things you can think of that reflect the wonderful, unique, exciting, interesting, multi-dimensional individual you are. Don't worry just yet if any particular story or quality will impress an admissions officer, just put it down on paper. Furthermore, don't try to do these exercises all in one sitting. Finally, many of our clients find it helpful to keep a notebook handy to scratch down ideas and notes whenever and wherever they occur.

EXERCISE 1: UNABASHED BRAGGING

In our work with clients, we begin by asking them to fill out a Brag Sheet. This exercise not only serves as a kind of memory jogger of things worth bragging about; it also helps our clients to realize that their hobbies, travels, community service work, and personal stories can provide amazing raw materials for brand messages and eventually essays. Admissions committees are interested in well-rounded applicants who have experienced life, pursued passions, and achieved as much outside of the professional setting as within it.

We instituted the Brag Sheet exercise so that these aspects of our clients' stories didn't slip through the cracks. So many times, we would be well on our way to a final draft of an accomplishments essay when a client would say offhandedly, "I'm really proud of those cost-cutting measures I implemented, but I'm also proud of the time I managed to secure free malaria medication from the US Government and saved that village in Africa..." There was nothing to do at that point but press the delete button on the cost-cutting essay and start back at page one. Hopefully, the Brag Sheet will open your mind and spur your imagination so that you don't disregard unique achievements and talents that you might have overlooked otherwise.

BRAG SHEET QUESTIONS:

Where have you traveled and/or lived?

List continents, countries and interesting cities, including within your native country.

List all organizations with which you have done volunteer work.

This can include one afternoon at a soup kitchen ten years ago, or a deeper involvement.

List all of your interests and hobbies.

List all extracurricular involvement during college, no matter how brief the involvement.

List all awards or honors that you have received in college, at work, or otherwise.

List three work projects that have been most interesting to you.

Describe a time you failed.

Describe at least one "defining moment" in your life. Think about experiences, books, conversations, etc... that have greatly impacted you and made you rethink your current path or future goals.

Have you had to overcome any personal or professional hardships?

Have you done any public speaking (at work, school, etc...)?

Have you ever been promoted at work? If so, elaborate below.

Have you ever supervised anyone at work or in an extracurricular setting?

What are your computer skills?

Are you married? Do you have children?

What are your favorite books?

Have you ever started up a business - large or extremely small?

What interpersonal qualities do you believe make you unique?

Have you published anything?

Do you have any patents?

Do you participate in any sports? Have you run a marathon? Are you part of a basketball league?

What part of the world are your parents and grandparents from? What is your cultural heritage?

Does your family have any unique traditions?

What are your three greatest weaknesses?

EXERCISE 2: FROM ACHIEVEMENT STORIES TO STRENGTHS

A. GENERATE STORIES

What have you accomplished thus far that is really worth bragging about? For the time being, it's not necessary to write stories. Just shorthand notes should suffice for a first pass (e.g., The time I led on-campus recruiting for my department at work). As you are writing down your ideas, hold off trying to determine why you succeeded and instead just focus on what you did. This will hopefully open your mind to some unique strengths and talents that you might have overlooked if you simply asked yourself, "How do I prove I'm a leader?" In our work with applicants, we've discovered that it's best to start with a rich assortment of life experiences and to see what emerges as a core strength rather than to start with what our clients perceive to be their core strengths and then to try to find one or two stories to back those up. If you follow our recommended approach then your stories will lead you to your brand message rather than vice-versa.

Some suggestions that will spur your thinking and help you to keep an open mind:

1. Consider personal achievements as well as professional achievements. One of our clients struggled with a speech impediment throughout his life, worked incredibly hard to overcome this disability, and grew into a fantastic speaker by the time he was in college. That personal achievement turned into a story worth sharing.
2. Don't forget leadership and achievements in the communities you are part of outside of work. Admissions officers are very interested in what you have accomplished outside of the office, especially when you have a history of involvement with a cause about which you are passionate.
3. Remember the times that your involvement made a big difference for or impact on a person, group, or organization. Ultimately, business school admissions officers are much more interested in the fact that you made a difference than that you are simply different. Another candidate saw that most of the new hires to her group were leaving after less than a year on the job because they simply weren't challenged. She took the initiative to create a rotation program that offered new hires a series of stretch assignments. As a result, turnover dropped by 75%. She made a big difference for her company.
4. List as many examples as you can where you achieved something significant by influencing, motivating, and inspiring a group of other people: in other words the times you harnessed the energy and creativity of other people and served as a leader.
5. Think about the times that you challenged the status quo or identified and captured a new opportunity.
6. Remember the times you identified a problem and developed a clever, creative, or innovative solution to address it.
7. Concentrate on achievements from the past. It's true that most admissions officers place a premium on recent accomplishments. In fact, a couple of programs explicitly state that they only want to hear about experiences from within the last three years. If you were a dynamic, take-charge leader who made an impact in high school and have not taken the lead since then it may be difficult to support this brand message in your application. On the other hand, if you are asked about your most significant life accomplishment or about a defining leadership experience then your whole life is in scope. One applicant wrote an amazing essay about how the leadership lessons she learned as a drum major in high school made her a more effective leader in the business world.

8. Don't forget about failures, setbacks, and defining moments in your life. One thing you will find in the biographies of almost every exceptional leader is that they faced a series of hardships and setback early in their lives. Your own stories about coping with failure, analyzing what went wrong, and growing and learning as a result can be an excellent source for potential brand messages and essays. One candidate was cut from his college football team freshman year. After briefly considering dropping out of school, he realized that this was an opportunity to focus on leadership and academics and ended up emerging as a student leader and graduating at the top of his class. Another applicant was laid off from his job but demonstrated resilience, creativity, and courage in defining new career goals and taking an entry-level job in a new field that positioned him for future success. Admissions officers may be leery of candidates who have experienced an unbroken string of success or at least try to make it appear so. These applicants have yet to be put to the test by a setback or failure.

B. TAKE YOUR BEST STORIES ONE STEP FURTHER

The two most telling aspects of the value of any story are the actions you took and the results you achieved. The actions you took reveal your approach to a particular problem and provide some clues about your strengths, capabilities, and character. The results indicate that your actions made a difference. For the stories that look the most promising, we recommend that you take your notes one step further: for each story, fill out what we call the "STAR framework" to focus your storytelling and summarize the key elements of the story and what you did and what you accomplished. Remember if you, or in some cases you and your team, are not the "star" of the story then the story probably won't prove very helpful when you begin mining the stories for possible brand messages.

STAR stands for Situation - Task - Action - Result.

The framework will help you to stay on track and give a thorough answer that provides background, tells exactly what you did and ends with the critical results.

- Situation - Begin with setting the stage and presenting the complication or conflict of the story: "My brand was losing market share to a new competitor"
- Task - Identify your objective in light of the complication and summarize the task or project performed: "I decided to revise our strategy"
- Action - Describe the action steps you took toward your goal: "I surveyed customers to learn what traits they valued and implemented product changes accordingly"
- Results - Summarize the outcome and how you and/or your team made a difference: "We gained 20% additional market share."

C. MINE STORIES FOR STRENGTHS

What you want to do now is to look more closely at your most powerful achievements and accomplishments -- the stories in which you overcame obstacles, contributed greatly, and made an impact. The following questions are to help you to elicit what aspects of your strengths, skills, talents and character enabled your success. The answers will add to the universe of potential brand messages that you might decide to feature in your application and essays:

- Which of my strengths, talents, or attributes did I draw upon to make a difference?
- What qualities, skills, or attributes that I possess most contributed to my success in this situation?
- Which of my abilities surpassed the expectations of my teammates and/or superiors?

- As compared to my peers, what particular talents or abilities set me apart?
- In what ways did this experience contribute to personal growth and make me stronger?
- When you are part of a team what is the most outstanding and consistent way you add value?

List your answers to each question for the time being. In the next step, we will be looking across your answers to identify the strengths that are the most compelling.

EXERCISE 3: INTERVIEWS

Business school applications and interviewers are fond of asking the question, “What would the people who know you best identify as your clearest and greatest strengths?” At this point, most applicants offer an impromptu response of all the “nice” things they think people might say about them. What’s surprising is that so few candidates have actually taken advantage of one of the richest sources of insight about their character, talents, and unique contributions: the feedback of others. Consider how much more powerful it would be to respond when asked the question above by an interviewer: “I know what they would say because when I started my application process I sat down with my boss, my teammates, and the head of the community service organization where I volunteered and I asked them.”

We realize that asking others to tell you about why you are so wonderful can be a bit intimidating. As in the exercise above, it might be easier to ask them first about ways you made a difference or added value in specific circumstances. It is generally easier for people to recall specific projects and contributions than it is for them to rattle off a list of superlatives. Furthermore, this information will be helpful to you because the stories they recall might supply additional materials for future essays.

Here are some interview questions that you can use to help elicit some helpful feedback:

1. How has my involvement made a positive difference for you/the team/the organization?
2. As compared to my peers and others you have worked with in the past what strengths or characteristics make me stand out?
3. What adjectives would you use to describe me to another person?
4. Where have my skills and capabilities grown the most in the time you’ve known me?
5. What do you see as my biggest opportunities for growth?
6. Which of my strengths did you consider most important when you recommended me for the assignment/the promotion/project X?
7. If I had to make the case that I would be a great addition to a business school class next year, what aspects of my character, personality, or abilities should I feature?
8. When we are on a team together, what role do you prefer me to play, and why?

If your interviews aren’t generating boatloads of stellar achievements and exceptional strengths and you need a confidence booster, schedule an interview with your mom. Chances are she’ll have some wonderful things to say about you that you can add to your list of possible brand messages.

Finally, part of this exercise of gaining self-awareness also is asking for weaknesses/improvement areas, and asking for both might make it less awkward.

EXERCISE 4: "AND THE AWARD GOES TO..."

On the data forms for most programs you will be asked about honors, awards, and special recognition that you've received thus far. Many of our clients are concerned if they can't fill the page with accolades, but most overlook the fact that a single recognition might be more important to the admissions committee than a page of prizes. Many applicants fill in their list of platitudes with as little thought as filling in their address and phone number. Certainly, an impressive assortment of blue ribbon achievements will catch the eye of the admission officers, but before moving on to the other parts of your data sheet, stop for a moment and consider why the admissions committee might be interested in a peek inside your trophy case. It's because the honors you've received offer them some insight into your remarkable, noteworthy, outstanding talents. The trophy, certificate, or newspaper clipping is really a signal that you surpassed the competition and distinguished yourself from your peers. In this exercise you should carefully compile your list of awards, scholarships, blue ribbons, and honorable mentions and then take a moment to ask yourself why you won? What strengths did you draw on in order to win that creative writing competition, earn player of the year, or beat out the other teams in the business plan challenge? This list of talents and strengths you generate may end up as one of your core brand messages.

One of our clients wanted to write an accomplishment essay telling the admissions committee that her proudest achievement was winning a business plan competition in college. Writing an essay to tell them she won wasn't necessary; they can read that on her data form and resume. On the other hand, the essay she ended up writing telling them how and why she won by inspiring and motivating a team, facilitating the design of an innovative product, and carefully managing the creation of a compelling business plan ended up being a great story. Why this was so meaningful to her also told us something about who she is. The awards are not the important thing, the strengths you called upon in order to win are.

EXERCISE 5: PASSIONS

What do your passions in life have to do with being accepted to business school? A great deal as it turns out. Some of our clients don't immediately see the connection between business and passion. They think that business is about the numbers, rational thinking, and cold, logical decision-making. While we can't completely discount this characterization, it is important for you to realize that admissions committees are looking for candidates that are truly passionate about their aspirations and life goals and want to make an impact on the world around them.

Consider for a moment that for many years Stanford's first essay question has been: "What matters most to you, and why?" This is a question about what you value, and the GSB's admissions committee wants to understand what you are passionate about and how that passion has manifested itself in your life and career choices.

At least one of your brand messages should tell the admission committee about an abiding passion that drives you and excites you. The answer to that question doesn't have to be as lofty as world peace or the end of global warming. We've seen amazing essays about simple passions such as being there for the people you care about, helping young people from your hometown follow in your footsteps, building a career that promotes healthy living for others, or topics such as a passion for music or the personal freedom signified by a passport.

The following questions may help you to explore what you value and what's important to you:

What has changed you?

What has shaped your personal values?

Who has shaped you or your personal values?

Think about the most significant or emotional or memorable moments in your life:

What do they say about you? What do they reveal about you?

Do they hold the key to what matters most to you? Is there some theme that connects them?

Who do you love? Why?

What do you love? Why?

What makes you mad?

What makes you sad?

What makes you happy?

What makes you angry?

What frightens you?

What do you want to be famous for someday?

EXERCISE 6: BACK TO THE FUTURE—WHAT QUALITIES WILL MAKE YOU A SUCCESS IN YOUR FUTURE CAREER?

Because the decision to go to business school is about preparing for future career goals and because your future success reflects positively on the institution you attend, admissions officers will be asking themselves, “Does this candidate have the potential to succeed in the career goals she has set for herself?” We recommend that our clients crystallize their career vision during the branding stage, so that they can be sure that their brand attributes bolster the case that they will succeed in these future career goals. If your brand messages create a picture of you as an ace investment banker with unmatched quantitative skills and you tell the admissions officers that you want to start a not-for-profit they may be left wondering if your strengths translate to this new endeavor. Don't leave them guessing, be sure you have brand messages that build the case for your future success.

In this exercise, imagine that you are preparing for an interview for your dream job. Write down all the skills, capabilities, and talents you possess that will be critical to your success. For each of these points come up with as many examples as you can from your past to provide evidence of these strengths. For example, we worked with one client whose career aspiration was in the venture capital field but he didn't have any investment banking or VC experience. On the other hand, his job in the military required him to present funding requests to congress for new technologies. As it turns out he was quite adept at understanding new technology, explaining the benefits of the technology in layman terms, and raising money to fund the technology development. All these skills were directly relevant to his future career in venture capital and he was able to build a convincing case that he would be able to succeed.

GENERATE POTENTIAL BRAND MESSAGES

Companies devote considerable time, energy, and creativity to developing their brand message and you should too. The stakes are very high at this point in the process. You are about to make some critical strategic decisions about what your application will communicate about you to the admissions committee. In our experience guiding hundreds of business school applicants, we have found that defining three to five core brand messages is about right. You may in fact be courageous, quirky, loyal, generous, wise, determined, entrepreneurial, resourceful, intelligent, artistic, energetic, sporty, and many other things as well, but if you attempt to tell the admissions committee everything about you, you run the risk, paradoxically, that they will finish reading your application and feel they don't know you at all. The goal of the application and the essays isn't to tell the admissions officers everything about you; it's to tell them the most important things and to reinforce those qualities in their minds by offering what brand managers refer to as “reasons to believe.” But how do you decide what to focus on?

After completing the brand exercises, you should have some excellent raw materials to draw on as you begin to shape the key messages that will form the Brand Identity that your application and essays will communicate to the admissions committee. Now is the time to revisit your findings from the Voice of the Customer Exercise from the section about Learning About Your Buyer. The qualities you came up with for each school are probably broad: exceptional leadership, an entrepreneurial outlook, a track record of collaboration. Now, you should find that you will be able to check those boxes with your unique combination of strengths. By the end of this step in our guide you should be able to take a general quality, such as leadership, and say much more than “I am a leader.” Anyone can make a claim about being a “leader” or a “team-player.” What you will be able to do is to tell the admissions committee why you are an exceptional leader and the leadership style that has served you well in the past. Are you the field general who operates down in the trenches elbow-to-elbow with your troops or more of a creative visionary who generates flashes of insight that are capable of changing the game? That is the level of specificity that your brand messages should achieve.

EXERCISE: BRAND MESSAGES

Study your notes from the branding exercises closely and identify the qualities, traits, characteristics, strengths and talents that appear most frequently. Write each one of these down on a post-it-note in no more than 10 words. Find an empty wall to serve as your canvas and stick up your brand messages. The advantage of using Post-it-Notes is that you can move your notes around, from groups, and reshuffle categories.

Here are some examples from clients we have worked with:

- I have extensive international experience
- I have always taken the road less traveled
- My communication skills are exceptional
- I am a turn-around specialist
- I am a gifted negotiator
- I lead creative teams to innovative solutions
- I inspire people with my dynamic energy
- I am passionate about bleeding edge technology
- I make the communities I'm part of stronger

On your first pass you will probably find a great deal of overlap and you will be able to combine different notes that are essentially saying the same thing.

AUTHENTICATE BRAND MESSAGES WITH REASONS TO BELIEVE

The first and most important test of your brand messages is authenticity. Without evidence and examples your brand messages will simply be a set of empty claims. You must be able to back those claims up with what companies like Procter and Gamble call "reasons to believe." The first step in architecting your brand identity is to separate fact from fiction and authenticity from aspiration. The best way to do this is to stay close to the data you generated during your branding exercise. Of course, after doing all that hard work you have some initial ideas about what your primary brand messages will be. Now you want to put them to the test.

EXERCISE: REASONS TO BELIEVE

The next step is to go through your notes again and assemble as many concrete examples as you can that would convince the admissions committee to believe each brand claim. Write these examples on a post-it note and place them under the potential brand message they support. Again, only shorthand notes are required. Don't worry if you are using the same story more than once to support different brand messages. A story about a team you led might be great evidence of your ability to motivate others as well as provide an example of a time when you generated an innovative solution by harnessing the creativity of a group of people.

You'll be able to move the stories and examples around until you feel that you have properly supported your brand messages with reasons to believe. At this point, the claims that are strongest and best supported are vividly clear because of the number of Post-it-Notes you have under each brand message. This is essentially a democratic process and the stories and examples have voted for the most compelling brand messages. The brand claims that aren't supported by the evidence should be eliminated at this point.

The time you spend on this part of the exercise will be well worth it because chances are that many of these anecdotes or examples will lead to a great essay when it comes time to select the stories you will tell.

EXAMPLES:**BRAND MESSAGE: MY COMMUNICATION SKILLS ARE EXCEPTIONAL**

Reasons to Believe:

1. President of Public Speaking Club
2. Led Analyst training classes at work
3. Selected as lead negotiator for three transactions this year

BRAND MESSAGE: I HAVE EXTENSIVE INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

Reasons to Believe:

1. Six-Month assignment in Kuwait
2. Systems Implementation in New Delhi
3. Process Improvement Project in Hong Kong

BRAND MESSAGE: I MAKE THE COMMUNITIES I'M PART OF STRONGER

Reasons to Believe:

1. Created Engineering Rotation Program to reduce turnover
2. Started Youth Group at Church
3. Launched career and resume workshop for non-traditional majors in college

After completing the Reasons to Believe exercise, you should have clarity about which of your brand messages are most compelling and convincing. Ideally, you will have identified about eight to ten brand messages at this point. In the next step you will test and refine those brand messages further and finalize your brand identity.

FINALIZE YOUR BRAND IDENTITY

"What do I want the admissions committee to know about me once they have read my application and essays?" It's time to answer that question definitively by finalizing your brand identity. The brand messages that form your brand identity must be simple and straightforward, they must communicate your most compelling strengths, they must be relevant to your buyer, and they must be supported by a number of reasons to believe.

To further refine your brand messages into the top three to five you should ask yourself the following questions:

1. Will each brand message resonate with my target audience, the admissions committee?

Refer back to the research you've done about the admissions committee and ask yourself if what you are communicating will motivate them to sit forward in their chairs. You might have had a blistering fastball in college, but is that something that is likely to impress your audience? Probably not. On the other hand, if your fastball left a little to be desired but you had a reputation for relentless optimism and were able to keep your baseball team's spirits high even during a particularly bleak season, you may be onto something. Take a look again at the qualities that the admissions officers value and see how your list of brand messages relates to that list.

2. Do one or more of my brand messages support the case that I will succeed in my future career goals?

Because the decision to go to business school is about preparing for future career goals and your future success reflects positively on the institution you attend, admissions officers will be asking themselves: does this candidate have the potential to succeed in the career goals she has set for herself? Therefore, at least a few of your brand attributes should bolster the case that you will succeed in these future career goals. They will also be looking for some consistency. Switching careers is a valid reason for going to business school, but you will need to provide evidence that you have the qualities and experiences that will enable you to make this career transition successfully. Don't leave them guessing, be sure to include brand messages that build the case for your future success.

3. Does one or more of my brand messages offer anything different than my competitors, the other candidates?

One of the questions we are often asked at this stage, does every brand statement have to be unique to me? If you are applying to elite programs it is very likely that other candidates will possess some similar strengths. The key is that your specific combination of brand messages should make you stand out. One candidate we worked with was a successful entrepreneur. Clearly, he is not going to be the only successful entrepreneur applying to business schools. The fact that he was a successful entrepreneur who was passionate about education and the potential for distance learning to revolutionize global education delivery made him stand out from the crowd.

4. Is each brand message short, simple, and clear?

By asking yourself the first three questions you will probably have narrowed down your list to around five to eight core messages. Now, you should try to improve on these messages by simplifying and clarifying them. There is no use putting the work into refining and sharpening brand messages that are ultimately going to fall by the way side.

The essays are an opportunity to expand on the brand message and explain what you mean. Your brand messages themselves are for your reference but they should be simple and straightforward enough for anyone to understand without explanation. The most effective best brand messages can be expressed in only a few words. Consider this list from companies and products you know:

- a. Everyday Low Prices (Walmart)
- b. The Most Magical Place on Earth (Disneyworld)
- c. Melt in your mouth, not in your hands (M&Ms)

CONCLUSION: FROM BRAND IDENTITY TO COMMUNICATION

After testing your brand messages against the checklist above, you should now have a list of about five brand messages that you want to communicate to the admissions committee. Your school research will help you to decide which brands to emphasize in which applications. For example, you might choose to feature your collaborative abilities in one application and your keen analytical mind in another. In a third school, your creative thinking and entrepreneurial spirit might be front and center. Nevertheless, if you've done a good job of creating your brand identity you should feel that these statements capture and convey the essence of who you are and what you can do.

Our philosophy is that you will ultimately be more successful and find a school where you truly fit if you communicate a clear and honest picture of who you are. This is not just an ethical matter, it's a practical one. After reviewing thousands upon thousands of applications and reading stacks of essays, admissions committee members, have well-developed B.S. detectors. Your objective is to put together your "personal best" application and to communicate a set of brand messages that are both convincing and truthful. Assembling an application that tells the admission committee what you think they want to hear but has no relationship to who you are is a big mistake. If you tell your story with confidence, honesty, and objectivity you'll have the best chance of being accepted to a program that is right for you.

Of course, these messages are not set in stone at this stage; you will continue to refine them throughout the process. Nevertheless, effective strategic decisions about your brand will ensure that the time you invest in execution will have the greatest impact.

STEP THREE: COMMUNICATE

FROM BRAND MESSAGES TO ESSAY TOPICS AND STORIES

SITUATION: At this point, you know your customer, you have assessed your product, and you have a fairly accurate idea of what product attributes you want to feature. You are already way ahead of most of the competition. Most have simply read the essay questions, scratched down a few ideas, and started writing.

COMPLICATION: You have your brand messages clearly in mind, but now you must communicate them via a very specific medium: the business school essays. It bears mentioning that your entire application should support and reinforce these brand messages but the essays are your most powerful communication tool. The essay questions are signals from your customer about what they want to know about you and how you will be compared to your competition. Your challenge then is to find a way to tell them what they want to know while also telling them what you want them to know.

So why write essays? Why not just send them a list of your brand messages and be done with it? Put yourself in the admissions officers' shoes: at the outset, your brand messages are really just a set of empty claims. Why should they believe you "can lead creative teams" or "have made a difference in the causes you are passionate about?" You must convince the admissions officers that these claims are true, and the primary way you will do so by telling them stories which persuade them that your claims should be believed.

In a novel, we learn about the characters by reading their behaviors. Often, the actions those characters take during times of crisis and conflict are the most revealing. After "seeing" the protagonist take action and make a sacrifice for others, we might say to ourselves this character is "heroic." As the heroic deeds mount in later pages we will be convinced that this character is a "hero." Business school application and essays work in a very similar way. The more examples you are able to offer to support a particular attribute the more likely your audience, the admissions committee, is to believe that you possess a particular strength or skill set.

QUESTION: How do I express my brands in the form of business school essays?

ANSWER: Now, the hard work you did generating possible stories and extracting the central brand message from each is going to pay off. You don't just have a single story to choose from to convince the admissions committee about your ability to lead creative teams; you have three or four. You won't be scratching your head wondering how you will prove that you have "made a difference on causes that you are passionate about" -- you will have a number of examples to draw from.

Now it's all about execution. You need to take your stories and map them to the essay questions for each school. You can check off stories from a master list as they are placed within the application, so that you ensure you have included all the important points.

Your recommenders should also be consistent with you, so be sure to share your overall plans and points you want to emphasize with them.

And as you communicate with your target schools via your data forms, your interview or ongoing informal communications be sure to present a consistent brand.

IN CONCLUSION

As we stated earlier, there is no need to utilize each and every exercise in this guide, or to agonize over completing every step. What is essential, however, is that you convey a personal brand that is supported by concrete proof from your background. Your personal stories will substantiate your unique characteristics which will pool together to provide admissions officers with a complete picture of you.

ABOUT STACY BLACKMAN CONSULTING

Stacy Blackman Consulting's mission is to help our clients achieve their most ambitious educational and professional goals by making the MBA application process less stressful and more successful.

Since 2001, we have helped hundreds of candidates with their applications to top business schools; our clients have been admitted to every top MBA program worldwide.

Stacy Blackman Consulting offers **Comprehensive**, **Hourly** and **Editing** services. Services may include:

- School selection
- Strategy development
- Assistance with essay writing: coaching, review and feedback
- Interview coaching
- Planning for school visits
- Reference selection, preparation and editing
- Developing resumes
- Review of data forms
- Wait list and deferral strategy
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In addition to our consulting services and our online **strategy**, **interview** and **application basics** guides, we have published a book on the MBA admissions process entitled **The MBA Application Roadmap**.

To learn more about our services and resources, or to schedule a free consultation, visit our website (www.StacyBlackman.com).

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