

Confessions: From a Leader of the Pack?

I am a rising senior at a well-respected university, and was lucky enough to land the most desired job on campus, that of tour guide. But the big secret? Our tour guiding is abysmal. A lack of regulation means our brand is not communicated consistently, yet many of our guides still manage to sound canned.

Sparse training feels like a siesta after a very competitive hiring process. First, we are handed a bound packet—reverently dubbed the Tour Guiding Bible—in which we can read about notable dates, programs, and alumni. Next, we take a quiz on the material. As an overachiever at heart, I assumed this quiz would necessitate the memorization of countless statistics. Instead we named a few student groups and talked about the food plan, tasks that freshmen could complete after about four days of fall quarter. Lastly, tour guides must “shadow” two tours given by other students. These tours are vastly different from each other, as each guide has infused their walks through campus with their own favorite stories and facts. Often, the physical route is the only congruency.

Since the campus visit is the college shopper’s primary influence, a reformation is in order to make tours more strategic. Here are my top ten ideas for improving a university’s tour-guiding game:

1. Be consistent with the institution’s brand or help defy stereotypes

Though all of us tour guides have read the aforementioned booklet, we have not been schooled in the university brand. My university is stereotyped as gearing towards preprofessional go-getters. Is this something the administration wants to embrace or shy away from? I have no idea whether it makes our admissions staff proud or makes them cringe when we describe our in to law school or the fantastic job Career Services lined up for us. Without knowing the university’s intended brand, tour guides may divulge information that gives guests an undesirable impression.

2. Remember what students care about

If prospective students wanted to know about the marble used to build the history hall and not about the life-changing “Ancient Egypt” class the guide took there, they’d skip the college tour and go on an architectural one instead. Though the history and traditions of an institution are important, how they influence the happenings of

today makes a far greater impression. It was not so very long ago that I was taking these college tours myself, but I can't tell you a single fact about any institution's oldest building. What I do remember is which school has the popular crepe stand, which school features the most unique tailgate traditions, and which school teaches an all-freshman course on dinosaurs. After reading the entire Tour Guiding Bible, I am unsure which parts of our story are important to the university, which facts are vital, and which alumni must be mentioned in every tour. Institutions should differentiate mandatory talking points from supplementary information.

3. Make it interactive

We live in a world of multimedia, multitasking, and multifaceted students. The more a tour guide can engage their tour—with suggested websites, trivia questions, and varieties of venues—the more comprehensive a prospective student's view of that school will be. Universities can help by providing materials to pass out at various landmarks or by following up with emailed stories, videos, and links after student visits. Every school I toured as a prospective student provided pamphlets at the admissions office, and none of them gave me anything supplementary relating to the tour itself. I would have loved my university to send footage from the English department's webcam, a link to our astoundingly professional online campus news source, or a YouTube clip of the school-wide spring holiday.

4. Keep it punchy

A tour guide can be a friend and confidant or the narrator of an extremely boring documentary. Without an engaging character—not mere perkiness!—a guide will be met with more eye rolls and texting than respect. I have found that many tour guides are hired for dimply cheeriness; while everyone loves a good optimist, universities should make sure they are hiring students who seem upbeat but genuine. Though administrators may not want to judge a book by its cover, prospective students will have no such scruples. By the end of a tour, they may not remember the guide's major, but they will certainly be taking notes on personality and “vibe.”

5. Save the cheese for the dining halls

Almost every prospective student goes on more than one college tour. They've heard the corny jokes, and they're familiar with the gush, “our library looks just like Harry Potter's!” Believe it or not, my university actually feeds us some of these awful jokes in the Tour Guiding Bible. We don't know what programs we are supposed to emphasize, but we do know the exact moment we're supposed to tell that kicker about the freshman and the weather.

6. Tailor the tour

Although there are certain facts that will interest any prospective student (free pancakes during finals week?!?), it is important to ask each group about their academic and social interests. Students want to learn what a college has to offer them, not just

what it can offer everyone they know. A good tour guide training program should include contingency plans—if you have dancers in your group, talk about the dance studios; if you have lots of undecided majors, talk about the ease of transferring between disciplines; if you have helicopter parents, spend a little extra time talking about health services.

7. Tell stories

What were your freshman classes like? How did you get along with your roommate? Did you have a blast playing intramural dodgeball? These are questions that prospective students want answered—everyone in their right mind is a little nervous about entering the college world, and hearing amusing/informative/helpful anecdotes makes a school seem both more approachable and more exciting. There should be room built into the structure of a tour for sharing experiences that are directly topical.

8. ... but don't narrate novels

One of my fellow tour guides wraps up every tour with a ten-minute-long fable. I walk by him and observe countless glazed visages. Another tour guide describes studying abroad like she is a travel agent. Keeping the stories fact-filled and fun-filled doesn't mean keeping them lengthy. Especially after a full info session and a long walk, students and their parents may be more interested in finding the nearest restaurant than hearing a Tolstoyan rant. Thus, universities must teach their guides how to get the institution's message across clearly and succinctly.

9. Prompt questions

The best tours are the ones where we have active participants. An occasional parent or student will pose questions of their own accord, but most families need some encouragement. I've found better luck asking, "What else can I tell you about freshman dorm living?" or "What types of philanthropies do you want to stay involved in?" rather than prompting, "Any questions?" Universities should let their guides know what questions we ought to elicit from our groups—for example, whether we want to focus on how athletically involved the campus is, or how unique the courses are, or how accessible are our professors.

10. Be honest

A shocking number of my fellow guides will claim that the library is a lovely haunt, and that it is such fun to write 20-page papers. However, no tour will believe that finals week is actually the best 7 days of our lives. Instead, guides should emphasize why it's survivable and how our beloved university makes it worth periodic pain.

The two keys to a great tour may seem contradictory: make it personal, and keep it regulated. In fact, these assets should not be mutually exclusive. Universities should train their guides to know the facts and also alert them of the main talking points.

Within a regulated format, individuals should be given the chance to share their college experience in a genuine way to really connect with visitors.

Most college kids hired for tour guiding positions are reasonably charismatic; they likely understand what stories will amuse and inform. But are we telling stories that complement our institution's brand? Tour guides should bring their personality and genuineness to the table, but not at the expense of preparation. Personal stories and experiences should be preselected, so that the allegories directly relate to an important topic. A story about bonding with a roommate during a power outage may illustrate friendliness, but may also worry parents about the quality of on-campus living. A story about getting an extension on a paper may illustrate the flexibility of faculty, but may also contradict the theme of rigorous academics.

Though institutions of higher learning spend unquantifiable amounts of time and energy determining what makes them stand out in the marketplace, a student may not know just what makes their school exceptional. Perhaps the administration would like to stress the value of cooperative education rather than a standard study-abroad program. Maybe the low student-faculty ratio is more enticing than the advising system. Unique assets should be explicitly emphasized to tour guides. Though a well-rounded tour is desirable, there should be a focus to the general information. And we need our universities to tell us just what that focus should be.

So what should an institution do to adequately prepare its tour guides? Hire approachable students who fit the image of the school. Teach us about our university's brand. Crash a few tours—have staff members pose as parents to check in and make sure every tour is consistent with this brand. Give us supplementary, interactive materials to complement our long walk and add credence to our words. And most importantly, discuss with us about how history and our own experiences unite to relay the institution's message. We live our own stories, but we need some help knowing when and how to tell them.