

Media

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Bryant and Benton.”

The Arkadelphia campus has ads airing before movies at theaters in Little Rock, Benton and Conway. They feature current and former Henderson State students and quick school-spirited text blurbs.

“Hopefully students in that area will recognize the faces and say, ‘Gee, if she’s going to Henderson, maybe I should,’” Dunn said.

The school will launch another TV campaign in the spring when high school seniors are likely to finalize college plans.

And application rates at Henderson State are up, compared to this time last admission season.

In mid-December, the school had fielded 200 more applications than that week in 2002. That’s a big difference for a mid-sized campus of just more than 3,500 students.

A similar campaign helped enrollment surge at the University of Central Arkansas in Conway.

The number of students there jumped by more than 11 percent last fall to about 9,500. The increase followed an intensive spring campaign and brought in the largest freshman class in the school’s history.

“[Advertising] wasn’t the only factor, but it was a major contributor,” said UCA President Lu Hardin.

“The increase in the number of students not only helped us offset the cost of the campaign, but provided revenue above marketing costs.”

Hardin tapped a high-profile figure for the ads: Chicago Bulls player and UCA alum Scottie Pippen.

The ad was produced last year at the Bulls’ practice facility in suburban Chicago around Thanksgiving. Pippen volunteered an hour-and-a-half to the piece, which includes Hardin. It initially aired for 60 days but continues during local sports programming.

“The Scottie Pippen ad had extraordinary results,” Hardin said. “I’ve received more positive comments on this ad than on any previous spots we ran.”

The athlete’s presence draws eyes to the university and sets up potential students to notice other ads that may tout the school’s rising academic programs or lush campus.

To Sonya London, a junior at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, college advertising campaigns make sense, as long as they adequately reflect the school.

“The ads I’ve seen for UALR have a wide range of students, I guess to show our diversity,” she said. “I’m not sure what kind of difference they make to us, though. Probably word of mouth and recruiters who actually go to schools with truthful information are more influential.”

Navigating schools’ messages can be tricky for students. They still need to study what each school offers, visit campuses and soak in atmospheres, said Susan Rogers, a spokesman for the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville.

“Awareness of higher education opportunities never hurts,” she said. “Every institution isn’t right for every student, and when you get past the first step of being aware that there are opportunities, the very important second step is figuring out what’s right for you.”

The dilemma of attracting and retaining students is not new to colleges.

Some schools have used small campaigns in the past, but many failed to understand until recently how effective advertising can be.

“Universities teach marketing, but they haven’t done it very well themselves because they’re institutions and they have state support,” said Ben Combs, president of Combs & Company, the Little Rock firm that handles UCA’s advertising.

The nation’s largest private colleges are “highly marketed, heavily marketed and successfully marketed,” he said.

For years an essential part of their operation has been producing literature that attracts donors.

“Public universities are now waking up to the competitive environment,” Combs said. “The hopeful result of that competition is that we, as a nation, will have an increasing number of people who turn to and complete higher education — the backbone of the future of this country.”

Though administrators have a vested interest in growing their own universities, they say promoting higher education as a whole makes advertising even more productive.

“There’s a surprisingly low level of knowledge about higher education institutions among

the state’s population,” said Joel Anderson, chancellor at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. “Mass media is perhaps the most effective vehicle for getting the message out and serving the larger state goal of increasing the college-going rate.”

At UALR — the state’s second largest university — advertising can target not only potential students but those already enrolled.

The commuter school struggles with campus dialogue because most students are there for only an hour or two at a time. Without the informal communication networks of large dorms and cafeterias — where many schools have bulletin boards or closed-access TV channels — UALR must reach its students through other means.

“Marketing can let them know about special programs and scholarships,” Anderson said.

“The message in one [ad] was aimed at communicating to prospective students that financial aid is available, which is important because in Arkansas money is a barrier to higher education.”

Funding can also be an issue in orchestrating marketing.

Campaigns are costly, so schools sometimes use outside donations to pay for them.

Henderson State used a gift of about \$250,000 to start moving on basic details of its package — worth \$300,000 over more than two years. The school’s budget now includes between \$30,000 and \$40,000 for advertising, and additional fundraising is helping, President Dunn said.

“I wish I had deep pockets,” he said. “I could fund it a lot quicker.”

The initial UCA campaign cost less than \$250,000, according to Hardin.

It was paid for by money that came back to the school after it cut a study abroad program in the Netherlands. That program was attracting fewer than 10 students and costing UCA in the long-run.

Arkansas State University in Jonesboro plans to spend about \$131,000 on a campaign this year, said Markham Howe, director of university relations.

ASU plans to start the year with modest advertising, though.

“For us, it’s a good business move because we’ve been able to grow without it,” Howe said.