

## ***Journal of Issues in*** ***Intercollegiate Athletics***

### **Brands Win Championships: The Secret to Winning a National Title in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

By Jeremy Darlow. Published 2015 by Jack and June Publishing, Portland OR. (181 pages).

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*Brands Win Championships: The Secret to Winning a National Title in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* begins with the premise “brands win championships—and I’m going to show you how” (p. 7). Jeremy Darlow was the head of brand and digital marketing for football and basketball at adidas at the time of publication. Seemingly patterned after Seth Godin’s (2005) *All Marketers Are Liars*—a tremendous book that provides valuable insights into the importance of utilizing well-crafted stories to sell products and services—Darlow’s book is a lesser collegiate sport-specific version of Godin’s work from a decade before. Indeed, the first two chapters of Darlow’s publication build to a third and final chapter titled “Telling Your Story” (p. 73).

After a brief introduction, the buildup to the climactic third chapter begins with a first chapter titled “Managing Your Perspective” (p. 9). An important part of this section is a model dubbed the Athletic Program Life Cycle. This model includes four components--recruiting, winning, money, and perception—which form a continuous loop. The importance of hiring the most qualified people and forming a unified organization is excluded from Darlow’s championship formula.

Readers are instructed to place their intercollegiate athletics program on a continuum called the Athletic Program Perception Scale that characterizes programs as local, regional, or national. Darlow suggests “local” (p. 26) programs—he includes Akron and Ohio as examples with Washington State as a fringe local/regional program—should focus on grassroots marketing. He declares these programs should utilize social media and “wild postings” (p. 26) by brand ambassadors and street teams to build their brands. Only regional and national programs, according to Darlow, should utilize traditional media methods including TV, radio, newspaper and print advertising, and direct mail pieces. Darlow recommends that “regional” (p. 26) programs—he includes Texas Christian and Washington—may utilize “some” (p. 26) traditional media. “National” programs—he includes Auburn, Texas, and Alabama—are eligible to utilize all traditional media formats. The critical need to avoid telling lies in your messaging is emphasized. As an indicator Darlow is serious about the viability of these methods, he assigns homework at the end of each chapter and leaves space for the reader to take notes.

Chapter 2 is titled “Writing Your Story” (p. 37). One of the suggestions Darlow makes in this chapter is that athletic departments need a brand manager. This person would work to ensure everyone on campus is telling the same brand story. The message is supposed to be simple and flexible—able to be applied to fans young and old.

Chapter 3 focuses on telling the intercollegiate athletics program’s story. Darlow provides a formula stating consistency plus frequency equal success. He then emphasizes the point that the repeated message and its content are critical. Darlow specifically warns against the use of ad agencies that may, in addition to providing look and feel enhancements, tinker with brand messaging in ways that damage the story. Darlow also emphasizes the effectiveness of newspaper and radio advertising—points that may be overlooked by young marketing professionals. One of the most important topics covered in the book is the concept of media trades. Media trades occur when an intercollegiate athletic department swaps some of its (ideally unsold or unused) inventory in exchange for newspaper, radio, television, internet, or other advertising space. Darlow correctly notes this potentially invaluable technique is underutilized in the intercollegiate athletics industry.

Chapter 3 devolves into a laundry list of marketing possibilities and observations. This seemingly boundless potpourri of ideas quickly threatens to leave novice marketing professionals with thick, beautiful marketing plans that remain unexecuted as the young brand manager tries to decide what to tackle first. A very important section titled “Quality Over Quantity” gets lost among the myriad of directions and ideas made available to the prospective brand manager—the presence of homework at the chapter’s end again reminding us this book seems intended for those new to the branding game.

The book is easy to read. However, it suffers from over-simplistic, incomplete, and superfluous information. The book is over-simplistic in that it recommends Ohio, Akron, and other “local” (p. 26) programs should simply use social media and posters to tell their brand story as they do not qualify for so much as “some” (p. 26) traditional media use. Given the fact the book purports to teach us how to build winning brands: “brands win championships—and I’m going to show you how” (p. 7), this is dangerous. Any Mid-American Conference athletic director who realized their freshly minted brand manager was forgoing TV, radio, and print ads in favor of “wild postings” (p. 26) would need to have a serious talk with the new hire. Similarly, a marketing manager at Washington State, Texas Christian, or Washington that doesn’t use all traditional media tactics is underperforming. On another over-simplistic note, the author declared Oregon was going to win more games than anyone in the decade (presumably beginning in 2014 when the book was published). Oregon finished last in the Pac-12 North in 2016—a division topped by “regional” (p. 26) Washington and Washington State. Finally, the book oversimplifies a brand manager’s ability to cut through the politics found on many campuses in order to unify an athletic director, a powerful coach, an external management staff, and others behind a message the brand manager deems appropriate. The author properly noted the importance of not telling lies in the story. Therefore, if a coach goes rogue and creates a “Believe” campaign for the team when it is coming off a poor season and poor results are anticipated in the upcoming season, then the young brand manager is in a pickle—having to choose between misrepresenting the season’s potential, or creating a separate message that has better public potential. Alternatively, it is entirely possible in a university setting that a superior will provide the intercollegiate athletics brand manager with the theme and they will simply have to make best effort to make it work. These are not uncommon realities in intercollegiate athletics. Politically

charged possibilities such as these are not conveyed in the book. Instead, the reader is left with an idyllic understanding of the branding process.

The book is incomplete because it fails to recognize and emphasize the critical role that people play in building a brand. The athletic director's hiring decisions have an incredibly powerful impact on anything a brand manager might hope to accomplish—impacting the quality of the coaches, management team, event staff, videographers, ticket sellers, sports information personnel, development staff, and more. While poster distribution is emphasized, the distribution of schedule cards and ticket brochures is overlooked. Given the lengths Darlow goes to in order to convey all possible ideas to the young brand manager in Chapter 3, these omissions are inexcusable. Schedule cards are both very inexpensive and particularly portable—easily kept in a wallet or purse so consumers can carry the brand anywhere they go. While Darlow repeatedly mentions the impact creative jerseys have on recruits, he curiously fails to mention the impact shoe brands have on potential student-athletes. According to Sato (2015), football players prefer Nike shoes—which could certainly impact recruiting every bit as much as a jersey given the value young adults place on shoes. Since recruiting comprises one-fourth of Darlow's Athletic Program Life Cycle, this is an important omission.

However, the most important concern may be the fact Chapter 3 doesn't distinguish between core branding principles and those that support or enhance the core. Many intercollegiate athletic programs are underperforming in terms of branding—which is likely what drove Darlow to write the book. Darlow recommends these departments hire true brand managers for this reason. However, this new brand manager needs to understand which tasks are critical and which tasks are less important. Darlow shares a fairly thorough assortment of ideas for the young brand manager to consider, but prioritizing these ideas would have made these options more valuable. *Brands Win Championships: The Secret to Winning a National Title in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* includes a nice synopsis of many of the options available to intercollegiate athletics branding professionals as they work to tell their program's story, but another layer of refinement would have made the book an even more meaningful resource.

### Reference

Sato, K. (2015, Jan. 27). New data reveals Nike's dominance among football recruits. *Huffington Post*. Retrieved from: [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/kai-sato/new-data-reveals-nikes-do\\_b\\_6551198.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/kai-sato/new-data-reveals-nikes-do_b_6551198.html)