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What we heard
USA is a much different university today than it was when it was founded. But old perceptions are still stuck in the minds of alumni, prospective students, and the Mobile community. The conversation needs to shift away from the past, and focus instead on USA’s authentic story today.
“Traditionally we’ve been a big commuter school. That perception is changing, even though commuters still make up 50% of the student body.”

“We’re seen as second choice, both as an institution and a health care provider. We’ve got a poor image, but a great product.”

“Ologie’s work should reflect the present and hint at the future. Our past is still stuck in people’s minds.”

“We are perceived as a community college for hitting the value message too hard in the past.”

“We’re not usually selling to the local students. They’ve been here, seen campus, and they’re biased against us.”

“Not only do I spend time convincing people that we’re a different South Alabama university, but also that we’re a different Alabama.”

“Overall, we’d like to be known for our programs, rather than just being a convenient or inexpensive option.”
The USA community has been working hard to advance the institution: improving facilities, building its research offer, expanding the student experience, and improving the health of people across the Gulf Coast. The problem? Few people off campus know about it. It’s high time for a confident, proud story that shows off the university’s strengths and connects with its audiences.
“There’s been an incredible evolution over the past ten years. People from this community feel very positive about South.”

“Athletics has been a rallying point, marking our shift to a residential experience.”

“Over the past few years, the campus has totally changed. We have a product here that a lot of students find attractive.”

“A lot of us would like to value creativity. That means a new, innovative way to put ourselves out there.”

“We all feel like this is the time and the window is open for the university to move to the next level of achievement.”

“Now that we can show our traditions and pride, we can be competitive. We can say, ‘Choose us first.’”

“We want to be the first choice for students, but also for health care. We need to make that message clearer.”

“South has allowed other people to tell its story—now we’re taking ownership of our identity.”
USA’s academic strengths go beyond single programs, to the comprehensive range of its education and the fresh, creative approaches that its faculty bring. There’s also research, which has a growing impact on the health and economic vitality of the Gulf Coast and its residents. By properly articulating these offers and their benefits, we can elevate their role in the USA story.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“The faculty are responsible for research, publishing, and presenting. The benefits of this work translate to their teaching.”</th>
<th>“We offer a high-quality, comprehensive education that rivals that of the leaders in our state.”</th>
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<tr>
<td>“We want to be known as one of the best urban, regional institutions that improves education outcomes for all students.”</td>
<td>“In the future, we’ll be at the forefront of developing new knowledge as a top-notch research institution. We’re already headed down that path.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Academics is the biggest misperception. The quality of what you receive in Mobile is the best.”</td>
<td>“If we can highlight the research initiatives going on, that’s going to increase the academic rigor, attract renowned faculty, and elevate our health care offer.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“There’s a nice balance of teaching and research. We haven’t been known for it, but the faculty have been toiling away.”</td>
<td>“We have never shown the benefits of academic medicine to the community.”</td>
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FINDING Nº 04

A PLACE TO LEAVE YOUR MARK

Many universities tout their centuries of history and tradition. But one of USA’s most unique traits is its youth, which truly excites and inspires the students, faculty, and staff. They can shape traditions, create new teaching methods, and experiment without hearing, “But we’ve always done it this way.” This idea has the potential to be a major differentiator.
“We don’t have established traditions yet, but we’re creating them every day.”

“As a student, you can impact and influence your environment—classroom, organizations, traditions.”

“Our best-fit students don’t want the norm for education. They want to create their own experiences.”

“Here we embrace doing things differently, and we work hard at that. It’s an exciting atmosphere.”

“It’s small enough that you can make an impact and there are opportunities to keep going.”

“We have a risk-taking, entrepreneurial attitude. Here you choose your own path.”

“Students want to be part of the ‘up-and-comer’ energy.”

“At my previous institution, you couldn’t build new things, and building new things is a lot more fun. Here, you can work with people to get things done.”
IN A WORD: OPPORTUNITY

Whether it’s access for first-generation students, applied learning experiences, or waking students up to new possibilities, opportunity is part of the culture at USA. However, the focus is what happens on campus—there’s little talk of outcomes. And “opportunity” is a popular word in higher education—how can the university talk about this idea in an ownable way?
“We’re really trying to give opportunity on a broader basis and scale. You’ll be prepared for life in a variety of pursuits.”

“We don’t focus enough on outcomes, and how a student’s four years here shapes who they are when they leave.”

“We’re not as aggressive as other institutions that may be producing go-getters. We don’t teach competition well.”

“The best student won’t come to us. We need to prepare them to be the best. If we don’t change them, then what’s the value of the degree?”

“Mobile and South make students feel very welcome. Graduates’ attitudes are very positive.”

“We want students to come here and have a transformational experience, but that also applies to health care. We are facilitators of transformation.”

“You can come here and solve problems that improve the quality of life. We’re unique in that way.”

“Engineering and health students know what they want to do. Success is broadening their perspectives and opening them up to new possibilities.”
This branding effort offers the chance to bring everyone, from all areas of the university, together with a shared story. Historically, work and storytelling have happened in silos, and there’s a discernable schism between the health system and the university campus. All entities make the others stronger, and by connecting the dots for both internal and external audiences, the story will be much more powerful.
“In the past it’s been all about individualism. We worked in silos with no collaboration across the university. It’s getting better.”

“Our stories haven’t always been told among us. But there’s a desire to work with each other.”

“Show how a baby being born [at Children’s & Women’s] all comes back to this institution and its academic mission.”

“We are one of the premier health providers. I don’t think people realize that it’s all connected.”

With UAB it’s one thought: university and health system. We need a way to express ourselves as one complete and whole university.”

“We are phasing out of ‘South’ in athletics. We are national and want to be known as ‘South Alabama.’”
One thing that everyone can agree on is the immeasurable impact that USA has on individuals, the Mobile community, and the greater Gulf Coast region. This is where huge opportunities for storytelling lie—it’s time to go beyond lists of facts and to emphasize the people and the work that are making a difference (and making history) every day.
“Our impact on the community and the greater region through the health system makes me so proud.”

“We’re focused on practical innovation that leads to economic development.”

“We don’t beat our drum loud enough. Our importance to the Gulf Coast is a major component of our brand.”

“Many nurses, med techs, physicians, and allied health professionals went through South. The impact is hard to measure.”

“I’d like to see us be more of a member of the south Alabama community, not just an institution in Mobile.”

“Without us, south Alabama would lag behind the rest of the state. And our health care impact is huge!”

“For a young university to be so involved in international manufacturing—we’re a catalyst. There’s great potential for growth and partnerships.”

“We have a $2.5 billion economic impact on the region. We provide a skilled workforce, create new companies, and solve important problems.”
How USA’s competitors are positioning themselves

We looked at USA’s competitors to learn what they’re saying and how they’re positioning themselves. This review gives us a sense of what others are doing and what key audiences are seeing.

For this review, we looked at:
- current communication materials
- websites

We assessed the overall packaging of the stories and positionings, including visual and verbal style, information, and key messages.
BIG IDEA:
Auburn is one of the largest universities in the South, remaining at the educational forefront with our emphasis on a blend of arts and applied sciences.

TAGLINE: This is Auburn.

KEY MESSAGES:
- Family-like atmosphere
- Land, sea, and space grant university with a spirited, rich sense of tradition
- Comprehensive academic offer with deep breadth and depth of degree options
- Research, extension, and outreach are central to the mission

TONE:
- Approachable
- Proud
- Traditional
- Practical

NOTES: The overall look and feel seem outdated and don’t tell much of a story, but sub-branding efforts, like admissions, show off Auburn’s spirit.
BIG IDEA:
The University of Alabama is a student-centered research university and an academic community united in its commitment to enhancing the quality of life for all Alabamians.

TAGLINE: The Capstone of Higher Education

KEY MESSAGES:
• UA offers a well-rounded and affordable college experience
• Students are the first priority
• Research efforts make a difference in people’s lives

TONE:
• Straightforward
• Inclusive

NOTES: The language is very attribute-driven, and messaging doesn’t have a clear focus.
BIG IDEA:
UAB is a premier doctoral research university and academic medical center.

TAGLINE: Knowledge that will change your world

KEY MESSAGES:
• Pursues the frontiers of education, research and health care
• One of the nation’s largest and most reputable hospitals
• Offers opportunities for achievement across disciplines
• Has helped shape, and is shaped by, the city of Birmingham

TONES:
• Determined
• Casual, where appropriate
• Committed

NOTES: Relies heavily on the health offer, though the admissions section tries too hard to make UAB sound like it’s good at everything.
BIG IDEA: Mississippi’s flagship research university.

TAGLINE: We ring true

KEY MESSAGES:
• Provides the academic, leadership, and social opportunities to help each person excel
• Proud of unique Bulldog spirit and traditions
• Dedicated to learning, research, and service as a land-grant institution

TONE:
• Driven
• Passionate
• Proud

NOTES: Ties the research story as much as possible to both student experience and outcomes, but also tries to demonstrate excellence across all aspects of the university.
BIG IDEA:
Serves a broad range of students on four campuses in Alabama, online and around the world.

TAGLINE: None

KEY MESSAGES:
- Provides flexibility through online, classroom, and hybrid learning opportunities
- Caters to a diverse audience including traditional undergraduates, military, and working adults
- Offers the traditional college experience, including Division I athletics and a beautiful, residential campus

TONE:
- Proud
- Personal
- Supportive

NOTES: Troy feels like a place for the everyday, working adult who needs a convenient but solid education.
BIG IDEA:
A leading, comprehensive doctoral and research institution in the Gulf South.

TAGLINE: None

KEY MESSAGES:
• The premier research university of the Gulf South and a proven leader in innovation
• Comprehensive academics with over 20 teaching or education degrees, staying true to our roots as a teacher-training school
• A haven for the arts
• Proven success in academics and athletics

TONE:
• Encouraging (for prospective students)
• Ambitious
• Informative

NOTES: Though the Southern Miss site is filled with content, it’s difficult to grasp what the student experience is like there. Too many links and external sites detract from a good user experience.
Research

University of Southern Mississippi Research

The University of Southern Mississippi continues to meet head-on the intellectual and human issues of the day. The challenges are formidable, and university professors and students are tackling the issues through relevant research that translates into real-world applications and learning opportunities.

At The University of Southern Mississippi, researchers are creating new knowledge that directly impacts society by:

- Monitoring the health of the ecosystems of the Gulf of Mexico and impacts of the BP oil spill
- Offering solutions for the safety and security for sports stadiums and arenas that have been identified as potential targets of terrorism
- Developing strategies for management, conservation and repopulation of marine species commonly used as food resources throughout the world
- Implementing educational programs designed to deal with nutrition, obesity, diabetes and autism in Mississippi
- Creating in our polymer science program new polymer materials used in everyday products such as cosmetics, ship building and sports equipment
- Gathering statistical data to improve weather forecasting models in the Gulf of Mexico
- Refining devices to detect airborne pathogens used by first responders
- Forensic technology designed to rehydrate degraded fingerprints
- Developing an airborne laser instrument for mapping coastal areas

Bolstered by $80 million in external funding during the 2009-10 fiscal year, support for USM research has increased substantially during the past decade and annually sustains a variety of robust research projects.

From the humanities to the sciences, faculty members are awarded highly competitive funding from prestigious federal agencies including the National Science Foundation, National Institutes of Health, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, the Department of Homeland Security and the National Endowment for the Arts.

As a comprehensive Carnegie research university, USM is committed to creating a culture that nurtures and supports a rich and innovative environment where students and faculty are making a difference in the world around them.

If you’re CREATIVE and INNOVATIVE, begin your journey here.

Southern Miss offers prestigious programs, study abroad, nationally recognized research, and support to help you succeed.

Our Honors College is the #1 ranked in the United States. Many core classes are available under an honors designation, providing an academic challenge and a smaller and more ideas-rich learning environment.

ABOUT ACADEMICS
- More than 90 undergraduate academic majors and 80+ graduate programs
- Undergraduate student/faculty ratio of 13:1
- Nationally recognized programs in the arts, music, science, business and history
- Top programs in Mississippi for nursing, education and accounting
- Study-abroad opportunities in more than 20 countries
- Support offices for freshmen like the First-Year Initiatives, Writing Center and Speaking Center
BIG IDEA:
An enterprising urban research university.

TAGLINE: None

KEY MESSAGES:
• A campus for the adventurous, resourceful and driven
• A national leader in graduating students from widely diverse backgrounds
• Provides students with connections to Atlanta’s business, government, nonprofit, and cultural organizations
• Plays a major role in the economic and cultural vitality of Atlanta

TONE:
• Motivating
• Action-oriented
• Smart

NOTES: The admissions sub-brand feels especially ambitious, using “un-” words (like “unrelenting” and “unforgettable”) to demonstrate strength and quality.
BIG IDEA: A research university with a personal feel.

TAGLINE: Idea Fusion

KEY MESSAGES:
- We value your individuality and provide opportunities for you to use your unique talents and skills
- Committed to providing productive, research-driven solutions
- We are innovators inside and outside of the classroom, preparing students to succeed anywhere

TONE:
- Relatable
- Optimistic
- Dedicated

NOTES: The website speaks in the second person, directly addressing the visitor, which gives it a personal feel. However, the site is cluttered, with little hierarchy for messaging.
Peer Insights
“Near” Aspirational Peers

BIG IDEA:
North Carolina’s urban research university.

TAGLINE: None

KEY MESSAGES:
• Academic programs that are responsive to the needs of the region and beyond
• Students gain the intellectual and professional skills that will prepare them for productive lives in a global, knowledge-based environment
• Spirit of collaboration is a university hallmark, and it extends beyond campus into the region

TONE:
• Engaged
• Welcoming
• Approachable

NOTES: The university conveys its deep connection the city of Charlotte through its programs and community engagement efforts.
STAKE YOUR CLAIM.
TAKE YOUR PLACE AMONG 49ERS.

49ERS AREN'T YOUR AVERAGE STUDENTS. WHO WANTS TO BE AVERAGE? AVERAGE IS BORING. WE'RE NOT LOOKING FOR AVERAGE, AND WE KNOW YOU AREN'T EITHER. 49ERS ARE DRIVEN. THEY'RE SMART. THEY ARE CONSTANTLY ASKING QUESTIONS AND THEY AREN'T AFRAID TO TAKE RISKS. THEY KNOW WHEN TO HAVE FUN AND WHEN TO BUCKLE DOWN. INTERESTED?

Great. Get started by creating a Future 49er Account, visiting campus, and Like us on Facebook for Future 49ers.

Life at UNC Charlotte is full of possibilities. We are a respected academic institution made up of seven colleges offering 80 programs leading to Bachelor's degrees, Master's degrees, and
We noticed that these competitors are all talking in similar ways about the same things. There’s an opportunity for USA to stand out by talking about these themes, if they’re relevant, in a unique way:

- Applied research
- Comprehensive academics
- Well-rounded experience
- Spirit and tradition
- Personal feel
- Shaping the region
Applied research

“At Old Dominion University, our philosophy is simple: Knowledge should be productive. We are committed to providing research-driven solutions.”

“At The University of Alabama, we’re working to make sure our research efforts continue to make a hands-on difference in the lives of the people we serve.”

“A proven leader in innovation, Southern Miss is generating real-world solutions through transformative research.”

Comprehensive academics

“UA offers bachelor’s, master’s and doctoral degrees in more than 200 fields of study.”

“If you’re looking for a top-notch science education in the classroom, lab, and clinic, you should definitely look at UAB. Then again, if you prefer business, the arts or humanities, you should also look at UAB.”

“MSU is preparing its students for bright, productive futures.”
Well-rounded experience

“The University of Alabama offers a complete educational, cultural and social experience. You might enjoy attending Crimson Tide sporting events, engaging with the arts, or volunteering for community service projects. Maybe you’ll want to do all of the above, or something completely different. With more than 450 student organizations and an environment that encourages student involvement, you’ll find plenty to do during your time at UA.”

Spirit and tradition

“We’re changing with the needs of today while living with a respect for the traditions and spirit that are Auburn.”

“We hope you’ll find an inner strength and appreciation of your ability to make a difference. It’s called the Warrior Spirit, and it’s alive and well at Troy.”

“We are extremely proud of our traditions, old and new.” (Mississippi State)
Personal feel

“At Old Dominion University, studies are designed to help you bring your talents, your ideas and your goals to life.”

“Georgia State has a university-wide commitment to student advising with a keen focus on students’ progress to graduation.”

“Troy University provides students with the ultimate in flexibility.”

“We help each person excel. Your success is our success.” (Mississippi State)

Shaping the region

“Georgia State plays a major role in advancing the socioeconomic and cultural climate, education, health care services and other resources available throughout the city.”

“We are committed to using knowledge to establish Alabama as a progressive economic center.” (UAB)

“ODU contributes nearly $2 billion annually to the regional economy.”
How USA is communicating today

We conducted an in-depth review of USA’s existing materials to better understand what’s working and to identify opportunities for improvement.

For this review, we looked at:
- current print materials
- website

We focused on messaging—both what USA is saying to key audiences, and the visual and verbal language used to convey it.
1 **ALL OVER THE MAP**
Overall, the communications lack consistency. All the pieces should feel like a family, with visual and verbal elements that shift thoughtfully. Right now, they don’t work as part of a system.

2 **LESS WHAT, MORE WHY**
In general, there's too much focus on the offers, and not enough focus on the “so what?”—the graduates, the work, the impact. Materials must be clear about why audiences should care about USA.

3 **SOUTH WITH NO DIRECTION**
When “South” is used too often—as a default descriptor or as part of a cliché—it loses impact. The word is obviously an important part of the brand, but it should be used thoughtfully in communications.

4 **MAKING HEADLINES WORK HARDER**
The main language on the front of each piece is a label, describing exactly what it is. There’s no engaging headline, and no personality. Labels make for quick retrieval, but the cover should be more engaging.

5 **DOING MORE WITH LESS**
Print and web content is densely packed, without a hierarchy to aid navigation and comprehension. Too much information overwhelms the audience, especially prospective students.

6 **A WIDER PALETTE**
One thing that USA does well is owning its spirit colors: blue and red. However, there’s an opportunity to expand the palette for more flexibility, and to create more visual interest.

7 **LIMITING TYPEFACES**
Having a range of fonts as part of the brand makes sense, but they should work together and feel like a family. Communications today use way too many, and it feels haphazard.

8 **CAPTURING MOMENTS, NOT POSES**
Photos tend to look staged or like stock photography. They’re static, and smiling subjects are often facing forward. We’d love to see the images create more of a narrative, and show off the authentic experience.