



BRANDED

How a communications strategy proved vital to parking success during a long-term campus construction project.



By Mark E. Hairr



The University of Tennessee at Knoxville (UTK) recently embarked on a campus infrastructure improvements effort that resulted in an historic level of campus construction. This extensive upgrade to campus facilities is a key element in supporting the high level academic and research programs necessary to move UTK from a top 50 public research university to a top 25.

Because the university parking system is comprised of more than 16,000 parking spaces in nine garages and more than 100 surface lots, practically any construction project of significance has an effect. In addition to university-controlled parking, there are 1,000 municipal on-street metered parking spaces along campus streets that fall under the jurisdiction of the City of Knoxville. Further, the university's parking system is complemented by a comprehensive campus transit system that provides fixed-route bus and point-to-point van services seven days a week. As a result, the effects of construction projects go well beyond parking, but also to campus transit routes, bus stops, and the level and frequency of transit service.

The potential disruptive effect of this level of construction on the campus parking and transportation system was mitigated through a collaborative and unique communications strategy branded as the Conezone. This initiative provides clear, concise, and updated information that's targeted to specific audiences, including students, faculty, staff, and visitors, about how construction affects their parking and movement around campus. Construction is expected to continue at a high level over the next several years, so the Conezone initiative will continue to be the central tool used to ensure campus stakeholders are equipped with the information they need to successfully navigate campus.

Strategy Impetus

The major impetus for the development of a branded communications strategy at UTK was a \$160 million student union project. Because this is being built on

the site of the existing university center, which will continue operations throughout construction, it is necessary to build the new facility in two phases, with phase I opening in 2014 and phase II opening in 2016. The student union construction site is located at the epicenter of campus, where pedestrian and vehicular traffic volumes are highest at the university.

The student union project, combined with other major campus construction projects, resulted in the loss of more than 500 parking spaces in the center of campus. This was especially difficult to address because these spaces met a wide variety of parking needs for students, faculty, staff, daily visitors, and those attending campus special events. As a result, the university recognized the need for a special planning and communications effort to ensure that the highest levels of safety, parking convenience, and campus mobility were maintained over five years of upheaval.

The student union construction project by itself had far-reaching effects on the parking, mobility, and transportation elements of campus. For one thing, it required the closure of a parking garage that supported all visitor parking for the university center and a significant rerouting of the main student pedestrian corridor connecting residence halls, the university center, and academic buildings. Further, the project resulted in fewer available spots in a surface lot at the center of campus that supported a range of parking needs for faculty, staff, students, visitors, and special events, particularly athletics; the lot lies directly across the street from the 102,000-seat football stadium.

The high number of construction projects that will be ongoing throughout campus furthered the



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need for a special effort to ensure campus parking and mobility is maintained at the highest level possible. In total, there will be more than \$500 million worth of construction projects occurring simultaneously on the 550-acre campus during the next five years (and possibly longer). These include two new residence halls with more than 700 beds each, a new 110,000-square-foot engineering building, a 123,000-square-foot music building, development of 13 sorority houses ranging from 9,000 to 17,000 square feet each, major additions to the equine and animal hospital facilities on the agriculture campus, and major renovations to the athletics complex located at the heart of campus.

Strategizing

The UTK administration assembled a team of stakeholders more than six months in advance of the start of construction on the student union project. Representatives from a wide range of university departments, divisions, and areas included those from the university administration, academic units, communications/media relations/creative services, the police department, parking and transit services, housing, disability services, career services, finance, the dean of students/student affairs/student life, the parents association, athletics, recreation sports, and others. The planning effort was led by UTK Finance and Administration in conjunction with the office of communications, and involved regular team meetings in which a plan was formulated, updated, and put into action prior to the beginning of the student union construction project.



Armed with a commitment to develop a branded communications strategy, the UT Communications and Creative Services staff took the lead in brainstorming and developing different branding concepts. Administrators used as a model a recent branding effort employed by the Tennessee Department of Transportation (TDOT) for the state’s largest interstate construction project. TDOT used “SmartFix 40” to brand the Interstate 40 construction project, which lasted several years in the downtown area. The SmartFix 40 effort was a comprehensive approach to communicating major project information, timelines, and roadway changes on an ongoing and regular basis throughout the duration of the construction project. It was highly effective in contributing to the overall success of the project.

After a series of meetings aimed at evaluating appropriate brand identities that would be appropriate for the UTK effort, it was determined that the school’s mascot, Smokey the dog, would provide a highly identifiable and well-known branding icon to serve as the focal point for this campaign. The next step was to identify the specific elements and mechanisms to be used to communicate with the campus community.

The major means for communicating on a regular ongoing basis would be a new website hosted by the UTK Communications Office; it used the Conezone branding in both its address (conezone.utk.edu) and design. The site was developed to target relevant information to different campus audiences, including separate pages for faculty/staff, students, visitors, and persons with disabilities. The website included regular updates on major campus construction projects and specific details on how each project affected campus mobility. A key element of the website was a series of maps of specifically-delineated areas of campus that included information about the construction project and tips on the best parking, transportation, and pedestrian options available to effectively navigate around campus.

In addition to the website, the communications effort involved the installation of a number of informational signs throughout campus. They included the Conezone branding and relevant site-specific information, and are a critical complement to the overall communications effort. These signs are very distinct and stand out easily from typical street, traffic, and construction signage. Several of the signs in high-traffic pedestrian areas included quick response (QR) codes that linked directly to the Conezone website, offering instant information for pedestrians on campus.

Results

The Conezone communications strategy has been a success, minimizing headaches associated with confusion, parking, and mobility problems, and congestion typically associated with extensive construction in a dense area. The initiative hit the bull’s eye in accomplishing the original goals set out at the beginning of this process—namely, lifting the shroud of mystery and communicating pertinent information to the campus community in a highly-effective manner.

Although the UTK campus is experiencing historic levels of construction, especially in the heart of campus, the detrimental effect on the campus parking and transportation system and the number of complaints have been kept to a minimum through the initial phase of the program. The website and its regular updates ensure that information is current and is communicated to targeted audiences in a timely manner, usually well in advance of the start of work. This branded communications effort will continue to serve as a primary resource for ensuring that parking, transportation, and mobility for students, faculty, staff, and visitors are maintained at the safest and most effective level possible for years to come.



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