Journal of
Professional Communication

jpc

Sheridan@50: A creative history for a creative campus

Christine Szustaczek*, Peter Kikkert, Christian Knudsen,
Jennifer Deighton

Sheridan College, Oakville (Canada)

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Sheridan's celebration of its 50th anniversary in 2017 provided a unique opportunity for our internal community – students, alumni, staff, and faculty – to co-create and explore the rich history of the college. We partnered with Dr. Peter Kikkert, then Sheridan Professor of Public History, and Dr. Christian Knudsen, Sheridan Professor of Cultural History. The key outputs were a documentary (exploring Sheridan's history) and a travelling display of eight historical towers (documenting Sheridan's creation, development, successes, failures, capabilities, culture, and the societal forces that have shaped it). A social campaign, web landing page, three key events, and publications (both print and digital) helped engage our internal community and disseminate the findings. The initiative helped archive Sheridan's history, build awareness of its achievements and progress, demonstrate how its founding values (creativity, innovation, community, inclusivity) still guide the institution, and increase people's knowledge, pride, and sense of belonging with Sheridan.

On May 21, 1965, William G. Davis, then Minister of Education, tabled Bill 153 in the Ontario Legislature, which would allow for the creation of a new system of Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology in Ontario (Ontario Department of Education, 1967). In 1967, Ontario's first 18 colleges, including Sheridan, simultaneously came into being. In 2017, the system, now 24 colleges strong, celebrated its 50th anniversary (Colleges Ontario, 2017). The occasion gave the public relations function at Sheridan a key opportunity to build a sense of belonging and pride among its internal community. PR and communications professionals are responsible for defining and maintaining an organization's character and values and building a culture of listening and

★Corresponding author (Christine Szustaczek)
Email: christine.szustaczek@sheridancollege.ca

engagement (Global Alliance, 2017). When people understand, accept, and identify with an organization's character, it makes the organization worthy of trust and motivates people to believe in and advocate for the organization (Arthur W. Page Society, 2012).

To uncover Sheridan's key milestones and the character and values that have shaped the institution over the years, the PR team eagerly partnered with two professors of history who were interested in conducting this research effort. Over the past two decades, there has been an explosion in the number of institutional histories produced by Canadian universities (Martin Friedland [2013] at University of Toronto, Kenneth McLaughlin [1997] at University of Waterloo, Michiel Horn [2008] at York University, and H. Blair Neatby and Don McEown [2002] at Carleton University). At Sheridan, no detailed examination of the institution's past existed, leaving vital questions unexplored:

- How has the institution evolved and changed over time?
- How did it foster and grow a unique culture or academic/learning environment?
- How has the institution been shaped by societal values and forces?

The PR team engaged Sheridan's alumni office, with the two groups working together to find alumni and employees who could share memories and memorabilia for the project. The group won a $10,000 internal grant in support of scholarship, research, and creative activities at Sheridan College to seed the effort.

The team's approach was purposefully engaging, creative, and inclusive to align with Sheridan's Creative Campus Philosophy (Sheridan College, 2013) and to foster the buy-in and adoption that results from public participation (Environmental Protection Agency, 2017). The effort was rooted in public and cultural history. Public history includes the representation of history in the public arena, collective memory, and how history is expressed in various media (National Council on Public History, 2017). Cultural history aims to bring the past (including values, rituals, and ideas) to life (Yale University Department of History, 2017). Both streams apply historical studies to everyday community life in a meaningful and practical way. Both also enhance memorability. Research has shown that people have a far stronger recall of stories than statistics (63% vs. 5%) (Dykes, 2016). Communicating the history of an enterprise has the power to instill or renew a sense of community identity and purpose (Seaman & Smith, 2012). Institutional memory and collective documentation can also lead to better decision making in the future (Fullick, 2015). The team (with undergraduate student researchers Justin Santiago and

Sarah Gonyea) combed through hundreds of public and institutional records (library archives, public and student newspapers, viewbooks, yearbooks, and annual reports), crowd-sourced 150 photos and memories from the Sheridan community, and conducted 18 first person interviews with alumni, employees, past presidents, and politicians.

Stakeholder analysis

The audience for this campaign included:

- 170,000 alumni, 50% of whom graduated since 2000 and are active on social and digital media; 85% of whom live in the Greater Toronto Area and have the potential to attend local events; and 80,000 of whom subscribe to our alumni eNewsletter
- 115 retirees of Sheridan, who are registered with our Retiree Association and receive eNews updates
- 2,760 current employees, 1,350 part-time and 1,410 full-time — of which 426 (or 30.2%) have 10 or more years of service at Sheridan, and 143 (or 10.2%) have over 20 years of service, making them likely to have institutional stories and memorabilia to contribute
- 23,000 students, who represent our present and future (27% international, 45% new to Sheridan, given the high number of one and two year credentials, and average age of 23)

Goals and objectives

The goals were to co-create and archive Sheridan's history, build awareness of its achievements and progress, show how its founding values (creativity, innovation, community, inclusivity) still guide the institution today, and increase people's knowledge, pride of association, and sense of belonging. The objectives were to:

1. Engage audiences to participate, seeking to receive 100 donations of historic photos or pieces of memorabilia prior to July 1, 2017, to be analyzed by the historians and student researchers and possibly incorporated into the legacy pieces

2. Plan and deliver two high impact celebratory events, seeking record attendance of over 1,000 employees at the Welcome Back event on August 30 and 250 students/community members at our community celebration on October 2, increasing people's exposure to our key findings

3. Capture a body of knowledge that will live beyond Sheridan's 50th anniversary year celebrations: eight historical tower panels, one social documentary trailer and a full-length 30-minute film, a web page, and a special 50th anniversary edition of Sheridan's President's Report to increase exposure to key milestones and values

4. Increase employees' knowledge, pride, and sense of belonging with Sheridan, as measured by a post-event survey where key findings of the research would be shared for the first time

Solution overview

To aid in collecting the memories and memorabilia of our community, the team planned both in-person and online activities. In April, hallway parties were held at each of Sheridan's three campuses (including one attended by Chancellor Hazel McCallion) to raise awareness of the initiative, help identify potential interviewees, and spread the word that the team was seeking historic photos. Photos that were received were worked into the rotation of a weekly twitter campaign that featured a similar call to action, asking for additional photos to be shared with the hashtag #Sheridan50 or through a dedicated email collector that was established. All of the photos were uploaded to a new Sheridan@50 landing page, where they could become the start of an institutional archive.

The team further identified a strategic opportunity to unveil the outputs of the research at two additional signature celebratory events. The first was the Welcome Back Breakfast on August 30. Held the week before the fall academic term begins, it is an annual opportunity to re-invigorate Sheridan's faculty and staff, provide important institutional updates, re-connect together as a community, and make employees feel appreciated. It was determined that the historical tower panels (featuring informative textual statements, powerful quotes, and attractive, purposeful, and authentic images) would be unveiled at this marquee event. The event featured a number of surprise guest speakers to help advance the campaign's goals and objectives. The first was

comedian Steve Patterson, host of CBC Radio's The Debaters, who was asked to deliver a brief monologue on higher education prior to leading the three other surprise guests (Sheridan's past presidents) through a guided reflection on their time at Sheridan to further bring the institution's history to life. The comedian was instructed to engage our past presidents in a tongue-in-cheek trivia game based on the discoveries of the Sheridan@50 research project, to test their knowledge and share the public history research findings. A rotating series of historical photos (crowd-sourced from the internal community as part of this historical research project) were projected on multimedia cubes framing the stage throughout the event.

The second event was a community celebration on October 2 in which the public, government officials, industry partners, and all current students engaged in tours and displays (including the history tower panels), activities (photo booth), and a barbecue. The social documentary film (the second key output of the research project) received its premier screening during this event.

Communication/execution

The key messages were:

1. You are an important part of Sheridan's story. We need your help. Please share your memories and photos with us. They may become part of our 50th anniversary installation this fall.
2. The secret to successfully charting our future lies in better understanding our past.
3. We have much to celebrate. We are 50 years young and strong.
4. In 1967, we began as a small community college of 380 students, with 32 instructors and 17 programs, setting up shop in a repurposed high school building in Brampton.
5. Today, we're a flourishing, diverse community of approximately 23,000 students and 3,000 employees, operating on 3 campuses in Brampton, Mississauga, and Oakville — serving as the educational backbone of the West GTA.
6. While much has changed over the years, key aspects of our present-day identity (such as creativity, innovation, community, and inclusivity) have long been embedded in our institutional DNA.

The communication efforts included:

- Three hallway parties to spur the collection of memories and memorabilia
- Printed postcards distributed at all internal and external events promoting the collection of memorabilia
- Monthly updates to our alumni through an email newsletter
- Electronic communications (employee eNewsletter updates)
- The creation of the Sheridan50 web landing page
- A year-long twitter campaign (sharing one historic photo from each of our 50 years of operation)
- Two signature celebratory events (the Welcome Back Breakfast and the Community Day BBQ)
- The creation of flip books and a fun facts quiz based on the research findings, which were displayed and/or played on screen at our community events
- Blog stories capturing the work of the researchers
- An illustration of the key findings from our historical research, shared in our 2017 President's (annual) report

Implementation and challenges

All design, strategy, written communications, digital, and social campaigns were completed by salaried staff.

The strategy to embed Sheridan's history into pre-planned signature events for the community helped to maximize our finite budget and avoid the risk of lack of participation that can set in when too many events are undertaken in an anniversary year. The strategy to crowd-source our history by asking for donations of historic photos, memories, and memorabilia generated excitement and anticipation. It made the activity inclusive, as it gave everyone a role to play in co-creating Sheridan's historical record. These lessons were applied to Sheridan programs, such as animation, which celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2018/19.

Due to the five-week academic strike that took place at all Ontario colleges from October 16 to November 19, 2017, the team postponed three efforts related to this campaign. First, to demonstrate concern and empathy for the magnitude of the strike and its impact on our students and employees, a student and employee contest was cancelled, which was set to launch in

fall, 2017. It invited people to recreate (in today's times) the historic photos of Sheridan that were uncovered as part of this research, with plans to create a legacy exhibit featuring the before and after photos. This campaign was important because, as the stakeholder analysis shows, students are at Sheridan for a relatively short time (often two years or less, given the high percentage of certificates and diplomas vs. degrees), which meant that they might not have historical artifacts to contribute. Secondly, due to time constraints and re-allocation of priorities, the team chose to simply upload PDFs of the historical research findings (from the tower displays) to its Sheridan50 landing page, rather than embedding the content in a manner that would create an interactive and engaging user experience. Third, prior to the celebratory events on August 30 and October 2, the team had hoped to survey our employees to determine a baseline measurement of their sense of pride and belonging to Sheridan, but they chose to forgo this activity as it was becoming increasingly apparent that a sector-wide academic strike would soon materialize, which created increased levels of anxiety among our community.

Measurement and evaluation

All of our objectives were met, as shown in the table below:

Table 1: Sheridan@50 objectives and measures of success

Objective	Measure of Success
1. Receive 100+ photos, memories, memorabilia	150 photos were received by #Sheridan50 in person, via mail, and to sheridan50@sheridancollege.ca
2. Have 1,000 people attend the Welcome Back event and 250 at the Community Barbeque	1,150 employees attended the Welcome Back event; 500 attended the Community Barbeque (based on crowd estimates by security team and consumption of food)

Objective	Measure of Success
3. Capture a body of knowledge and increase exposure to findings and key messages	Eight historic tower panel displays created (shown at the Welcome Back event August 30, and have recently completed a travelling tour (2 week display at each of Sheridan's 3 campus libraries); a trailer and a full social documentary film were created, premiered at the October 2 community event, mailed to all individuals featured in the film, with the YouTube link shared with our 2,760 employees and 80,000 alumni subscribers (with an open rate of 23%); 71 twitter, 57 Facebook and 59 Instagram posts sharing Sheridan 50 facts sent by the alumni account; 240 tweets posted by Sheridan and our followers using the #Sheridan50 hashtag with a potential reach of 965,552; Sheridan50 landing page received 3,160 views with an average time of 2 minutes and 36 seconds; hard copy of the 50th anniversary President's Report mailed to 1,500 donors and friends, and a digital copy sent to our 80,000 alumni subscribers
4. Increase employees' knowledge, pride, and sense of belonging	450 completed our post-event survey: 94.54% agreed they learned something new; 76.28% agreed they're more proud to be part of the Sheridan community; 67.8% said they feel more connected to Sheridan; 93.02% noted they "very" much enjoyed the history presentation by Steve Patterson and the past presidents; 93.52% agreed that Sheridan made them feel appreciated

Conclusion

The initiative helped to archive Sheridan's history, build awareness of its achievements and progress, show how its founding values (creativity, innovation, community, inclusivity) still guide the institution today, and demonstrated people's knowledge, pride of association, and sense of belonging with Sheridan.

References

Arthur W. Page Society. (2012). *Building belief: A new model for activating corporate character and authentic advocacy*. Retrieved from https://page.org/attachments/508b442e53cd975472b3fa3f405c7c35f03cf6e5/store/ebe516e49e99af360d1e-3ecdaa7271c33477365bc62a016bf16fd96af540/Building-Belief-New-Model-for-Corp-Comms.pdf

Colleges Ontario. (2017). *Ontario Colleges at 50*. Retrieved April 1, 2017, from https://www.ontariocolleges.ca/en/colleges/amazing-50

Dykes, B. (2016, March 31). Data storytelling: The essential data science skill everyone needs. *Forbes*. Retrieved from https://www.forbes.com/sites/brent-dykes/2016/03/31/data-storytelling-the-essential-data-science-skill-everyone-needs/#7d8ae7f652ad

Environmental Protection Agency. (2017). *Public participation guide: Introduction to public participation*. Retrieved April 4, 2017, from https://www.epa.gov/international-cooperation/public-participation-guide-introduction-public-participation

Friedland, M. (2013). *The University of Toronto: A History*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.

Fullick, M. (2015, May 29). On the record: The importance of universities' organizational histories. *University Affairs*. Retrieved from https://www.university-affairs.ca/opinion/speculative-diction/on-the-record-the-importance-of-universities-organizational-histories/

Global Alliance. (2017). *The Melbourne Mandate*. Retrieved March 28, 2017, from https://melbournemandate.wordpress.com/

Horn, M. (2008). *York University: The way must be tried*. Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press.

McLaughlin, K. (1997). *Waterloo: The unconventional founding of an unconventional university*. Waterloo, ON: University of Waterloo.

National Council on Public History. (2017). *How do we define public history?* Retrieved on March 30, 2017, from http://ncph.org/what-is-public-history/about-the-field/

Neatby, H. B., & McEown, D. (2002). *Creating Carleton: The shaping of a university*. Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Ontario Department of Education. (1967, June). *Colleges of applied arts and technology: Basic Documents*. Retrieved April 1, 2017, from http://cclp.mior.ca/index.php/download_file/-/view/26.

Seaman, J. T., Jr., & Smith, G. D. (2012, December). Your company's history as a leadership tool. *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved from https://hbr.org/2012/12/your-companys-history-as-a-leadership-tool

Sheridan College. (2013). *Our brand*. Retrieved March 28, 2017, from http://our-brand.sheridancollege.ca/

Yale University Department of History. (2017). *Cultural history*. Retrieved on March 30, 2017, from https://history.yale.edu/academics/undergraduate-program/regions-and-pathways/cultural-history