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University of Toledo engineers hope to hit home run with their pitch

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You hear a sharp crack of the bat, and the crowd in the virtual stadium erupts with cheers and whistles. A faded "College of Engineering All-Stars" logo descends over the centerfield scoreboard on your computer screen. These are a few of the sights and sounds of a new marketing campaign for the University of Toledo's undergraduate engineering school. Developed around a baseball theme, the campaign sports a colorful Web site - <http://allstars.utoledo.edu> - and incorporates mail flyers and a stack of UT fact sheets which are designed to look like baseball cards and list the school's "performance highlights." There is even an actual baseball, stitching and all, that bears a UT monogram and is sent through the mail. "This is an object they may not easily throw away," said Nagi Naganathan, dean of the engineering college. "In the process, they will get to know what this college and university is all about."

College officials are aiming to attract more high quality students to the engineering school. But unlike recent billboard marketing by UT and nearby Bowling Green State University, this campaign does not directly target prospective students or their parents. Instead, the objective is to gain the engineering school a top 100 ranking in the next U.S. News and World Report magazine list of the nation's best undergraduate engineering programs. The edition hits newsstands in August.

The campaign's cards and flyers are aimed at an audience of nearly 400 deans and other senior faculty members of engineering colleges throughout the country whose votes this spring will determine the rankings.

These faculty members give schools a score of 1 through 5 based on what they perceive as the quality of their engineering programs. Unlike the magazine's broader college rankings, which critique schools using data such as acceptance rates and standardized test scores, undergraduate engineering programs are ranked solely by this peer evaluation.

Among the magazine's "Best National Universities," UT as a whole ranked in the fourth tier last year, between 189th and 248th place. Among the nation's top law schools, the UT college of law recently ended up in a six-way tie for 85th place.

The college of engineering has yet to appear in the list of top undergraduate engineering schools, although last year its graduate program was ranked 18th in the country by the Princeton Review, a test preparation company that publishes college guides.

Nevertheless, the quality of the engineering school's incoming freshmen, as measured by high school grade point average and ACT scores, has steadily increased during the past 20 years.

Last fall's incoming freshmen had ACT scores slightly below 26 and an average GPA of over 3.6, the school reported.

Because the U.S. News rankings are so widely viewed and often revered by many prospective students, making the list would greatly expand the college of engineering's visibility, Mr. Naganathan said.

"A U.S. News [ranking] is something people easily identify with," he said. "It goes beyond the boundaries of this nation. It's something globally recognized as a ranking you look at."

For years, colleges have viewed their U.S. News ranking as a tool for attracting students. But with the heavy competition among colleges today for top students, more schools have been doing marketing and "brand building" campaigns, said Donna Van De Water, a managing director and principal for Lipman Hearne, a Chicago-based consulting firm with university and nonprofit clients nationwide.

However, marketing campaigns created solely to enhance a school's U.S. News ranking are relatively rare, Ms. Van De Water said. Also, campaigns that rely heavily on more fanciful themes such as baseball are usually geared towards audiences younger than college deans.

"You tend to see that type of stuff more on the student admission side," she said.



Like every championship team, the University of Toledo's College of Engineering has a number of advertising aids that it's using in its search for the nation's top students, including posters, banners, cards, and inscribed baseballs. There are mail flyers and a stack of UT fact sheets that are designed to look like baseball cards and list the school's "performance highlights."

(THE BLADE/ERIC SUMBERG)

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Yet the surprise of finding a baseball in the mail is a reaction UT is aiming for, according to John Adams, director of university marketing.

"The goal is to get their attention," he said.

The campaign cost about \$12,500, and everything aside from the printing was done by the university's marketing department. Mr. Adams said that marketing staff settled on a baseball theme because baseball has certain design elements, like baseball cards, and lingo, such as "All-Stars" and "MVPs", which can deliver information in a creative way that is quick and easy to understand.

"I think it was treated very tastefully," Mr. Adams said of the marketing effort. "You could do it cheesy, or you could do it very tastefully - and that's what I believe we were able to accomplish."

Mr. Naganathan said he has received a handful of similar marketing packages each year from other engineering schools, including the University of Florida.

Pramod Khargonekar, dean of Florida's college of engineering, said his school sent information about its programs to other colleges using cubes of sticky notes. The idea was a reference to how Florida engineering students took first place last fall at an international engineering conference by creating an automated process for printing images on the sticky note cubes, which are made by BIC USA Inc., the manufacturer of ballpoint pens and various other products.

"We try to be very creative in what we send in the hope that they [our engineering school peers] will pay attention," Mr. Khargonekar said.

Ask what he thought of UT's marketing materials, Mr. Khargonekar was apologetic.

"I can't remember off the top of my head," he said. "But I'm sure we got it."

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