

VHHS Brand Audit
Phase 1 Research Report

Prepared For: Vestavia Hills BOE

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Introduction

When organizations undergo a strategic branding process, the purpose is to unveil and strengthen the identity of the organization amongst both internal and external audiences. The rebranding process yields a visual direction that is sustainable for years to come, but also focuses on a revival of the brand's strongest characteristics to ensure that the identity presented is an accurate representation of the brand's values. A successful brand image has a direct relationship to the strength and power of the brand with both internal and external audiences.

The process of branding involves developing a consistent brand message through which the brand identity is developed. Brands must regularly review their values and imagery to ensure that they are an appropriate representation of the organization, relevant with the audiences, and consistently implemented at every level and across every medium. Organizations that understand branding best place an emphasis on the emotional link between the brand and its various audiences. The strength of the brand corresponds directly to the strength of the relationship each audience forms to that particular brand.

The purpose of this research report is to provide a complete brand audit of Vestavia Hills High School (VHHS) to capture the pulse of the school's brand. The research process involves a review of the current brand positioning to uncover the current brand image profile and determine appropriate actions for enhancing the image.

Research Team

The research team included members of the Knight Eady staff who specialize in brand identity development and strategic marketing. The team conducted all of the data collection, synthesis and analysis of results. The research team included the following people:

- David Knight – Chief Executive Officer
- Michael Eady – Chief Marketing Officer
- Chris Nix – Chief Development Officer
- Suzanne Alvarez – Director of Marketing and Culture
- Katie Jernigan – Public Relations and Digital Media Coordinator

Introduction to Branding

Definition of Branding

A company or organization's brand is about more than just its logo. An organization's brand is characterized by the emotional connection held by the audiences the organization strives to reach. Branding, in comparison to marketing, focuses on developing long-term and strategic relationships rather than simply selling a product, service or idea. The bulk of the rebranding process

involves in-depth research to uncover what the organization does best and the sentiments of the individuals who represent or interact with the brand. These elements inspire the creative process when developing the visual elements to represent the brand.

A major part of branding is the mental association each audience and stakeholder has with the brand. Good brands develop strong, favorable associations towards the brand, which are triggered by the brand's attributes or marks. Strong, favorable brand associations lead to a strong brand image, which develops brand equity. The ultimate goal for a brand is to consume the audience and take them on a holistic brand experience. The more that brands are intertwined into the journey of a consumer, the more likely that the brand becomes a guiding factor in that consumer's actions and decisions. Strong brand associations develop social networks, strengthening bonds through shared experiences and ultimately become a part of the identity of the consumer themselves.

Branding Literature Review

- **Positioning:** Brand positioning encompasses the development of unique and specific brand associations in the minds of consumers so as to differentiate the brand from others. Brand positioning is developed by the brand having a common message, and that message guides and directs the brand's interactions with all audiences. In return, brand positioning shapes the audience's views and opinions about the brand. This is a key element in setting the brand apart from competitors.
- **Strategy:** Brand strategy is developed first by defining a company or organization's goals and should be approached as a long-term, sustainable endeavor. The lack of a strong brand foundation focusing on long-term growth and sustainability will inevitably kill the brand. Strategies should be strict enough to maintain consistency and have a clear and concise message, but flexible enough to allow for adjustments based on the changes in the market, audience or competitors.
- **Identity:** Brand identity is developed internally so that stakeholders whom make decisions that may impact the brand are working from the same understanding. The brand identity encompasses all of the characteristics and traits that embody the brand. These ideas, beliefs, values and practices are the elements through which all brand decisions are made.
- **Awareness:** A brand's awareness is measured by the scope to which a brand is acknowledged by both stakeholders and potential stakeholders and recognized by the brand's logos, messaging or products/services. Generally, brand awareness is one of the first goals for the brand's marketing, advertising and communications strategies.
- **Image:** Typically, brand image is defined as the current view consumers hold about a brand. It is directly related to the emotional value and not strictly a mental image. A brand's image should include its mission and vision and utilize visual elements such as logos, slogans, advertising, etc.

to reflect those beliefs. A brand's image is molded by the various impressions the brand makes on a consumer and the accompanying experience. Marketing, communications and advertising tactics are used to strengthen the brand image, but must be an appropriate representation of the brand's values.

- **Brand Equity:** Brand equity measures the value of the brand, which can be determined by the strengths and weaknesses linked to the brand's name and symbols. These qualities and characteristics affect the brand's ability to earn name recognition over time.

Research Objectives

Introduction to Research

The purpose of Phase One of the VHHS strategic branding project is to provide a complete audit of the brand of the high school. The research is done to uncover what qualities and characteristics embody the brand of the high school. The results will allow the research and creative teams to develop visual marks to best represent the brand. Additionally the research will interpret the perceptions of the stakeholders in the VHHS brand in order to capture the brand identity of the high school. These findings will be used as a filter for the creative process and to develop a strategic communications plan in order to share the brand message across all platforms and to all audiences.

Primary Research Objective

The primary objective of the research is to audit the brand of VHHS through data collection from the students, faculty, staff and community members. An emphasis was placed on the students of the high school, as they are the most prominent and involved stakeholders in the brand.

The goal is to determine what values these stakeholders feel make up the brand of the high school. Additionally, the research team sought to determine the key characteristics and qualities that stem from those values.

Secondary Research Objectives

In addition to obtaining a pulse of the brand of VHHS amongst its stakeholders, the research phase was also used to evaluate the brand's current visual elements. While the audit includes obtaining an understanding of the values and characteristics of the brand, it also encompasses an evaluation of every current use of the brand marks. This evaluation looks at every visual, experiential, and communication element of the brand for consistency, relevancy, clarity and reputation. The research team will use these findings to determine the best recommendations for the visual marks and to develop the branding style guide for the high school.

The research phase of the branding project was also used to measure and determine the best methods of communication in order to scale the brand message both among the stakeholders and externally. These insights will be used to develop a strategic communications and marketing plan.

Reasons for Brand Audit

The results of the audit of the VHHS brand will provide the Vestavia Hills Board of Education and the VHHS stakeholders with valuable data and sentiments, which will help yield a viable and sustainable brand strategy. The Knight Eady team has taken on the role of the auditor by spending extensive time with each audience, primarily the students of the high school in order to obtain important

information to analyze the current state of the brand and plan for the future. The research team is not attempting to re-create or re-define the brand in anyway. The team is utilizing the information collected to synthesize the best characteristics of the brand and determine the best visual marks to represent the brand.

VHHS can expect to receive the following benefits from the brand audit:

- Uncovering potential opportunity to enhance the brand image
- Insights and recommendations for the best branding elements to use to represent the brand
- An enhanced marketing and strategic communication strategy
- Knowledge of the sentiments and values of the brand's stakeholders, which make up the primary elements of the brand

Conclusion

Phase one of the VHHS rebranding project involves a complete review of the current state of the brand through primary and secondary research. The goal of this phase is for the research team to uncover the true brand identity of the high school and provide recommendations for the best visual marks and communications strategies to use moving forward. Knight Eady is performing the research as the first phase of a five-phase strategic branding initiative for VHHS.

Research Methodology

Research Strategy

The goal for the research team was to obtain a complete understanding of the VHHS brand by engaging in conversation and structured observation of each of the various audiences. The primary focus within the stakeholders was the current students in the high school, as they are the heart of the brand. With each audience, an emphasis was placed on gaining a large sample size in order to obtain an accurate representation of the group.

Data was collected through a combination of primary and secondary research. The purpose of the primary research was to gather information and a profile of the VHHS stakeholders as it relates to the current state of the brand and mindsets on the representation of the brand moving forward. The secondary research included a review of other schools at both the high school and college level that have undergone or are currently undergoing a rebrand as a result of concerns related to the school's mascot.

Primary research was conducted through surveys, focus groups and both in-person and phone interviews (Table 1).

- Surveys were used to collect quantitative data on the students, so as to obtain as much information from as large of a sample size as possible. Two surveys were distributed on the front and back end of an educational discussion on branding and marketing. All of the surveys contained open-ended questions to allow respondents to reply freely and without potential bias from pre-determined answer choices. This method was used to obtain an organic representation of the audience's opinion of the brand of the high school, and then measure their sentiments after developing a deeper understanding of branding outside of just a logo.
- Focus groups were conducted with a variety of audiences to gather data on the brand as it relates to various social networks. Focus groups were held with groups of randomly selected individuals as well as groups of like-minded participants with shared sentiments. This method allowed the research team to observe how groups of likeminded individuals analyzed the brand. Additionally, the focus groups with randomly selected participants allowed the research team to observe how individuals on various ends of the spectrum interacted in regards to the controversial mascot and overall brand of the school.
- Interviews were conducted using a general interview guide approach. This approach is used to ensure that the same general areas of information are collected from each of the interviewees. However, this method also allows for a certain degree of flexibility to further explore some of the common themes. Both telephone and in-person interviews were used to collect data. Telephone interviews enabled the research team to collect

information rapidly and from a larger sample size. In-person interviews provided a personal interaction and greater exploration of the topics.

Secondary research was conducted through both interviews and article reviews. The focus of this research was on other high schools and colleges that have conducted a rebrand to any degree and/or have removed or changed their mascot as a result of concerns related to the image. Examples of some of these schools include Ole Miss, University of Nevada Las Vegas, Westwood High School (Iowa), and Fairfax High School (Virginia). Additional secondary research examined other schools and companies that have undergone rebranding to update their marks and set standards to ensure consistency in brand usage.

Materials and Methods

Survey

Surveys provided a method of structured observation using a questionnaire as the instrument for collecting data (Appendix). Surveys were used to collect data from both students and teachers at VHHS.

For the students, survey data collection was done through several sessions of branding discussion. The respondents completed a pre-survey upon arrival. They were then led through an educational presentation on branding and what makes up a brand. They then engaged in a follow-up survey to gather information. The first branding discussions and survey distribution took place during Career Prep classes and Youth Leadership meetings. Lastly, any student who wished to participate was invited to attend an open branding discussion and survey response time. Four (4) students participated in the open forum. Students were made aware about the open forum through communication with the VHHS student body in the week leading up to the open forum. There were 1,189 total student surveys collected as a part of the educational branding seminars. The sampling method was random, as every VHHS student was invited to participate. Additionally, students could opt-out if they preferred.

Any teacher at VHHS who chose to be a part of the research process was invited to attend a branding presentation and survey session after school. The survey method for the teachers was completed identically to the student survey method. All faculty and staff were invited to attend an open staff meeting, which was dedicated to an hour-long branding presentation and data collection through survey research. Faculty and staff sampling in the survey research was considered random, as all staff were invited to attend but not required to participate.

All of the survey questions for each of the audiences were open-ended questions, and were based on determining the respondent's understanding of what makes up a brand and what attributes the respondents feel best represent the VHHS brand. Survey research fulfills the criteria of reliability and validity.

There was no incentive rewarded for participating in the branding discussions or survey research. The respondents completed the surveys themselves and anonymously, making it unlikely that they were biased or displayed an uninformed response.

Focus Group

The focus group method was used to augment the quantitative survey research and further investigate some of the common themes in the brand identity of the high school. Focus groups were conducted with the students, faculty and community members. A member of the research team served as the moderator for all of the focus groups, with an additional research team member taking notes. All of the focus groups were conducted using the same general guide to ensure consistency in the topics of discussion, but with enough flexibility to allow for specific topics to be explored deeper if warranted (Appendix).

For the students, focus groups were held with the Student Government Association (SGA) as well as a random selection of students from several of the Youth Leadership classes. To begin the discussion, students were briefly introduced to branding as more than just a logo and to focus on the experiences and memories that are triggered when consuming brand marks or messages. Students were shown other brand marks and asked to share what those marks meant to them. Students were then shown marks used by VHHS and asked to describe how those represented the brand of the school. The participants were asked several open-ended questions about what they felt the Rebel Man represented and what it means to be a VHHS Rebel. The moderator also asked participants to share what they felt were the core values of the school. Moderators were allowed to ask further questions outside of those provided on the questions guide to gain a better understanding of the brand. Lastly, students shared feedback and insights on how they would like to move forward and their own recommendations for what they would like to see as a result of the rebranding process. Over 75 students participated in focus groups, with 8-12 participants in each group.

Focus groups in the community were conducted with like-minded individuals within the same social networks. Community focus groups were held with community members of all ages. Participants fulfilled one, some or all of the following criteria: resident of Vestavia Hills, parent of a child in the school system, alumnus of the high school, or parent of an alumnus of Vestavia Hill High School. Community focus groups allowed the research team to obtain valuable feedback and sentiments from stakeholders of the high school outside of current students and faculty/staff. The moderator used the same general guide with the flexibility to deviate if warranted by the discussion.

Interviews

Interviews were used as a form of qualitative research data collection to explore the brand of VHHS deeper. One-on-one interviews allowed the research team to

develop a deeper understanding of the participant’s experiences as a part of VHHS and how those experiences create the complete brand of the school. Interviews were conducted with participants from the following audiences: faculty, staff and community members.

Within each audience, an emphasis was placed on obtaining a wide range of participants from various age groups, backgrounds, levels of participation with the school/community, feelings regarding Rebel Man, etc.

Interviews were conducted using the same general guide as the focus groups to maintain consistency with topics discussed and data accumulated (Appendix). Interviewers were allowed flexibility to deviate from the questions and opened the discussion to allow participants to provide their thoughts and opinions on any issues that they felt were pertinent for the research team to hear.

Email

All community members, students, alumni, etc. were invited to share their opinions and provide feedback through an email address, Vestavia@knighteady.com. Data collected through this method was sorted and analyzed according to the audience the sender affiliated with as determined by the research team. For research reporting purposes, data was included in the interview section of the report for each audience.

Table 1: Materials Used By Audience

Method	Students	Faculty/Staff*	Community
Survey	•	•	
Focus Group	•		•
Interview		•	•
Email	•	•	•

Table 1: The above matrix provides a breakdown of each of the data collection materials used and the audiences that the materials were used for to collect data.

*Faculty/staff group includes any respondent that serves as a teacher or leader in VHHS. This included but is not limited to any athletic coach; leader of any non-athletic extracurricular activity, school associated group or organization; teacher; etc.

Conclusion

The research team used four methods of data collection. These four methods provided a variety of both quantitative and qualitative research. Additionally, each method allowed the team to obtain an appropriate sample size from each of the audiences.

Results

Primary Research

The primary research involved several methods of data collection to obtain an understanding of the current state of the brand and the mindset of the each of the stakeholders within Vestavia Hills Hill School. Additionally, this research provided insights for the research team to provide recommendations moving forward in regards to the visual and communication aspects of the brand.

Students

Data was collected from the students through survey research and focus groups. In the survey research, a questionnaire was distributed to each participant before and after the branding discussions to obtain an understanding of the audience's connection to the former Rebel Man mark, the audience's values as they relate to the brand of the high school, and gauge each respondent's understanding of the branding process.

Pre-Survey Results

From the initial survey distributed prior to the branding presentation, it was determined that there were three primary categories of affiliation for this audience. The categories included: strong to medium connection to Rebel Man (Category 1); divided, weak or no connection to Rebel Man (Category 2); and agnostic (Category 3). Of the survey respondents, the division amongst the categories was as follows: Category 1 = 61%, Category 2 = 30%, and Category 3 = 9%. Within each of these categories, the audiences were sub-divided and analyzed for trends.

Category 1

In the strong to medium connection to Rebel Man category, two overarching themes were revealed. The majority of this audience did not have personal concerns with the Rebel Man as a representative of VHHS. They share a strong affiliation to the Rebel Man mascot as something that has always been a part of the school. This audience was then broken down into two sub-categories: students that felt the Rebel Man was the most important tradition at VHHS, and students that liked Rebel Man, but described other traditions that were more important.

Category 1A: Of the students that participated in the pre-survey and fell in Category 1, 34% of respondents felt the Rebel Man was the most important tradition at VHHS. For this subcategory, the following trends were discovered:

- **What does being a 'Rebel' mean?** Vestavia, fighting for something, going against the norm, our mascot, tradition, family, setting an example for others, resilience

- **What VHHS traditions are most important?** Rebel Man
- **What qualities do you like about Rebel Man?** everything, part of the VHHS tradition/history, represents VHHS in a good way, that parents/other family members had him as their mascot, colors, brings excitement and spirit, rowdy, appearance (mustache, cane, outfit, look)
- **What qualities do you dislike about Rebel Man?** Nothing

Category 1B: Within the respondents classified in Category 1, 66% fell in the subcategory that liked Rebel Man, but noted other traditions at the high school that were more important. This subcategory shared the following trends:

- **What does being a ‘rebel’ mean?** Rebellious, standing up for what you believe in, tradition, uniting together, Vestavia (high school and community), pride/spirit, not conforming, going against the norm, doing the right thing, mascot, family, hard working, resilient, excellence, unique, leader, star wars
- **What VHHS traditions are most important?** Football games (particularly Mountain Brook and Hoover game), the Hoover rivalry, pep-rallies, fight song and alma matter, Relay for Life, charity, striving for excellence always, Rebel Yell/class yell, chants and cheers, tailgating before Hoover game, school colors, band/halftime show, family/togetherness, other sports/extra curricular activities
- **What qualities do you like about Rebel Man?** Everything, symbol of the Vestavia school/community, tradition (in the sense that he’s always been at VHHS), tradition (southern heritage representative of the area’s history), that he brings everyone together, that parents/other family members had him, colors, strong/southern appearance, physical appearance (mustache, outfit, accessories, etc.), representative of pride and standing up for what you believe in, enthusiasm and energy he brings, different from other mascots
- **What qualities do you dislike about Rebel Man?** Nothing, the controversy

Category 2

The second category of pre-survey respondents included those who presented a divided, weak or no connection to Rebel Man. This category included respondents who expressed some degree of negativity towards the Rebel Man as a mascot for VHHS. This sub-section accounted for 30% of the pre-survey respondents. Within this category there were three subcategories, which were divided up based on the degree of negativity of the respondent’s sentiments towards Rebel Man as the mascot of the high school.

Category 2A: The first subcategory of Category 2 included those who were offended by the Rebel Man or saw him as a direct representation of racism. This subsection made up 17% of Category 2. The following trends were found in this section:

- **What does being a ‘Rebel’ mean?** Leader, confederacy, going against the norm, not following the rules, racism
- **What VHHS traditions are most important?** Pep rallies, Relay for Life, excellence in everything, none, football games
- **What qualities do you like about Rebel Man?** None
- **What qualities do you dislike about Rebel Man?** Racist, offensive, the negative reputation he gave the school

Category 2B: The second subsection of Category 2 included respondents who saw how Rebel Man may be offensive to some, but also felt that the way the character represented VHHS was not meant to be distasteful. This subcategory also did not like that the image could be controversial and negatively represent the school. This subsection accounted for 56% of Category 2 and shared the following sentiments:

- **What does being a ‘Rebel’ mean?** Standing up for your beliefs, going against what is wrong, going against the norm, standing out/non-conforming, student body (loud, rowdy, pride, spirit), racism, confederacy, VHHS, mascot, leader, tradition, strength,
- **What VHHS traditions are most important?** Theatre, things that bring VHHS family together (pep rallies, football games, etc.), charity events, chants and cheers, alma mater, excellence
- **What qualities do you like about Rebel Man?** Colors, recognizable, tradition/connection to the school, presence/energy at games and pep rallies, rebels against bad things (cancer, racism, etc.)
- **What qualities do you dislike about Rebel Man?** May seem offensive/racist to some people, interpretation as plantation owner, the misunderstanding of him as to how he represents VHHS

Category 2C: The final subsection of Category 2 included respondents who had reasons other than the controversy or did not disclose reasons for disliking the Rebel Man mascot. This category accounted for 27% of Category 2 in the pre-survey respondents. Trends among this category included:

- **What does being a ‘Rebel’ mean?** Going against the norm, VHHS, leader, standing up for what you believe in, pride, courage, going against authority, standing up against something wrong, school mascot, being different
- **What VHHS traditions are most important?** Academic excellence, pep rallies, Relay for Life, football, did not answer/I don’t know
- **What qualities do you like about Rebel Man?** Nothing, school spirited/pumps people up, wears school colors
- **What qualities do you dislike about Rebel Man?** His appearance (old, outfit, etc.), all of it, it is another school’s mascot

Category 3

The third and final category of the pre-survey respondents included students who appeared to be agnostic about the Rebel Man and/or the rebranding process. This category included 9% of the pre-survey respondents. There was a common theme in this category that the respondents did not have or did not care to share an opinion on the topics discussed in the survey. Within this category, two subcategories were revealed. Of the respondents in Category 3, 56% did not provide responses, put "I don't know," or listed random words as their answers. Additionally, 44% fell into the subcategory that still valued certain traditions of VHHS, but did not express any specific likes or dislikes as it pertains to Rebel Man and the branding images of the school. In this subsection there were a few themes in the responses of what it means to be a VHHS Rebel, and which VHHS traditions were most important. These trends were as follows:

- **What does being a 'Rebel' mean?** Going against the norm, team focus, Vestavia,
- **What VHHS traditions are most important?** Football, pep rallies, Relay for Life, school colors, Rebel Man

Post Survey Results

After the branding discussion with the students, a follow-up survey was distributed. This survey measured the students' sentiments as they pertain to the brand of the high school and what elements they felt were essential parts of the VHHS brand. Of the responses, three primary categories were determined within the audience; strong to medium connection to Rebel Man as a part of the VHHS brand (Category A), divided or no connection to Rebel Man as a part of the VHHS brand (Category B), and agnostic (Category C). Of the survey respondents, the division amongst the categories was as follows: Category A = 22%, Category B = 61%, Category C = 17%. Within each of these categories, the audiences were analyzed for trends.

Category A

For the post-survey respondents, 22% fell into Category A, meaning their survey responses referenced a strong to medium connection to Rebel Man as a distinct part of the brand of the high school. Several trends were found in the answers for this category of respondents. Of those that submitted a post-survey, Category A respondents expressed one or more of the sentiments and opinions listed below.

- **Describe the brand of VHHS:** Rebel Man, friendly, family, strong athletics, strong academics, excellence, hard working, community, dedicated, successful, classy, traditional, good, sportsmanship, red and blue (school colors), charitable
- **Characteristics/traditions that make up the VHHS brand:** Rebel Man, academics, football, tradition, pep rallies, extra curricular activities, Relay for Life, excellence in everything

- **What does it mean to be a VHHS Rebel:** Rebel Man, tradition, standing out from others, friendships and a sense of community, fighting for what you believe in, being a part of the school, excellence, growing up in Vestavia, being a part of something parents/other family members were a part of, southern, pride

Category B

Of the students that chose to participate in the post-survey questionnaire, the majority fell into Category B. This category represented students who did not mention Rebel Man on their post-survey, and thus listed other brand qualities, traditions and definitions of being a VHHS Rebel. Within this category, several trends were discovered. The majority of the respondents expressed one or several of the sentiments and opinions detailed below. There was little differentiation in the responses of this sub-section. The following trends were found in the responses:

- **Describe the brand of VHHS:** community, charitable, family, pride, tradition, strong academics, classy, driven/hard working, loyal, athletic, energetic, spirited, well-rounded, united, excellence,
- **Characteristics/traditions that make up the VHHS brand:** Relay for Life/other fundraisers, football, sports, academics, pep rallies, chants/cheers/Rebel Yell, family, extra curricular activities and organizations affiliated with VHHS, being the Rebels, excellence, spirit/spirit stick, fine arts, the people of the school, friendliness, Buddy Anderson
- **What does it mean to be a VHHS Rebel:** going against the norm, standing up for what you believe in, being a part of something bigger than oneself, one joint community, being yourself, a sense of family and togetherness, tradition, being strong and courageous, class, striving for excellence in everything, being unique, having loyalty, pride and spirit, hard working, nothing, bad/controversial,

Category C

Of the students that turned in a post-survey questionnaire, 17% fell into Category C. This category was determined to be uninterested based upon their responses to the questions being agnostic or unrelated to the topic being researched. There were no determined trends in the responses as they relate to the brand of the high school.

Focus Group Results

In the focus groups, the moderator guided the students through a discussion. These discussions uncovered the students' thoughts on what makes up the brand of VHHS, what it means to be a VHHS Rebel, gauge their opinion on the rebranding, and gather their thoughts as what they would like to see moving forward. These opinions were shared out loud in front of the students' peers and recorded through hand-written notes by the moderator.

In describing the brand of VHHS, the following words were used most frequently: community, class, family, sports, excellence, pep rallies, togetherness, Coach Buddy Anderson, Blue Ribbon academics, compassionate, charitable, friendly, tradition and something for everyone.

When shown the Rebel Man logo, the students shared the following sentiments most frequently: tradition, home, family, controversial, politically incorrect, not racist, racist, misunderstood, classic, energy, football, old.

When explored deeper, the students engaged in further discussions about what makes the community unique and what it means to them to be a rebel. The students talked mostly about the strong sense of community and togetherness they feel both in the high school and in the community at large. While the high school merges two different middle schools, the students expressed that the groups mix well. The participants talked about the environment being one that fostered friendships and that the student body is genuinely compassionate. Some of the examples the students used to describe the brand were Relay for Life, Rebel Yell, Rebel Edge, football games and pep rallies. Additionally, the students are proud of their diversity and tendency to excel at many things. Amongst the students there was a general consensus that every VHHS student had his or her place and was able to get involved in something that made them a part of something bigger than themselves.

The students were asked to describe what it means to be a VHHS Rebel. The focus group participants shared that it means holding oneself to a higher standard and being a part of the school rather than seen as individuals. The students referenced the Rebel Edge and the saying “when you play one Rebel, you play us all” regularly during focus group conversations. Ultimately, the most consistency in the groups was found in describing the high school as charitable, striving for excellence, spirited and community oriented. Many of the students described the atmosphere as family-like.

When talking about the Rebel Man specifically, many of the students expressed an indifferent attitude. However, some students did express strong opinions as to whether they supported the decision to remove him as the mascot or did not. The students were asked to share what they felt the mascot represented, which they described as traditional, a unifying factor in the school community and representative of the school’s beginnings breaking away from the old Berry High School.

Lastly, participants were invited to share their opinions on the rebranding process and any thoughts moving forward. Many students expressed that they will always be the VHHS Rebels, and that with or without a mascot it does not change who they are. The majority of the focus group participants appeared to not want a new mascot moving forward. Students referenced the past school year, saying that

the mascot was rarely missed, some felt that students were more spirited this year, and that activities like the pep rallies, band and seniors on the sidelines at football games provided spirit and energy for the students and fans. Many placed an emphasis on the idea that any new marks need to be closely related to the school and still provide the ability for the sports teams/extracurricular teams to still have their own identities. Several participants noted that the “VH” mark was the most iconic and best representation of the school now.

In an additional focus group held with the SGA on March 7, the research team explored topics outside of the original question guide to discuss direction moving forward. When asked if the group would prefer to have a mascot or not have a mascot, there was a very clear divide amongst the focus group participants.

On one side, students felt a new mascot would be met with animosity and would be ignored. The reason being, with the name of the school still being “Rebels,” a mascot without strong connections to the school would not suit. The students all stressed the strong relationship to the Rebel name. Others also emphasized liking some of the high school’s other marks, such as the “VH.”

In opposition, some students expressed an appreciation for having some sort of icon or character dressed up and running around during pep rallies and games. This subsection also felt the mascot was a big part of games for the community, especially younger kids. They talked about attending Rebel Camp and interacting with him when they were children. This group also referenced how teachers would dress up in different themes of the week for pep rallies last year, but they would prefer to have something consistent.

Overall, the group had a consensus that the mascot was not greatly missed this year. Additionally, with any change, there will be a lot of people that do not like the new branding initially, but the final product would be accepted over time.

When asked to brainstorm ideas and thoughts on a new mascot, the SGA focus group explored several ideas. The strongest ideas of the group were the “Rowdy Rebels” and/or a live animal named Rebel. Ideas for an image of the mascot included a cowboy or southern themed man that closely resembled the original Rebel Man.

Overall the students strongly emphasized the need for some sort of strong, consistent, identifying image. It needs to be something that can go on everything, from t-shirts and other apparel, to school supplies, banners, etc.

Faculty and Staff of VHHS

Data was collected from the faculty and staff of VHHS through survey research and interviews.

Survey Results

Based on the survey responses, faculty that chose to complete a pre-survey were divided into two categories and analyzed for trends. Category 4 included faculty whose survey results were categorized as a strong connection to Rebel Man and included 11% of the sample. Category 5 encompassed faculty whose survey responses categorized them as having a mild, divided or no connection to Rebel Man. This category included 89% of the sample.

Category 4

This section of faculty and staff shared the sentiment that there were no characteristics or qualities about the VHHS Rebel Man that they disliked. Generally they expressed sentiments that favored the image. Additional trends in this subsection included:

- **What does it mean to be a VHHS Rebel?** Tradition, academic excellence, community service, family
- **What VHHS traditions are most important?** A history of excellence, building a strong history/tradition, “When you play one Rebel, you play us all.”
- **What qualities do you like about Rebel Man?** Tradition, representative of and resonates with the students, unity, represented Vestavia’s excellence
- **What qualities do you dislike about Rebel Man?** None

Category 5

Category 5 for the faculty and staff of VHHS was grouped by responses that indicated the participant disapproved certain qualities of the previous VHHS Rebel Man mascot. The majority of the respondents fell into this category, but varied on the degree to which he or she disliked the image. Additional trends in this subsection included:

- **What does it mean to be a VHHS Rebel?** Going against the norm, “Rebel Edge” – being better than others, standing up for what you believe in, excellence, determination, tradition
- **What VHHS traditions are most important?** Academic excellence, philanthropy, commitment to students, family/unity, school spirit and events (pep rallies, athletic events, Relay for Life, etc.), community support
- **What qualities do you like about Rebel Man?** None, representative of school (traditionally, colors, spirited)
- **What qualities do you dislike about Rebel Man?** Historical connotation, negative representation of school, divisive, offensive

Interview Results

In interviews with faculty and staff of the high school, questions were asked to obtain feedback about what makes the school and community unique and also to

gather opinions on what the audience would like to see from a mascot and branding standpoint moving forward.

When describing the community and the high school, the majority of the respondents' answers were relatively consistent. Many of the faculty and staff referenced the split of VHHS away from Berry High School in the early 1970's and the development of the name "Rebels" because the students rebelled against the school system. This historical account drives the school's long-standing connection to tradition. Many faculty and staff members noted that a lot of coaches and teachers have been a part of the school for a long time. Many of them joined the staff early in their careers, and/or graduated from the school and came back to teach or coach. This commitment to the school is a factor in the school's rich history and commitment to excellence.

When describing the current state of the school and community, there was an overwhelming consensus on the high level of achievement and overall commitment to the school. There is a general sense of strong involvement at all levels within the school and this has fueled a strong sense of community and pride. Additionally, several faculty and staff mentioned that the school has a strong sense of inclusiveness and diversity, which provides all students with a supportive learning environment and sense of belonging. Lastly, there was a theme of strong academic success and philanthropic participation. The students are resilient, hard working, caring and committed, which yields a strong sense of pride and unity for the school and community.

Amongst the faculty and staff, several core values were consistently used to describe the school. One of the most prominent values shared was being service-oriented, and many used Relay for Life as an example of this quality. The majority of the responses described a commitment to excellence and being well rounded, which was exemplified by success in academics and athletics. However, those were not the only driving factors of the school's success as so many students participate in fine arts or other extracurricular activities and each student strives to be the best in whatever they may do.

This audience was asked to share what it means to be a VHHS Rebel and what the Rebel Man represented to them. The majority of the group noted that the Rebel Man was not the defining factor in who they were as a teacher, coach, leader or as a part of the school. From the responses, it is clear that being a VHHS Rebel is about being a part of the school or team, and that it is a big deal to be associated with something bigger than them as an individual. This fuels school pride, with a tribute to the tradition and the historical reference of when the school split from Berry. Lastly, being a VHHS Rebel means always striving to be the best and having the courage and strength to stand up for one's beliefs.

There was a strong consistency amongst the faculty and staff interviewed that the Rebel Man, as it was used at the high school, was never meant to be

offensive or seen as an offensive symbol. However, some of the interviewees did note that they could see a negative connotation or had chosen not to use him in conjunction with their team, group or organization prior to the decision to do away with the icon over the summer. While many of the interviewees would not have removed the Rebel Man originally, several expressed an understanding for the change. However, amongst the interviewees there was a divide in opinions as to whether or not there should be a new mascot. For those that felt a mascot was needed, reasons for having one included: something for the kids and community; something for pumping up the fans; and filling the void of the previous mascot. Some of the participants that fell into this group suggested the “Rowdy Rebels” with a cowboy themed appearance. The majority that preferred to not have a new mascot cited reasons as the following: not a strong void this past year without him; other school groups such as the seniors, cheerleaders, band, etc. serve the need of pumping up the fans and providing spirit; with the right logos and images the Rebel Man is not missed as much; or not feeling strongly one way or the other. One suggestion from this group included having a student serve as the brand ambassador without a costume, but rather an annual award voted on by his or her peers. This person would embody the spirit of the VHHS Rebels and play a role in pep rallies and games.

Moving forward, the faculty and staff of the high school had several thoughts and recommendations to help the research team. Several expressed their connection to the VH logo and the Old English ‘V’ used by the baseball team as iconic marks for the school and athletics specifically. Additionally, many coaches placed an emphasis on the true colors of Vestavia as scarlet red and royal blue, and making sure those were used correctly. However, there was an interest expressed in being equipped with the tools to develop, strengthen and maintain the individual identities of the various sports and organizations within the overarching VHHS brand and look. Lastly, there was an emphasis on sayings such as, “when you play one Rebel, you pay us all,” and “Rebel Edge,” and using those or others to develop a slogan or tagline to accompany the brand images.

Community Members

Community members were engaged in the research process through interviews and focus groups. A sample of 39 community members was measured for research data collection. Participants within sample of the community fulfilled all, some or one of the following criteria: resident of Vestavia, alumni of the school, and/or children in the school system.

Interviews

Among the sample of the community who participated in interviews, there was a strong consistency in the respondents’ answers when asked what makes the community unique. Almost every participant mentioned the strong school system and excellence in education. Many of them referenced this being a factor in their decision to move into or stay in the area. Additionally, participants described the

community as hard workers, caring and community oriented. With that, the community is heavily involved in the schools, but also in school activities. Many cited football games and Relay for Life as examples of the community's unity. Others mentioned the safety of the community and the comforting feeling of home. Lastly, the community shares a great deal of spirit and investment in each other. Interviewees felt Vestavia residents genuinely care about one another and the success of the young people. They are value-driven and committed to maintaining excellence through hard work.

Other characteristics of the community were also expressed by some of the respondents. These sentiments were shared by a small sub-section of participants. Some respondents mentioned that Vestavia has experienced some change of the past 10-15 years, which has brought in diversity at various levels. Other responses noted a transition from working-class families to more white-collar, which has developed differences in the family dynamics that may not be shared by the entire community. Lastly, while many respondents noted the community's deep roots in tradition, there was some divide on the positive and negative effects of this value. Some saw tradition as a strong connection to southern ideals and characteristics, while others interpreted traditional values as limited ability to change or easily perceived as negative by those outside the community.

Interview participants shared thoughts and opinions on what qualities and characteristics they liked and disliked about the original Rebel Man mascot/character. From these responses, there was a clear divide among the sample of research participants. The interviewees from the community were divided into three categories to be further analyzed for trends and sentiments. Category D was determined as having some sort of connection to Rebel Man. Category E was classified as those who had strong negative sentiments towards Rebel Man, Category F included participants that did not share an opinion either way of the Rebel Man mascot as it pertains to VHHS. Of interviewees, 55% fell into Category D, 25% fell into category E, and 20% fell into Category F.

Category D

Category D includes any of the community members who participated in an interview as a form of data collection for the research and were determined to have some sort of connection to the Rebel Man. These participants fell within a spectrum of strong to mild connection to the character. The majority of this section was characterized as having liked the Rebel Man because he was a positive and iconic representative of VHHS. Some of the respondents in this category are more ready to embrace change moving forward, while others would rather not see great change.

When asked what it means to be a VHHS Rebel, Category D shared many of the same sentiments. Many in this category described feelings of family and togetherness, both at the high school and in the community at large. Additionally,

VHHS Rebels were described by Category D as hard working, dedicated and high achievers. Lastly, Category D associated being a VHHS Rebel to being a part of a team or something bigger than oneself, which yielded school spirit and pride. The divide amongst this group came from what they might like to see moving forward in regards to the mascot specifically.

Some of the interviewees that fell within Category D felt a need to have some sort of mascot to replace the previous Rebel Man. In this group, generally they liked the Rebel Man's representation of the south and the strong recognition within the community. This subsection stressed a need to showcase the strong brand of VHHS and all of the various parts of the brand that make it successful such as academics and other extra curricular organizations.

The other subsection of Category D expressed that they would rather not have a mascot. This subsection trended to feel that the Rebel Man was never a representation of something negative or offensive, but more so important because of the image's longtime ties to VHHS and tradition. The Rebel Man was important to this subsection because the image was connected to being a part of the VHHS community. Several participants who classified in this subsection expressed a strong connection to the term Rebels and the image of Rebel Man, but less of a connection to the actual mascot on the sidelines. Overall, this subsection felt that if the mascot were not the Rebel Man, then there was not a need for a mascot at all.

Category E

Category E includes community members who were interviewed and expressed strong negative associations to the Rebel Man image and mascot. This category all shared the sentiment that the Rebel Man image represented negative principles such as confederacy and racism.

Category E described being a VHHS Rebel in several ways. Many shared that they are proud to be a VHHS Rebel because of the strong values of the school and community. However, some in this subsection felt that being a VHHS Rebel carries a negative connotation and can have damaging implications on the community.

In regards to having a mascot in the future, this subsection was divided. Of the respondents that felt a need for a new mascot, the reasoning was that there is a need to fill the void to help eliminate the old image. Some of the respondents categorized in Category E that expressed a strong need for a new mascot said it would have to be something abstract and not closely related to the former image.

Lastly, respondents in this category felt a need to better represent all of the various groups and organizations that are a part of the high school. Additionally they expressed a need for communication and marketing tactics to better showcase the strong academic brand of the school.

Category F

Community participants that were categorized into Category F did not express strong opinions about the Rebel Man mascot as a part of VHHS or the need for a mascot in the future. Overall, this category all felt a strong brand image with good logos and identifying marks would be good for the brand of the school.

Interviewees shared several sentiments about what it means to be a VHHS Rebel. These opinions included the historical account of the school breaking away from Berry High School. Additionally, participants felt being a VHHS Rebel means working hard to achieve success and a sense of pride for fighting for what you believe in.

Focus Groups

Through focus groups with community members, the research team further explored qualities and characteristics of the VHHS brand and what elements make being a part of the school's community unique. Community focus groups were smaller in size, ranging from 4-7 individuals per group. Groups were typically of like-minded individuals, but each group included a variation in demographics in terms of age, year graduated from VHSS and length of time in Vestavia. Community focus groups followed the same general guide as the student focus groups, but the moderator maintained the flexibility to deviate if necessary. Participants were also given the opportunity to share thoughts, sentiments and ideas about anything they felt important for the research team to hear that may not have been asked in a question.

Across all of the focus groups, there was consistency amongst the participants when describing what makes the school and community unique. All of the groups discussed the excellence in education, the strong family atmosphere, and community spirit. Several focus group participants stressed the level of support the school receives from the community for educational needs as well as for school functions such as athletic events or Relay for Life. There is an emphasis on athletics, but it is not the driving factor. Many attributed the great quality of the school to teachers.

When discussing what it means to be a VHHS Rebel, the focus groups discussed a variety of things. Several focus groups emphasized the pride that is associated with being a part of the school and community. Additionally, the school's history and tradition carry a lot of weight and are valued by a lot of the students and alumni. Another focus group discussed specific things such as generations of families that have played for some of the same coaches at the school.

Many of the focus groups discussed the need for a new mascot, but stressed having strong involvement from the students during the mascot development phase. Others felt a mascot may not be the right solution at this time and felt

emphasizing the students and various positive qualities that are a part of the school was more important.

Secondary Research

High Schools

In researching other high schools, over 200 high schools were found to carry the name “Rebels.” To review further, the research team looked at high schools across the state of Alabama to see what images and mascots were being used for the schools’ branding. Additionally, the research team explored schools across the United States that used the name “Rebels” to see what branding images were used and if a physical mascot was used by the school.

In Alabama, 19 schools were found to currently carry the Rebel name (Table 2). However, seven of those schools are no longer in operation. Of the 12 remaining schools with the Rebels name, seven used an image similar to the VHHS Rebel Man image. Many times these images were adjusted to use colors to match the respective school’s colors. Only one school could be found to have the Rebel Man image and a physical mascot on the sidelines. Additionally, some schools used a different image to represent the Rebels, such as a character’s face similar to the mascot of the University of Nevada Las Vegas.

Table 2: Schools in Alabama Currently Using “Rebel” Name

School Names	City	Name Change?	Mascot? Y/N	If yes, What is it?	If No, other Images Used
Bessemer Academy	Bessemer, Alabama	Changed from Tigers	yes	rebel man caricature (grey suit)	
Central Alabama	Montgomery, Alabama	No	NF	NF	
S.R. Butler High School	Huntsville, Alabama	No	yes (not seen in costume, just image)	Rebel Man caricature (green)	
Thorsby High School	Thorsby, Alabama	No	yes (not seen in costume, just image)	rebel man caricature (one on football stadium is very different version)	
Chambers Academy	Lafayette, Alabama	no	no		CA with circle
Coosa Valley Academy	Harpersville, Alabama	no	yes (not seen in costume, just image)	rebel man caricature (in black and white)	
Rehobeth High School	Dothan, Alabama	no	no		R with crossed swords
Eclectic Academy Rebels	Eclectic, Alabama	no	no		NF
G.W. Long High School	Skipperville, Alabama	no	no		Old "L"
Grove Hill Academy (Clark Preparatory School)	Grove Hill, Alabama	yes	yes	gators	
West Morgan High School	Trinity, Alabama	no	Yes (not seen in costume, just image)	rebel man caricature (red)	
Reeltown High School	Notasulga, Alabama	no	yes (not seen in costume, just image)	rebel man caricature (blue)	
Dixie Academy	Louisville, Alabama	no	no		Confederate flag

Inglenook Academy	Birmingham, Alabama	no	NF	NF	NF
Lowndes Academy	Lowndesboro, Alabama	no	Yes (not seen in costume, just image)	head of UNLV mascot	
Reeltown High School	Notasulga, Alabama	no	Yes (not seen in costume, just image)	rebel man caricature (blue)	
Sansom High School	Gadsden, Alabama	No	Yes (not seen in costume, just image)	rebel man caricature (gray and purple)	
South Choctaw Academy	Toxey, Alabama	no	Yes (not seen in costume, just image)	rebel man caricature (red)	
Zion Chapel	Jack, Alabama		Yes (not seen in costume, just image)	rebel man caricature (red)	

*Schools highlighted in red have closed and are no longer in operation

**Resources include: mascotdb.com, ahsfhs.com, maxpreps.com, al.com, images.google.com

When researching schools that carry the Rebel name outside of the state of Alabama, over 200 schools were discovered. To further explore the use of the name Rebels and associated imagery amongst high schools, a sample of 22 schools from the list from various states and parts of the country were researched to determine what imagery and branding the school uses. Additionally, schools were noted if they have experienced any sort of mascot or branding change in recent history (Table 3).

Table 3: Schools Outside of Alabama with Rebel Name

School Names	State	Rebel Mascot?	Mascot Change?
Southside High School	Arkansas	Yes- looked identical to Ole Miss rebel	Yes- Maverick (new logo and fight song too)
A.B. Miller High School	California	yes - similar to UNLV	No
Atkinson County High School	Georgia	Yes - Rebel Man in red	No
Berrien High School	Georgia	No - use B with crossed swords	
Astoria High School + VIT (Compete as South Fulton)	Illinois	yes - purple and green head of Rebel mascot similar to UNLV	No
Westwood High School	Iowa	Yes- uses Confederate soldier image, but also crossed swords, school colors blue and gold, rebel mascot in honor of a dog owned by a popular student's family	No
Allen Central High School	Kentucky	Yes - soldier on Confederate flag	Yes - slight update to soldier and removed flag
Atherton High School	Kentucky	yes - use A primarily	Yes - just revealed new revolutionary Rebel in Jan. 2016
Boone County High School	Kentucky	Yes - similar to UNLV, navy with long mustache, feather hat	No
Boyle County High School	Kentucky	No - Use B, letter of school	No
Owen county High School	Kentucky	Yes - older style horse/soldier image with word Rebels	No
Robert E Lee High School	Louisiana	Yes	Yes - changed to patriots
Briarfield Academy	Louisiana	Yes - Rebel Man image in red	
North Caddo High School	Louisiana	Yes	changing now
Walpole High School	Massachusetts	Yes- Rebel Confederate flag and man	Somewhat- removed rebel man from signage and replaced with a big "W". The

			school says rebel flag creates an underdog mentality and revive failing sports programs
Adams County Christian	Mississippi	No - use pirate flag look with just school letters	No
Altmar-Parish-Williamstown	New York	No - use school letters	No
Richland High School	Texas	Yes- Dixie Bells and Johnny Rebs	Yes- took symbols of confederate flag away from school. School redefined the word rebel as choosing your own path and your future.
Bowsher High School	Ohio	yes - Rowdy the Rebel, soldier on horse with sword	
Byrnes High School	South Carolina	No - use script text "Rebels" with sword	No- but undergoing controversy over name
South Burlington High School	Vermont	Yes- confederate colonel mascot, colors do not correlate to confederate flag	Yes- Rebel nickname still remains at the school. The term rebel has positive meanings and the school board is working to teach the school what it really means to be a rebel
Fairfax High School	Virginia	Yes- Johnny Rebs (confederate soldier caricature)	Yes- dropped Johnny Reb, dropped name of Confederettes drill team, and confederate school flag. Mascot changed to a lion and the school voted on a new school flag.

Ole Miss

The research team visited with Ole Miss administration and athletic department staff to further research the school's previous rebranding process regarding the Colonel Reb mascot and imagery.

When the Ole Miss administration made the decision to remove Colonel Reb (mascot similar in nature to Rebel Man), the decision was also made to not have a replacement at the time. The administration felt that the Ole Miss students and alumni needed time to move forward from a decision that was, in many ways, divisive.

Seven years after the removal of Colonel Reb, the mascot was replaced by a new mascot, the Rebel Black Bear. The selection committee established by the school made the decision to incorporate the Rebel Black Bear as the new on-field mascot of Ole Miss. The research participants from Ole Miss emphasized that the Rebel Black Bear is primarily intended to be an "on-field mascot" and has not been used on very much branding, merchandise, etc. In their brand style

guide, Ole Miss makes a distinct declaration that the Rebel Black Bear character mark is only to be used with youth merchandise and is not permissible to be used on any other merchandise, Ole Miss branding, etc.

Discussion and Analysis

Explanation of Results

Student Research

Time spent with students was the focal point of the research process. The research team was able to gain a strong pulse on the students' sentiments in regards to the brand of VHHS and opinions for how to best capture the brand essence with appropriate imagery.

In the initial survey results, a clear conclusion was drawn that a majority of the students felt a strong connection to the Rebel Man mascot as a part of the brand of VHHS. However, the post-survey results revealed that the majority of students saw other traditions and values as the focal point of the high school's brand. From these findings, it can be concluded that while the majority of students appeared to have positive sentiments towards the Rebel Man image and mascot, they also expressed a strong association with many other values, traditions and qualities of the school.

While there were many different opinions and sentiments, the strongest points of consistency and shared sentiments by the majority of students fell in the following areas:

- For what it means to be a Rebel: leadership, going against the norm, tradition, unity, excellence, standing up for what you believe in, being a part of something bigger than oneself, pride
- Describe the Brand of VHHS: charitable, traditional, excellence, academically driven, hard working, community, compassionate, something for everyone
- Characteristics of the brand include: Relay for Life, football games, pep rallies, extra curricular activities, the people of the school, school colors, alma mater

Additionally, from the results it can be determined that there is still a very distinct divide amongst the student body in regards to the positive and/or negative connotations that may be associated with the Rebel Man image. There is a clear spectrum as to the level of like or dislike each individual student may have for the specific Rebel Man image. However, there is a strong connection amongst the majority of students to the term Rebels, specifically when describing the unique definition of what it means to be a VHHS Rebel. From these findings, the research team has concluded that the removal of the original Rebel Man mascot and keeping the Rebels name was necessary.

The students' responses indicated that one element of the school they value is being deeply rooted in tradition. Many students are second or third generation VHHS students, which contributes to a family-like community and a strong sense of school spirit. Several traditions and events that are important to the school are

football games, pep rallies, Relay for Life, Rebel Yell, the school colors, chants and cheers, achieving excellence in everything, academic success, band, and being a part of an extracurricular activity or organization. The variety of these activities and interests represents the student body's value in contributing to the school in some way and is an important element in the school's brand. These traditions should be strong elements when forming brand messages and telling the brand story.

Lastly, the research team has determined that there is also an observed divide on if a new mascot or image would or would not be accepted by the students. Some students felt a need to have something new for athletic events and pep rallies for school spirit, while others did not feel that anything would be accepted at this time due to the discord in regards to the removal of the previous mascot. Overall however, the majority of the students did place an emphasis on the concept that any new marks or logos need to be closely related to the school or past images/logos used by the school. From this feedback, the research team has determined that any creative elements need to incorporate a traditional look inspired by previous VHHS marks.

Faculty Research

From the faculty research, the feedback revealed a divide amongst the faculty and staff as it pertains to the decision to remove Rebel Man himself. However, the surveys indicated that a majority of the faculty felt the image was divisive. In the interviews, several faculty and staff members expressed that the Rebel Man image was not a defining factor of them individually or the school. The audience varied in the degree to which they expressed liking or disliking the image, but overall the responses indicated support of the decision to remove the original Rebel Man image. Moreover, ideas and values such as being a part of something bigger than oneself, working together, striving for excellence and standing up for what you believe in were expressed as the defining factors representing the VHHS community.

In regards to the characteristics and qualities that make the high school and community unique, the research team found several trends that were shared by a majority of the faculty. Overall the faculty praised the school's ability to provide a variety of activities and organizations to meet the needs of the students at the school. This fuels inclusiveness, diversity and encourages students to become involved in some way. This audience also emphasized the academic success and philanthropic value as two of the most iconic elements of the school and student body. From the surveys and interviews, the research team observed the faculty is very proud of the student body for being resilient, committed, hard working and caring of one another. These elements are determined to be the strongest components of the brand of the school and are essential in guiding communications plans and development of future brand imagery.

For a mascot specifically, this audience also had a divide in opinions as to whether or not a new mascot was important for the school. Those that trended towards needing a new mascot indicated reasons why as something for kids/community, something to contribute to school spirit and filling the void of the removal of the previous mascot. For those that felt a mascot was not needed, reasoning included not feeling a void the past year without one, using students such as seniors, band, cheer, etc. to pump up the crowd and that having strong brand marks and logos would provide a better representation of the school. From this feedback, it is clear that the faculty and staff share similar sentiments with the students, and the divide falls clearly on the need to have or not have a mascot. However, any new mascot or brand marks should strongly correlate to the values and characteristics of the school and be inspired by previous VHHS brand imagery.

Community Research

Like the student and faculty/staff audiences, the community also shared opinions on many of the same values and characteristics that make the high school and community unique. At nearly every interview, participants claimed the excellence in education to be the best characteristic of the school and a reason why they were a part of the community. The hard working and caring community fuels the family-like atmosphere, which leads to community members participating in several of the high school's events such as football games and Relay for Life. The community's shared sentiments with the students and staff further support the analysis that the school's brand messaging and imagery should represent the hardworking, value-driven, committed personality of the brand's stakeholders.

Additionally, this audience also expressed a divide in sentiments pertaining to the Rebel Man mascot and image specifically. From the responses, the research team felt that the community members who tended to have the strongest connection to the Rebel Man mascot did view the image as an important part of the VHHS brand. However, this group also saw other elements and imagery as a part of the brand as well. Those who may not have expressed as strong of a connection to the Rebel Man mascot also saw other elements such as school events and the values of the community as the fundamentals of the brand. Overall, the majority of the community members shared the same values when describing what it means to be a VHHS Rebel such as being a part of something bigger than oneself, service oriented, spirited and the pride of being a part of the community.

The majority of the community subsection trended towards not having a mascot, citing reasons that anything representing the school needed to tie in to the tradition of the school and correlate with the name Rebels. They felt Rebel Man was the only image that could achieve this need. Those who felt a mascot was needed expressed that the students and community needed something for football games and pep rallies and also needed a strong unifying symbol. However, many of the participants included that they would not want any sort of

mascot or brand elements that did not appropriately represent the school in the sense of the values, tradition and history of the school. Collectively, the sample of the community did emphasize a need for brand messaging to do a better job of representing the school as a whole and all of the various groups, organizations, academic accomplishments, etc. that are important elements to the brand.

Secondary Research

High Schools

Secondary research on high schools in Alabama and across the nation that carry the Rebel name led to several conclusions as it pertains to the research team's recommendations moving forward. While many schools in Alabama still use imagery very similar to the VHHS Rebel Man mascot, very few use the exact same colors as the one used by VHHS or have a physical character used for athletic events or other school functions. From this, the research team can conclude that having a physical "Rebel" mascot is not a widely adopted trend. Additionally, other schools have adopted variations of a Rebel character to move away from what could be determined as confederate imagery or have chosen to not use a human-like image at all.

When looking at the national research, there was a clear difference in schools that use the Rebel name with human-like/soldier images versus those who use school letters and logos. A trend was discovered that many schools across the nation are undergoing discussions about changing their specific mascots or imagery if it closely relates to confederate imagery. Many have made slight changes to their image to keep a traditional look but eliminate confederate associations. Additionally, several schools such as Fairfax High School in Virginia and Southside High School in Arkansas have completely removed all of the old branding that was determined to be controversial. From this research, the conclusion can be made that there is national attention on schools with controversial branding and images, resulting in pressure to change. However, there are various degrees to which the changes are being made.

Ole Miss

Our interviews with current and former Ole Miss administrators brought about several conclusions as it relates to this particular process. First and foremost, Ole Miss and Vestavia both have a very rich tradition, and they both have fan bases, communities, and alumni who care deeply about their respective schools. Traditions are very important to Ole Miss students and alumni. They want to be represented in a very positive manner through their brand.

Our research findings from visiting with the Ole Miss administrators and athletic department conclude that it was beneficial for Ole Miss to experience a time period without a mascot. We feel this time period did give their students, alumni and fan base time to somewhat move away from the divisiveness of the decision to remove Colonel Reb. Additionally, Ole Miss has done a tremendous job of

managing a consistent brand with its athletic programs and university through specific branding guidelines. The script “Ole Miss” is highly recognized and provides a very strong primary mark. Given the reasoning behind the Ole Miss brand style guide requirements that the Rebel Black Bear character mark is only to be used with youth merchandise and is not permissible to be used on any other merchandise, Ole Miss branding, etc., our conclusion is that Ole Miss wants to avoid brand confusion with the use of the Rebel Black Bear mark and the name “Rebels.” However, our research with Vestavia students, alumni, and community members has shown that the vast majority does not have any desire for a mascot similar in nature to the Rebel Black Bear.

Recommendations, Conclusion

Recommendations

Based on the research findings and complete analysis of the results, the research team has determined the following recommendations for VHHS moving forward.

Overall, it is determined that the decision to remain the Rebels is the best solution for the school. While some of the research participants would have preferred to remove the name as well as the mascot, overall the name Rebels has a distinct and positive clout with the audiences. Additionally, all of the stakeholders in the VHHS community share a strong consistency in their values, characteristics that make VHHS unique and in the traditions and events that are important to the school. However, the Rebel Man mascot character has brought about disagreement and divides the VHHS Community. It is recommended that the school use specific brand messaging and imagery to tell the story of what it means to be a VHHS Rebel and brand the Rebel name using the shared values and characteristics of the audiences.

the research team concludes that it is in the best interest of VHHS to move forward without a new mascot at this time. In lieu of a mascot, strong primary marks and additional brand imagery will be developed as the visual elements of the VHHS brand. Additionally, a branding style guide will provide recommendations for use of the marks in order to protect the VHHS brand and maintain consistency.

This recommendation is the best solution for VHHS because of the sentiments shared with the research team by a vast majority of the audiences. By remaining the VHHS Rebels, there is not another mascot or character that can adequately represent the essence of the VHHS brand, thus only logos should be used. Additionally, many research participants expressed that the Rebel Man was not missed this past year. Additionally, due to the overwhelming amount of student and community involvement in school activities, a mascot is not the only contributor to the school and community's spirit, pride and overall brand. Lastly, the new marks provided as a part of the rebrand process will be an exciting improvement and may fill any void that stakeholders feel may exist without a mascot.

Most importantly, the research team recommends that in conjunction with the new marks a branding style guide be developed to protect the use of these marks and assure accurate brand use. This style guide would include distinct primary and secondary marks. Additionally, the guide would identify the exact color codes of the school's official colors and neutral colors. Lastly, the guide would include an explanation of each of the brand marks, development of

additional brand identities under the VHHS brand and recommendations for use and application. Consistent marks and a branding style guide will help with protecting and strengthening the brand of VHHS by ensuring the brand is presented accurately and consistently across all mediums.

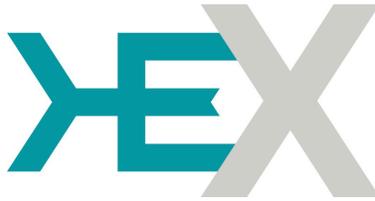
Lastly, the research team recommends the development of a holistic communication strategy to include marketing, advertising and public relations efforts so as to best tell and scale the story of the VHHS Brand. It is important that this strategy aim to communicate a consistent brand message that represents the full scope of the brand and each of the various elements that are a part of that brand. Knight Eady will develop this plan and consult with the VHHS stakeholders on best practices for implementation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the research team has determined several opportunities to enhance the brand image of VHHS. Through the development of iconic marks in conjunction with a strategic marketing and communications plan, the brand identity will be strengthened and effortlessly utilized by the brand's stakeholders. Lastly, with proper strategy and positioning, the brand will see an increase in awareness and equity over time.

Appendices

Pre-Survey
Post-Survey
Focus Group/Interview Guide



Questions for post-survey:

1. How would you describe the brand of VHHS?

2. Which word(s) would you use to describe each of the following:
 - a. VHHS Community

 - b. VHHS Student Body

 - c. VHHS Athletics

3. In your opinion, what VHHS characteristics/traditions best represent the VHHS brand?

4. Was there anything about branding that you learned or feel differently about after this presentation?

5. What does being a Rebel mean to you?

VHHS – Strategic Branding Focus Group/Interview Guide

DATE _____

Name _____ Approx. Age _____ Male / Female

Current Vestavia Resident (Y / N) Vestavia Alum (Y / N) Children in Vestavia Schools (Y / N)

Name _____ Approx. Age _____ Male / Female

Current Vestavia Resident (Y / N) Vestavia Alum (Y / N) Children in Vestavia Schools (Y / N)

Name _____ Approx. Age _____ Male / Female

Current Vestavia Resident (Y / N) Vestavia Alum (Y / N) Children in Vestavia Schools (Y / N)

Name _____ Approx. Age _____ Male / Female

Current Vestavia Resident (Y / N) Vestavia Alum (Y / N) Children in Vestavia Schools (Y / N)

Questions / Discussion Items for Focus Groups

1. What makes the Vestavia community unique?
2. What core values or qualities best represent the Vestavia community?
3. What is a Rebel?
4. What characteristics of the Rebel Man did you like or dislike?
5. What characteristics or qualities would you like to see in a future mascot?
6. Do you have ideas for a new mascot? Do you want a new mascot or no mascot at all?
7. Are there phrases, quotes, or sayings that you think represent Vestavia or speak for Vestavia?