

COLLEGE *of* CHARLESTON

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

President P. George Benson
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Cistern Yard
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Our commencement speaker, Charlotte Beers-Beadleston, has led some of the country's top advertising firms and conceived and delivered countless marketing campaigns.

And as she or any ad executive will tell you, such efforts always begin with a key question: What is the unique brand promise of the product or service being promoted?

I want to talk about that question in the context of today's graduation ceremony.

You can't create an effective marketing campaign around a product without first knowing what that product promises to do for your target audience. Articulating that promise is crucial to the success of an advertisement.

Brand promise is a powerful motivator. Just look at your own purchasing habits. The places you shop, the food you eat, the vehicle you drive, the type of cell phone you use – all say something about you as a consumer, and all link back in some way to a brand promise.

Today, as you pass through Porter's Lodge and move out into the global marketplace, I challenge you to identify or create your own brand promise.

That is, I challenge you to figure out what you have to contribute to society. What unique attributes do you offer in the career marketplace? What makes you different or better than other job candidates you will compete against?

We already know some of your attributes: You are young, computer literate, and ambitious. You are environmentally conscious, mobile, multi-tasking, and adaptive to change.

You place a higher premium on having a balanced quality of life than your parents did at your age. These things we know because they are inherent in your generation's brand.

In developing your own personal brand, it might be helpful to think about the brands you buy. Take Starbucks. There is a Starbucks just behind me here, on the other side of Calhoun Street. Every morning it's packed to the gills with bleary-eyed students getting ready for class.

What do you think of when you think of Starbucks? Coffee, certainly. But what kind of coffee? Perhaps it's your very own custom coffee creation, prepared to your exact specifications and consistent from one visit to the next. That is your expectation based on your perception of the company's brand.

You buy your coffee at Starbucks, and Starbucks promises to mix you a cup of coffee tailored to your liking.

Let's look at another example, one that is particularly relevant today: the College of Charleston's brand.

You probably chose to attend the College because it promised a faculty with a strong student-centered focus; it promised an unrivaled historic campus in a Southern coastal city; and it promised rigorous and rewarding academic study.

Individually, these qualities or characteristics are not unique to our college. But only the College of Charleston combines all of them. That is what makes the education you received so distinctive. That is the College of Charleston's brand.

We work hard to show off these assets to prospective students. In some ways, we have an easy sales job because the campus sells itself.

But if you live in Michigan or Idaho or Spain, you might never have heard of the College of Charleston, or even the city of Charleston. By the way, is that in West Virginia or South Carolina?

So we market our College. And we do this by communicating our brand promise.

So back to my earlier question: What's your brand promise?

Is your brand your Facebook page, your Twitter tweets, or a YouTube video? What are you putting out there about yourself? What are you promising?

Maybe you don't know your brand promise yet. But you're going to need it soon! Your next employer is likely to browse job applicants like a savvy shopper scans a supermarket aisle. Do you jump off the shelf, or do you blend in with a hundred other boxes of cereal?

I have good news and bad news about your brand promise. The good news: Today, your brand gets a boost. You've earned your degree and it and the College of Charleston are

now part of your marketing pitch. This significant and historic institution – where so many pioneers and visionaries have gone before you – is now part of your individual brand promise.

And the bad news? Well, it's more of a warning, a warning to be careful when creating your brand and taking it public. Customers can be fickle. What gets you in the door, may soon wear thin. You must keep learning, keep growing, keep refining your brand. When needed, re-invent your brand. If Britney Spears can do it, you can too!

But remember, for your brand to succeed, it must have substance and be an accurate characterization. Be sure your brand is grounded in your values and work ethic. Be true to your roots and the lessons your parents, grandparents, and professors taught you.

Creating a brand is more than just making a promise. It's making a promise that matters to other people, and then keeping that promise – always.

Think about the current economic crisis and all the promises that turned out to be shallow or empty: the promises of investment banks, insurance companies, government regulators, and rating agencies. And the promises of would-be homeowners who borrowed money they couldn't possibly repay. If we could turn back the clock, and reposition or reinvent a few of those brands, the economy would be in a far better place today.

So keep your promises. Your word is your honor. Your honor is your future!

Lastly, I want to ask you to make a promise right now, today. I want you to promise that you won't forget the College of Charleston. Your legacy, whatever it may be, is now part of this College. This College is now part of you.

Give back to the College. Become our ambassadors and our advocates around the country and around the world. Reach back and help the next generation of our students. Become active alumni, send your children and grandchildren to the College.

In exchange, I will make a promise to you: I will continue to do everything in my power every day of the week to increase the value of your degree. I will make sure that the College you promote as part of your own brand promise is worth everything you say it is, and more. I promise.