Turning Texas A&M Into a National Brand With CMO Ethan Braden

Welcome to this episode of the Marketing Vanguard podcast. Today, Jenny Rooney speaks with Ethan Braden, chief marketing officer at Texas A&M University, about building one of America's most consequential higher-education brands.

Ethan shares how his journey from Eli Lilly to Purdue University to Texas A&M shaped his approach to leadership, storytelling, and reputation management in complex institutions.

He discusses how to balance tradition and innovation, why universities must think like modern brands, and how collaborations, from NASCAR to Dude Perfect, can open new doors for engagement and national relevance. This conversation is a masterclass in brand building that applies far beyond academia.

Ethan Braden serves as CMO at Texas A&M University, where he leads brand strategy, communications, and national reputation building for one of the largest universities in the United States.

Before joining Texas A&M, Ethan spent five years at Purdue University, serving as CMO and leading marketing for both Purdue University and Purdue Global. Prior to that, he held senior roles at Eli Lilly and Company, overseeing U.S. and global brand marketing.

Episode Highlights:

[01:08] Crafting a Marketer's Second Act – Ethan traces his unconventional journey from Eli Lilly to Purdue University and now Texas A&M, revealing how corporate marketing fundamentals translate seamlessly into academia. He shares how following a mentor, embracing curiosity, and learning through change shaped his leadership. The move from commercial products to education, he says, was less about industry and more about storytelling and helping institutions articulate who they are, what they stand for, and why they matter. He shows that great marketers can lead transformation anywhere purpose and clarity are needed.

[03:26] Immersion Before Strategy – When Ethan joined Texas A&M, he didn't start with spreadsheets or slogans, he started by listening. He spent time with faculty, students, alumni, and cadets, attending campus traditions to experience the heartbeat of Aggieland. This deep immersion helped him understand the institution not just as a marketer, but as a member of its community. His approach underscores that in brand building, empathy and curiosity come before campaigns, you have to feel the brand to tell its story well.

[07:15] Rethinking the CMO Mandate – Unlike many higher ed marketers focused on enrollment, Ethan centers his strategy on national reputation and relevance. With student demand already strong, his mission is to elevate Texas A&M into the national conversation through consistent storytelling and thought leadership. He discusses the importance of moving beyond sports associations to highlight innovation, research, and civic impact. For Ethan, brand building in higher education means transforming awareness into admiration and creating a reputation that attracts talent, partners, and possibilities.

[12:05] Knowing Who You Are – In an increasingly crowded higher ed landscape, Ethan believes success depends on clarity, not comparison. "Winners are focused on winning, and

losers are focused on winners," he says, outlining why self-awareness and purpose beat imitation every time. His team invests in understanding audiences, refining their value proposition, and mastering the fundamentals of communication. The result is marketing that feels grounded, confident, and deeply connected to the university's mission.

[14:04] Partnerships in Character, Not Convention — Ethan's bold approach to brand collaborations shows what happens when tradition meets imagination. From NASCAR partnerships to Dude Perfect collaborations, he has turned Texas A&M's values into cultural touch points that extend far beyond campus. These initiatives, he says, go beyond exposure into alignment, storytelling, and showing that universities can inspire fandom just like major brands. His mantra: The most powerful collaborations come from shared character, not shared categories.

[17:28] Building the Best University for the Nation — Ethan closes the conversation by reframing what leadership in education means. Rather than competing for rankings, his goal is to make Texas A&M "the best university for the nation," a force for service, innovation, and progress. He shares his vision of creating a high-performance marketing engine that stands alongside Fortune 500 brands, proving that higher education can lead with clarity and conviction. It's a reminder that purpose-driven marketing, done well, has the power to elevate entire institutions and industries.

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