

Let's "Chalk" It Up: Fun Pastimes Turned Advertising Gold

Sydney Velez

"Drawing" from the world around her, undergraduate double major in public relations and English studies, Sydney Velez explains how fun, kid-friendly activities that children participate in have become a prominent way student groups get the attention of students on college campuses.

When I was younger, I lived in the big city of Minneapolis, Minnesota where there was no shortage of concrete. My parents always urged me to go outside and play instead of staying cooped up in the house all day. I was never very happy about this because I was not a very outdoorsy child; I much preferred to spend the day in my little reading corner. However, my favorite thing to do outside was to make art on the sidewalk. I took the thirty-two pack of sidewalk chalk that my parents bought me (I suspect they were excited to buy me anything that would keep me outside) and went to town. I made intricate drawings of pirate ships, birds, and trees with swirling colors that they could never be in real life.

As I grew older, my sidewalk chalk creations began to change. Instead of beautiful pictures of birds flying across the concrete, I began to write messages. Threats to my brother, funny things for people to glance at when they walked by, or messages in code so my friend would know what time to meet me in our secret place that night. I have long since shed my passion for drawing in chalk every day, but I have noticed that some of my fellow classmates have not. "Chalking" for advertising purposes is widespread throughout universities everywhere.

Some of the chalk advertisements I have seen at Illinois State University have intricate drawings accompanying them (nowhere near as beautiful as mine used to be, of course), some are just a phrase I do not quite understand, and some take up the entire plaza outside of Schroeder Hall! How did we transition from outdoor play to concrete billboards?

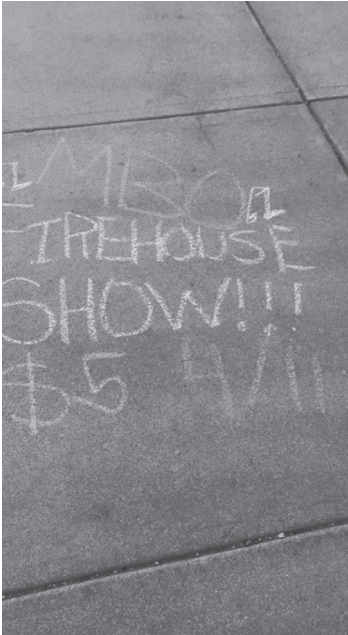


Figure 1: Firehouse Advertisement.

The Spark of Interest

On campus, there are always chalk messages on the ground to try to snag the attention of a student body that, let's face it, does not pay attention to much around them. One day I was walking to a class in a hurry with my head down just trying to get through the throng of people that were also hurrying to class. Since my head was down, I happened to notice a chalk announcement with a lot of colors and fun writing. I stopped and read further. It was about a comedy group on campus, and I thought to myself, "Golly, I want to go see that!" Later on I went to see their performance. Was it the chalk that made me want to go? How had it done that? The chalk writings are so widespread around this campus, as well as many others, that I became curious about how they affect students.

Common Uses of Chalking and Why

The morning walk to class as a college student: head down, headphones in, and no interaction with anyone or anything. Students are a group of people that are hard to engage, as they could care less about anything outside of their immediate bubble. Therefore, advertising to this group is challenging. "Chalking" is most commonly used on college campuses for advertising of clubs, events, or even voting. If we take a look at Figure 1, we can see that the people organizing the show at Firehouse, a local pizza place, wanted to get as many students there as they could so they wrote it on campus where everyone could see it. This is a basic advertising strategy. You put an advertisement where your target audience (the people you are looking to snag) can see it. The sidewalk is a place where everyone looks, especially college kids with their heads down on their trudge to class every morning. If everyone looks down then there is a higher chance of people becoming curious.

This is similar to how I reacted to the comedy show advertisement. I thought back to Joyce Walker's article "Just CHATting" where she discussed **reception**. Reception refers to how a text is understood and/or used by the receivers of the text. The creator of these chalked messages understands that this form of advertising will grab their intended audience's attention because this is a place every student looks at in a casual way. They attempt to use the messages to create a certain reception in the students: to fuel curiosity or to encourage students to make decisions about events they may want to go to or clubs they might want to join. Reception is especially important for college students who may not be very open to a message's content in certain settings compared to others. Most likely, this is what drew my eye to the message regarding the comedy show; I was already looking down on my way to class then became curious when seeing chalk advertisements.

Branching off of that, chalking is used on university campuses because the university itself wants to reach the student body with other important information. I often see advertisements such as "Don't forget to sign up for classes!" or "Summer school information sessions now open" or "Study abroad—It will change your life. Give us a call @ 309 *** ****." The university does this in order to reach out to students in a colloquial way. It helps them spark an interest that gets students to connect to the office to learn more. I perceive chalk to have a friendlier tone. I say "friendly" because chalk is mainly associated with outdoor fun or a pastime for children. When "children" and "fun" are the first words to come to mind, it comes across as a less intimidating medium that can better reach students that might be overwhelmed by these messages coming directly from a faculty member. The reception of a friendly message written in chalk on the sidewalk a student uses to get to class feels less oppressive; ergo, they are more likely to receive the message well.

Components of a Chalk Advertisement

There are some chalk advertisements that win over the audience and inspire people to go out to a certain event, but there are also bunches that get overlooked. I wanted to figure out what made the difference on a college campus. I went to the corner store and bought some \$ 0.99 sidewalk chalk, a pad of paper, and set out on a valiant scientific journey.

Color

To begin, I did a test to see if the color of an advertisement made a big difference in the reception of the message. I set up on a Monday at 11 a.m.

when it was bright and sunny and ended at 1 p.m. I chose 11 a.m. because this is a popular time for many people to be going to classes or coming out of them, in my experience—not too early or too late. I worked with the campus organization heading up the “Day of Compassion” to do my research. The organization asked for volunteers to do the chalk advertisements, so it was the perfect opportunity for me. The two advertisements I created were in the same plaza with mostly text, which ensured that there were limited variables. I created the first chalk advertisement (see Figure 2) using large arrows and text to show where people needed to walk to get to the event. I did it completely in one dull pink color. Then I sat by to watch every passerby’s reaction to my work. I acted like I was casually hanging out on the quad. I was positioned directly next to the advertisement, but I tried my best to blend in. I was specifically looking for whether they stopped to look, paused to read, or if they went toward the event, as these were all signs that they were influenced by the ad. To determine if it was “read,” I looked for people cocking their head or looking specifically at the ad for a prolonged time (six seconds or more).



Figure 2: “Day of Compassion” Advertisement in Schroeder Plaza.

What I found was that even though my first advertisement was a large word/arrow combination by people’s feet in a high traffic location, students did not pay much attention to it. I noted only about seven people out of the mob of students, in the two hours I observed, actually read it. It got even more faded as the day went on, and even less people looked at it. I then did a separate chalk advertisement with the same message/design but with a variety of brighter colors. I observed in the same time frame and place again. I observed a large spike of people noticing my lovely work; nearly thirty people stopped to read it. One man, who was walking in the direction of the dorms on west campus, stopped to read what I had wrote, and turned

around to go to the event and took photos with Reggie Redbird. My research showed that color made a difference to how many people were noticing it. When I used a less vibrant color, it went unnoticed. When I used bright colors people stopped to look.

After finding such a large gap in the amount of people paying attention to the brighter-colored advertisement, I looked into if there was a deeper reason for this phenomenon (why people seemed to notice the brighter colors in the advertisement more). I found insight while reading “Saliency of Color Image Derivatives: A Comparison Between Computational Models and Human Perception” by Eduardo Vasquez, et al. in the *Journal of the Optical Society of America. A, Optics, Image Science and Vision*, published in 2010. In this article, Vasquez notes that:

Human visual attention is for an important part bottom-up driven by the saliency of image details. An image detail appears salient when one or more of its lowlevel features (e.g., size, shape, luminance, color, texture, binocular disparity, or motion) differs significantly from its variation in the background. Saliency determines the capability of an image detail to attract visual attention (and thus guide eye movements) in a bottom-up way (613)

“Saliency” here means the pop-out effect of the color vs. its background. The more of a contrast there is, the more the human eye is drawn to it. This made me understand what my research was actually showing: the advertisement I drew in chalk was more noticed because the brighter colors I used stood out more against the gray of the pavement making people’s eyes notice the message. Color is very significant because it draws the eye to your message which gets it noticed and therefore also gets your message read—making it key to communicating with chalk. I think this is because color is very expressive. The people creating the event wanted to convey a message embedded in the color. The first “Day of Compassion” advertisement was done in warm colors which were meant to communicate that the event was warm, loving, and welcoming; whereas, the second advertisement with brighter colors seem to communicate a livelier, fun, and exciting environment. In my study, most students were drawn to the brighter colors which may show that they are more interested in fun and exciting events.

Placement

The next topic I wanted to investigate with sidewalk chalk was the prime placement for an advertisement where it would get the most views. I looked at advertisements laid down by the Bilingual Club on campus because they had their advertisements in diverse places on campus that were all drawn the same way, which allowed me to focus on just the placement success, not

color, size, etc. Many of their advertisements to recruit new members were in Schroeder Plaza, one of the busiest places on campus. The other one that I looked at was outside of Stevenson where the Languages, Literatures, and Cultures office is located—a place with a more specific language-oriented clientele. I repeated my original procedures for consistency; since I was looking at ads in two places, I did them on separate Mondays. Again, I sat right next to the ads and watched for physical cues that students were stopping to read the ad. I was not surprised to observe that more people noticed the messages in Schroeder Plaza. The volume of people viewing the message in the plaza vs. outside Stevenson was almost double. The plaza simply had more people exposed to it. That ensured the message was being seen by the most people possible. When looking at placement, it reminded me of another CHAT (cultural-historical activity theory) element discussed in Joyce Walker's "Just CHATting" article: **distribution**. Distribution, in this case, refers to the thought behind the choices this group has made in where to place their advertisement. They understood that their message would have the most exposure in the highly concentrated places on campus, which is telling about their organization. By these decisions I would conclude that the Bilingual Club wanted to gain as many numbers as they could, not necessarily just people who are already involved in the language department.

Frequency

The amount of these messages being drawn around campus is a significant factor. In my own experience, the more I see something that I recognize around campus, the more likely I am to stop and read the message. When I was in high school, I had a teacher that would force me to do the same chemistry problem seven times before I could move on to the next problem. She said that seven times was the amount of repetition required for my brain to retain the most information. Much like in my chemistry class, effective messages need enough exposure for people to remember what you are trying to say. With sidewalk chalk they can use the same message along one pathway so that when you are walking you keep seeing the same thing until you eventually read it. Though I did not test for this variable, I think that considering frequency would help explain why I was won over by the comedy show chalk advertisement; I saw the same advertisement about twice a day for a week which gave me the high exposure that imprints messages to receivers. Also, in conjunction, I think that when I see the same message over and over again, I start to assume that more people are going. Whether it is true or not, when I see twenty advertisements I assume tons of other students have seen it and are potentially going to this event. If more people are involved in this event, then it is perceived as "popular" or "cool," further enticing me to join. This genre of writing is easy to put in multiple places at once which makes it persuasive.

Text vs. Pictures

There is also the component of artwork being incorporated into messages that changes the effectiveness of the message in sidewalk chalking. In my own experience, I love looking at advertisements with artwork or pictures. In my field research for text vs. pictures in chalking, I focused on the advertisements for the Gamma Phi Circus on campus that was opening the weekend after my research. They were good candidates for this section because they had different types of chalk advertisements with both pictures and text giving me much to study. I replicated my experiment from the other topics, taking note of the amount of people stopping/reading the chalk announcement on the ground.

The first chalk advertisement that I looked at was the Gamma Phi Circus ad that included a fun drawing of a circus tent (See Figure 3). It had many other artistic qualities to it such as fun writing and a smaller illustration of a star holding balloons. The advertisement had a lot of whimsy, which I thoroughly enjoyed. When I observed people walking past it, an overwhelming amount of them stopped to look at the drawing, turning their heads to see the whole image and read the bottom part with information. In the two hours I was there, I counted forty-six people reading it on their way to and from class. This clearly shows that people are drawn to fun art. Artwork intermixed with your ad seems to grab people's attention and pique their interest long enough for them to read the other information in the advertisement. The other Gamma Phi Circus ad that I observed that was parallel to this ad was not looked at very often, I suspect, because it was just a block of text. The people I observed did not even glance at it twice. A potential interference with my observation of this second ad for Gamma Phi Circus was that it was an older advertisement that was walked over much more so it seemed to be faded. The difference in "newness" between these ads might have contributed to their individual popularity.

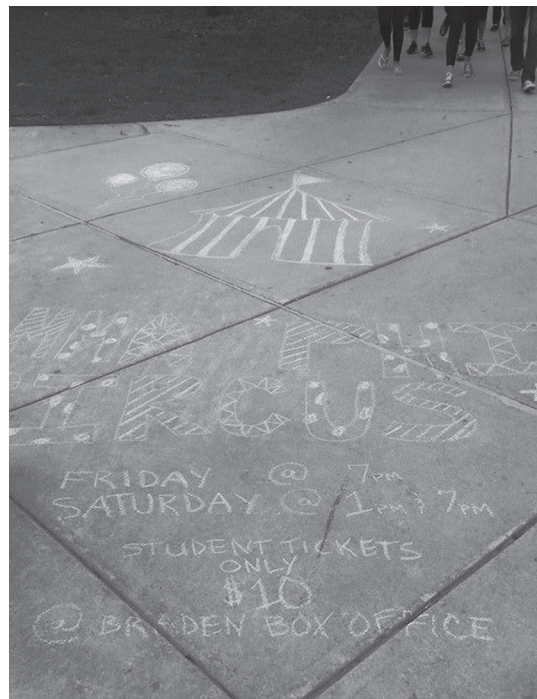


Figure 3: Gamma Phi Circus Advertisement.

Drawbacks

Using chalk is a way to keep **ecology** in mind. Ecology is the environmental factors that affect a text. The way chalk interacts with the environment is unique.

In my research, when looking at the Bilingual Club's chalk advertising on the second Monday that I was observing, it rained most of the day. Sidewalk chalk obviously washes away in the rain, which is problematic if a group is trying to send a message. Chalk lacks permanency that other advertisements might have. On the rainy day, there was not a single person during my observation period that stopped to look at the messages. Most people seemed flustered by the weather, in a hurry, or with their head down completely. In my own experience, chalking is only effective when the weather cooperates, so in the late fall through early spring, sidewalk chalk is not a medium that is used frequently. The risk of weather ruining ads is a major drawback of the medium for those who use sidewalk chalk as a way to hook people for organizations or events that are time sensitive.

In the End

From this project, I discovered that there are plenty of ways to make chalk announcements or advertisements your own, make them entertaining, and still accomplish goals. For me, chalking began as a fun way to get across a message that people will love looking at. It also served to inspire an investigation into a unique perspective on what forms advertising can take in the life of a college student such as myself. I now realize that many factors were at work that day that I saw a chalk advertisement for that comedy group. The message I was seeing was colorful which initially snagged my interest. As I continued to observe the advertisement, I enjoyed the writing and attempt at pictures included. Once the ad caught my eye with the design elements, I was engaged enough to read fully about the event. The ad was compelling enough for me to take notice, and then I saw it a few more times which prompted me to find out more details. I went to the comedy group's website to confirm the time. The advertisement was the initial spark. Overall, the advertisement I saw had a good balance of color, placement, frequency, and pictures making it a successful chalk advertisement. Chalk, for me, has grown from just something fun to do when I was forced to play outside as a kid, to a way to communicate with people on a larger scale.

References

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- Vazquez, E., Gevers, T., Lucassen, M., van de Weijer, J., Baldrich, R. (2010). Saliency of Color Image Derivatives: A Comparison Between Computational Models and Human Perception." *Journal of the Optical Society of America. A, Optics, Image Science and Vision*, 27(3), pp. 613–621.



Sydney Velez is an undergraduate double major in public relations and English studies. She loves to read, study, and can almost always be found in the library. When she is not hitting the books, she likes to peruse art galleries and museums to see the beauty that comes out of great artists' minds.

