



# STEVE HANNAH

President and CEO, *The Onion*

## ***How a commitment to content made turned a small funny newspaper into a serious business***

Addressing the 21<sup>st</sup> annual Brandworks University crowd, Steve Hannah used the story of the student-founded paper, *The Onion*, as an example to marketers on how to build a 21<sup>st</sup> century publishing platform that is on the cutting edge of new technologies as they emerge.

The one-time print paper now has a prominent website, social media presence, radio shows, Youtube channels and now a cable television series. With video clips, newspaper headlines and radio broadcasts, Hannah told the intriguing story on how the paper came about and why it is always positioned for what's next in media.

## ***Remember your brand as you expand***

As Hannah pointed out, *The Onion* has a firm understanding of their brand and world view, something he succinctly described as “the conversation that takes place in the break room between shifts at the Land of Lakes cheese factory” It is homespun, cynical and has a low tolerance for BS. From this core foundation, *The Onion* is clear about their role in the lives of their readers/customers.

In 1988, two UW undergrads founded the paper in Madison. From there to Minneapolis, Milwaukee Chicago and Boulder, the paper quickly gained national recognition, even being approached for a possible buyout by Comedy Central after just over 10 years of life.

In 2007, *The Onion News Network*, an online parody of 24-hour news stations, launched online. Spotlited by a news segment covering all the “BS” in the world, it demonstrated how the paper was able to expand into new media while maintaining its consistent worldview and role in the lives of its customers.

## ***Remain innovators in the midst of crisis***

In the midst of this success, *The Onion* faced economic challenges that were dominating the newspaper industry, but they never forgot that they were a content producing company that needed to be ahead of the new wave of content

creation. With a strong tech team and digital presence, *The Onion* began producing apps for iPhone and Android markets, teaming with marketers to create sponsored content for an ever increasing array of content vehicles. A recent example of this is the “Undercover” music project which *The Onion*'s AV Club created to showcase new musical talent. The readership of the AV Club is a highly desirable target for marketers and *The Onion* has sold out of sponsorships to this series for two years.

## ***In the business of selling ideas***

This commitment to creating engaging content and finding smart marketers who fit their brand is the core of *The Onion*'s continued success. Every creative idea is paired with an equally strong business case and everything continues to further the brand.

The once small town, college-based paper has since developed into a hilarious, nationally-recognized media presence based on three principles that Hannah outlined:

**1) Protect the Brand.** The Onion is very careful about who it partners with and how they produce content to continue to please their readers.

**2) Innovate and Invent Constantly.** Moving into new platforms, new technologies and creating new content streams has been key to *The Onion*'s growth when other media companies have struggled.

**3) No Good Creative Idea Should Exist Without a Business Case.** This is also central to how The Onion has maintained a tremendous growth curve when other media companies are shrinking. While they are able to constantly produce varied content, *The Onion* is still interested in having those ideas expand their business.



*Steve has spent his life in media, working for CBS News, Wisconsin Public Television, The Record and as Executive Editor of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel before serving as President & CEO of The Onion.*