

## VU Amsterdam objects and their stories: 1990–1995

### The reading board: the first VU Amsterdam advertising campaign

In 1992, VU Amsterdam launched the advertising campaign 'These times call for a Free University'. Part of this was a student recruitment campaign using the traditional Dutch *leesplankje* (reading board) with illustrations by Cornelis Jetses, in which the old words – *Aap*, *Noot*, *Mies*, etc. – were combined with contemporary images. The campaign was a success and ran for over 10 years, introducing new images every year. These were linked to specific degree programmes, such as *Noot* (a walnut) for Psychology, *Vuur* (fire - a space shuttle taking off) for Physics and Astronomy and *Weide* (parched meadow) for Earth Sciences.

By: Ab Flipse



The campaign was VU Amsterdam's first university-wide advertising campaign and one of the first in the Netherlands. Incidentally, VU Amsterdam already had more experience than other universities with 'propaganda', as it was called then. This was aimed at those who supported the university financially. As early as the 1930s, [a film was made](#) to illustrate everyday life at VU Amsterdam, shown at recruitment evenings throughout the country. Later on, the Student General Counselling Service provided 'general course information' on a small scale, and from the mid-1970s VU Amsterdam employed a water board information officer. These activities led to the establishment of the Information & External Relations Office, which gradually transformed the traditional information provision into profiling and recruitment.

It is no coincidence that the first major recruitment campaign was launched in the 1990s. This was the decade in which the traditional steady flow of students to VU Amsterdam and other universities, which had taken flight from the 1960s onwards, came to a halt. As Dutch universities were increasingly funded based on student numbers, recruitment also became financially important. Within the university itself, however, there was quite a bit of resistance: wasn't advertising more suited to detergent manufacturers than an academic institution? After all, good wine needs no bush.

Nonetheless, an important first step in this development had already been taken in 1989. In cooperation with design agency BRS Premsela Vonk, a new VU emblem was developed: the blue griffin. This mythical creature with the lower body of a lion, the head and wings of an eagle and the ears of a horse brought unity to and became emblematic of the corporate identity. This was not static, but distinctive. The different animal parts refer to the different scientific disciplines, which is stylistically expressed in a 'classically' designed body (arts and humanities), a 'mathematically' designed head (natural sciences) and freely designed wings (social sciences). The griffin looks back, as he is aware of tradition. He stands with all four feet on the ground of experience, yet combines this with 'the flight of the imagination'.

The campaign with the reading board, developed in cooperation with Campaign Company, also took VU Amsterdam's own identity as a starting point. The reading board – traditional but combined with modern images – connected past and present. The campaign was large-scale, with an emphasis on outdoor advertising: posters were placed in bus shelters and on billboards, and covered buses and trams. Daily newspaper ads supported the campaign. Support within the university grew: the campaign was playful, and moreover it offered both unity – the concept of the reading board – and the possibility to highlight degree programmes separately, with endless variations. There was also praise from the advertising world: in 1998, the campaign won an important advertising award, a silver 'Effie'.



The campaign became strongly associated with the image of VU Amsterdam and was repeated several times. It was only in 2003 that it was followed by the 'More perspective' campaign, with the recurring theme 'You learn more if you think outside the box', which was considered more suitable for an international profile. In this campaign, sentences or images were given a different meaning by adding an extra word or image placed 'outside the box'. Between 2011 and 2018, the slogan 'VU means looking further' took centre stage. Since 2018, VU Amsterdam has used the slogan 'Change your world' in recruitment, with the most striking image being a croquette that turns out to be a kiwi inside, accompanied by the text 'Change fast food'. All this is coordinated by the Communications & Marketing Department, which in three decades has grown into the central department responsible for positioning the university and all corporate communications.

See also:

- [Slide-tape presentation on the importance and use of the new griffin symbol](#) (1991)
- A [promotional video](#) as part of the 1993 campaign 'These times call for a Free University'

### Literature

For a more comprehensive account of changing perspectives on marketing and communications at VU Amsterdam since the 1980s and references, see: Ab Flipse, [Van maagd naar griffioen. Identiteit, profilering en corporate identity van de Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam sinds 1989](#) (From virgin to griffin: Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam's identity, profile and corporate identity since 1989), in: L.J. Dorsman and P.J. Knegtmans (ed.), *Universiteit en identiteit: Over samenwerking, concurrentie en taakverdeling tussen de Nederlandse universiteiten* (University and identity: on cooperation, competition and the division of tasks between Dutch universities) (Hilversum: Lost, 2017), pages 71–89.

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To see all the stories in this exhibition, visit [VU Amsterdam objects and their stories | 140 years of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam](#)