

Internal Branding: A University's Most Valuable Intangible Asset

ABSTRACT

Purpose

This paper examines the essential role that internal branding plays in successful university settings.

Design/methodology/approach

Case studies from businesses and universities, as well as reviews of the pertinent literature and research, provide the data for the paper's analysis of university branding successes and failures.

Findings

The author concludes that, in the complex university realm, internal branding helps an institution overcome internal resistance to branding efforts. It helps the institution take an identity-development strategy beyond traditional approaches, such as new logos, snappy taglines and expensive advertising campaigns, to an embedded cultural approach that guides everything from communications, fund-raising, marketing and personnel policies to enrollment management and program development.

Practical implications

The evidence indicates that the biggest mistake universities make when undertaking branding initiatives is failure to embrace an inside-out approach to brand development. Those universities that succeed in their branding efforts are willing to borrow strategies from the corporate world to get buy-in by engaging all interested constituents—faculties, staff, students, alumni and others—in the process.

Originality/value

This paper examines an emerging phenomenon within higher education marketing, one that, as of yet, has not been explored fully in the marketing literature.

Key words

Brand development, internal branding, university branding success

INTRODUCTION

Universities today find themselves competing for students and support in a marketplace made increasingly complex by a convergence of factors. First, their target audience is bombarded by an assortment of marketing messages and consumer information—beginning with the ranking systems that identify the “best” schools and the “top” programs. The audience is also more brand-savvy than its counterparts from previous generations. In fact, students today openly affiliate with various consumer brands, whether Apple, Nokia, Urban Outfitters or Virgin. Any institution seeking to distinguish itself with this group needs to keep in mind that it is sensitive to authenticity and sophisticated about evaluating marketing messages.

Making matters even more complex, demographic shifts are changing the marketplace in many regions of the world. In various European countries, for example, the population is aging, and even in the United States, where the children of baby boomers have been applying to colleges in record numbers, the pool of applicants is expected to begin shrinking this year. All this is happening just as many governments across the globe are reducing the resources devoted to higher education. In other words, the competition among universities is getting stiffer and stiffer.

As a result, colleges and universities have learned that they must become more accountable to their constituents. They realize that, just like for-profit entities within the corporate world, they must develop sustainability strategies. Many have turned to branding as a solution. In fact, in the last years of the 20th century, branding became part

of the higher education lexicon, and today, most colleges and universities around the world have embraced a brand strategy.

They have done so with mixed feelings and, all too often, with an imperfect grasp of the process. Perhaps that is no surprise, given that universities operate outside the realm of conventional businesses and given that they are relatively new to systematic and complex branding endeavors. So it is no wonder that many of them have concentrated their brand-building efforts on “quick-fix” solutions—logo redesigns, catchy taglines and trendy advertising campaigns—with high visibility and some tangible sizzle.

Unfortunately, these “outside-in” approaches offer short-term benefits and tend to fizzle once the early applause has subsided. Sometimes they even do harm. When communications and marketing professionals develop brand strategies that are not supported internally, consumers feel betrayed and frustrated. Not surprisingly, the reputation of the institution suffers, and the branding initiative becomes a scapegoat for larger problems.

UNIVERSITIES PUT BRANDING TO THE TEST

As with many other business concepts considered for a university setting, branding began with favorable buzz but eventually encountered formidable resistance. The reasons for this resistance are complex and grow out of higher education’s reluctance to acknowledge its concordant needs with corporate institutions. Like corporations, universities need to think about their sustainability. Like corporations, they need to please a demanding public. And like corporations, they face stiff competition.

A decade or so into the branding experiment, the evidence indicates that universities are struggling to make branding work. Many lack the budgets to contemplate—much less implement—comprehensive efforts. Still others suffer from frequent leadership changes, with one administration dropping the initiatives of its predecessors. But for the most part, it appears that the biggest mistake institutions make when undertaking branding initiatives is failure to embrace a strategy that includes an internal component to brand development. In other words, universities have been guilty of adopting the wrong branding strategies, opting for a product brand strategy, rather than a corporate brand strategy.

Product brands are often driven by short-term approaches guided by advertising campaigns developed by marketers. On the other hand, corporate brands are focused on sustainability and based on a set of core values and beliefs that connect the entire organization. Typically, a corporate brand strategy is defined and guided by an inside-out approach to brand development (Hatch and Schultz, 2008). Many schools hesitate to explore successful practices from companies like LEGO, Starbucks, Southwest Airlines and others, for fear they might be labeled “corporate.” What’s more, schools often fall into the trap of thinking they have limited time to implement a branding initiative. Daunted by the ticking of an imaginary clock, they skip the important internal branding process.

In addition, the communications and marketing professionals charged with branding initiatives have been trained to focus on external target audiences, particularly prospective students. They think about increased enrollment and financial outcomes, and are unaccustomed to engaging faculties, staff, students and other champions of the

university in the brand-building process. The internal systems needed to facilitate communication between administration and the academic units are sorely lacking, thanks to the silo culture that prevails at colleges and universities. This prevents effective and meaningful dialogue about the identity of the institution.

Here is just one example: The core of any brand depends on how a company clarifies the behavior it needs from employees to deliver on the brand promise. Every brand experience carries a defining moment that will determine how a customer reacts. Every organization—universities included—should be charged with creating a map of the experience customers will have with a given business and brand. By doing so, they identify every opportunity for a customer connection with one or more of the company's employees (Sartain and Schumann, 2006). If they fail to do so, they risk sending conflicting messages to their constituents. Without effective internal branding, conflicting messages are almost assured.

TRADITIONAL APPROACHES TO BRANDING

Branding began sometime around 1500 B.C., when the ancient Greeks marked their cattle, a practice that still exists in the livestock industry. However, branding initiatives relevant to an institutional enterprise began in 1931, when Procter & Gamble started placing labels on its products to help consumers differentiate one product from another. Shortly after World War II, Ford and General Motors engaged in heated advertising battles, which continue today, as a means of educating their audiences about the distinctive qualities of their respective products.

In the past decade, numerous colleges and universities have undertaken efforts to help prospective and current students, as well as faculties, staff, donors, alumni and friends, distinguish among competitive institutions offering higher education opportunities. As mentioned earlier, the approach most institutions have adopted is the product brand process described by Hatch and Schultz.

In a marketplace crowded with options, these approaches often fail to resonate with stakeholder groups. That's especially true of traditional paid advertising. Advertising as an outside-in approach to brand-building has met with limited success on most campuses, in part because faculties tend to be skeptical about branding. The faculty typically associates branding with marketing, which in turn is associated with advertising, often bad advertising. When colleges and universities limit their identity to solutions like advertising, they reinforce concerns about branding. All too often, faculties think that branding is just another marketing exercise. As such, they fail to see its relevance and fail to support it. By contrast, when faculties are engaged in the brand-building process they take ownership.

Campus marketers have an obligation to demonstrate how the brand-building process affects—and reflects—the professoriate. Because professors are often the pillar of a school's brand, this exchange is essential. The author can testify to the value of this exchange thanks to firsthand experience gained upon introducing a school's brand-building strategy to the faculty senate. Many thought that the communications office was suggesting an expensive advertising campaign, while others assumed they would be left out of the process. After the communications team reassured them that advertising was not being recommended as the brand solution, and after reiterating that the institution

valued their input, the initiative started to gain their confidence and trust. These key messages continue to be delivered throughout the internal branding process, as well as an explanation about the difference between product and corporate brand development.

Colleges and universities can learn from advertising failures among their peers. They can also learn from other experiments—taglines, for example—that fall short of expectations. In 2007, Thomas Bartlett wrote about school slogans in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. His article, titled “Your (Lame) Slogan Here,” (November 23, 2007), discussed the obsession that many institutions have with mottos and taglines. Bartlett asks whether colleges and universities really need a motto, pointing out that most alumni do not know their alma mater’s slogan. The author’s own research supports his conclusion. The findings of an extensive research project as part of a branding initiative show that alumni and faculties did not understand the university’s motto at the time. Once the University engaged alumni and faculties to help develop the University’s brand strategy, built from the inside-out, alumni, faculties and others rallied around the brand. In fact, these constituents agreed that the university should not adopt a tagline, as they felt that it would diminish the brand-development process and dilute the brand.

Like their corporate counterparts, colleges and universities must recognize that their most valuable tangible asset is their passionate employees. Businesses refer to these assets as brand champions. Venture Republic, an international consulting firm, defines brand champions on its website: “Brand champions are internal and external story tellers who spread the brand vision, brand values and cultivate the brand in an organization. Every organization needs committed and passionate brand champions. The more employees that an organization can turn into brand champions, the better will it be

equipped to build and maintain strong brand equity. Singapore Airlines, L’Oreal, Harley-Davidson, Google and LEGO are well-known examples of companies that benefit tremendously from having employees who are strong and dedicated brand champions.” By engaging brand champions in the brand-development process, institutions of higher learning will realize their most valuable intangible asset is internal branding.

BRAND AS CULTURE AND DIALOGUE

When universities define internal branding as a formal program of engaging internal constituents in a dialogue about the brand-development process, when they are willing to apply the “corporate” practice of identity-building, then the opportunity exists for universities to agree that internal branding can become their most valuable intangible asset. Faculties, students, alumni and other constituents are all accustomed to and fond of dialogue. Applying this concept to branding makes it much easier to digest; therefore, for many, branding is a conversation.

Traditional advertising has been a one-way conversation: sender to receiver. Today, people want and expect a two-way conversation. They want to give feedback. Internal branding fosters that. Advertising represents a red flag to many consumers. They are much more accommodating to the idea of branding as conversation (Jaffe, 2007). The author has witnessed this in research projects for a number of educational organizations. When conducting research for two school systems, faculties and parents were enthusiastic about the opportunity to converse about the image of the organizations and delighted to provide recommendations for a brand strategy. Conversational marketing as a dialogue with customers, as an information exchange in which both

parties benefit, builds trust. Trust leads to loyalty, and customers then become long-term partners (Gillin, 2007). Colleges and universities that establish a healthy dialogue and engage their constituents have a better chance to develop lifelong relationships with their stakeholders.

Faculty and employees can, and should, be a school's biggest fans. Organizations that make a compelling offer to their constituents and cultivate a relationship that can withstand the competition's strategies of lower prices, loftier claims and snazzier features establish confidence for consumers. They also validate that consumers have made the right choice and are eager to keep making the same choice. A great example is Starbucks (Taylor and LaBarre, 2006). In the last year, the author has sipped lattes in Dallas, Denver, San Francisco, Toronto and Zurich, among others. At every Starbucks outlet, employee buy-in, customer and employee dialogues, and on-brand behavior were on display.

Because schools have focused their brand efforts on external visual executions like logos, taglines and advertising campaigns, they often fail to think of their brands in terms of culture change. Many organizations have difficulty understanding the connections between culture and brand (Brown 2006). Corporate approaches to brand development are based on strategic and verbal identity-building efforts; this feels intangible to communications and marketing professionals who rely on tactical and visual executions to measure their success. Institutions of higher learning have the opportunity to think differently about their approach to brand building. They can embrace the corporate model by concentrating on internal branding. If they do, they gain the constituent support that has often eluded them; they help constituents understand the real

purpose of their branding initiative; and they gain the trust of stakeholders, especially academicians.

In the past year, the author created a blog to test the notion that internal branding is an intangible asset driven by institutional brand champions. The blog provides a forum for business and university professionals to share their thoughts about different approaches to branding and what they think it means to be a brand champion. These opinions have allowed audiences in all categories to identify the common ground between corporate and university brand-development processes and to realize that the most valuable tangible asset organizations have are their employees. In other words, they have realized that internal branding represents an opportunity to capitalize on their organizations' most reliable assets. The following excerpts from the blog support this point of view.

Steve Benfield is senior creative director for SAS, an international software company. Benfield wrote, "The voice of an organization, how employees communicate to others about and for the organization, is another key attribute of the brand. How an employee answers the telephone and lives the brand values is just as important, or more important, than the colors of the newsletter or how the brochure looks. It's all about the impression employees make on the target audiences. When all employees understand the mission, vision, values and culture of the organization, a style is developed that can be reflected in the visual identity of the organization.

"Why does brand matter? It's about loyalty. For example, if students have a positive experience at a college or university, they will become loyal alums who will give back to the institution and encourage others to attend the college or university. What

people think and how they feel about a brand creates an emotional connection that goes beyond the brand presentation.”

Mary Jo Hatch is professor emeritus for the University of Virginia and an adjunct and visiting professor at the Copenhagen Business School, and Majken Schultz is a professor at the Copenhagen Business School. Here is what they had to say: “When Majken got involved as a dean in our full-time MBA program at Copenhagen Business School (CBS), it was not a small thing. The program thrust CBS onto the world stage. With the launch of this program in 2004, we started competing head-to-head with leading educational institutions all over the world—some with such strong reputations that they expect to set standards for the rest of us. Although, with 16,000 students, CBS is one of the largest business schools in the world, its brand power does not come close to dominating the marketplace, as do those of some of our fiercest competitors: Harvard, INSEAD and the London Business School.

“Being from a small country forces us to be responsive to our customers and other stakeholders because without our attention to their needs, we could easily be ignored. Our stakeholders tell us that the democratic values and culture of involvement that characterize Scandinavian leadership are of great interest throughout the world—whether in India or Iceland. And we have learned that, where branding is concerned, putting stakeholders’ interests front and center is as important to a business school as it is to a corporation.

“But giving customers practical insight into the corporate use of democratic values is not enough; your culture has to walk the talk. CBS has a long tradition of cross-

disciplinary work, where students learn that no single perspective—or individual!—has the whole answer. So having a strong culture standing behind your corporate brand does not mean that all within the organization agree—but rather that they appreciate and make use of diverse thinking and strive to maintain mutual respect.

“As you know, seeing the organizational culture that stands behind your brand can be difficult. Culture is deeply embedded and does not make itself available to full description. That is why we at CBS still have a hard time stating what the Scandinavian values of leadership are. It is so much easier when Mary Jo comes for one of her many visits. She is always able to provoke CBS students by reminding them that, to the rest of the world, Scandinavian culture is distinctive and that teaching in Copenhagen is different from teaching anywhere else in the world. The students love it. Having a mirror to reflect their uniqueness makes them feel proud and special. And this is what branding in university requires. Each time we enter a classroom we have another opportunity to be brand champions for CBS, for Denmark and for Scandinavia. And we also regard ourselves to be brand champions for corporate branding!”

Pat Frantz Cercone is director of communications and marketing at University of Pittsburgh Bradford. Cercone says, “Brand champions on our campus are those staff offices and faculty departments that best outwardly live our brand promise: The University of Pittsburgh at Bradford is a safe, friendly institution for students who want to earn a world-renowned degree in a personalized environment. For the past two years, we've recognized the members of one faculty department and one staff office at our annual *Go Beyond Brand Party*, which is an informal and fun campus-wide event held in

February on the anniversary of our brand launch three years ago. At the party, the brand champions are introduced and recognized by the president, who also presents them with a certificate and later takes them out to lunch.

“Interestingly, the day after our brand party, a faculty member called me, asking why broadcast communications was chosen as a faculty brand champion this year and not one of the programs in his academic division. That told me that the designation of brand champion is becoming something that is coveted on our campus, which is very exciting. The concept of beyond, which is our institution's tagline, was created when we went through the brand-development process four years ago. The consultants we worked with, after talking to various members of our campus community, were hearing a common thread in the stories being told—the idea of going beyond: At Pittsburgh Bradford, they were able to go beyond the classroom by participating in a great internship or research opportunity. At our institution, they went beyond place by studying abroad in places like Ireland, Costa Rica, France and England. Attending Pitt-Bradford transformed lives and enabled them to go beyond their expectations.”

Nicholas Ind is a Scandinavian brand strategist and author of *Living the Brand*. He wrote: “People sometimes ask me what’s the most important thing in a successful internal branding programme. There are certainly some pre-conditions such as senior management involvement, a willingness to see the process as more than just a communication exercise, the involvement of human resources and a positive organisational culture, but there is one mechanism that stands out: brand champions. These are the individuals in groups, divisions and branch offices who willingly engage

with the brand and make it relevant for their colleagues. They do not have to be experts on branding, nor do the most senior people in the organisation— albeit the respect of their peers helps. Rather the most important attribute is enthusiasm. They should possess the confidence to talk about the brand vision and values and what it means to the people they work with, be capable of putting together workshops to generate new initiatives to deliver the brand in day-to-day work and willing to share good ideas with people in other teams and offices. When champions work well they are able to transform the brand into something that has meaning for the whole organisation.

“The evidence for the power of champions is derived from my experience of running programmes for both business organisations and non-profit ones. In an organisation of any size it is not possible for a senior management team to impose its idea of the brand on employees. To the surprise of managers, employees sometimes ignore, or are even cynical, to centrally produced messages from on-high about such things as brands. The idea of a brand only begins to resonate when it begins to affect the way people do their everyday work and that needs the involvement of people on the ground. People have to be inspired by the brand and see the benefit of engaging with it.”

CONCLUSION

Every university considers itself top-notch. But too many schools dilute their blue-ribbon stature by focusing their brand-development efforts on bad advertising or other reactionary approaches. Those universities that succeed in their branding efforts are willing to borrow strategies from the corporate world and get buy-in by engaging all interested constituents in the process. A sound solution is based on a long-term strategy:

building a sustainable brand. That means engaging audiences in a dialogue, which leads to additional discussions about the identity of the organization (Kelly, 2007).

For the past seven years, the author has studied successful inside-out approaches to brand building from the corporate world. He has led research projects for school-branding initiatives in primary, secondary and post-secondary levels. The author has also presented case studies at conferences around the world and completed an extensive review of the literature pertaining to organizational brand development. His findings show that colleges and universities share much in common with the corporate world. Like universities, successful and authentic corporate organizations are driven by their core values and guiding principles. Like universities, they are contending with a marketplace of savvy, sophisticated consumers. It is not much of a stretch to think that their experiences in brand-building may well offer universities a model for sustainable relationships with their core constituencies. When universities understand that their most valuable tangible asset is their employees, and when universities engage them in the institution's brand-development process, the most valuable intangible asset becomes internal branding.

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