



The Branding of Higher Education

Date created: January 2008

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Campbell Soup, Volvo, Xerox, Coca-Cola . . . What could higher education possibly have in common with these commercial products and their companies? As objectionable as it may be to some within the walls of the academy, there are undeniable parallels. We serve diverse constituencies; the educational experience we provide to students has a price associated with it; institutional vitality is highly dependent upon the revenue generated from student enrollments; we have competitors; we compete on price, quality, service, and reputation; our image is largely determined by the constituents we serve; and their image of our institutions is influenced by their interactions with us.

However, the concept of branding, as applied to higher education, is somewhat different from branding in the commercial sector. Most notably, branding in higher education is about who we are, and is not limited to what a particular product offers the marketplace. An educational brand is often equated to an institution's academic reputation. But, that explanation is far too limiting. Think of a college or university brand as being synonymous with the institution's personality—congruent with its mission, defined by its values.

Perhaps the most significant benefit of branding in higher education is the focus it brings to an institution. For example, a student-centered college or university will respond to changing student needs and expectations, but, in an attempt to be all things to all people, often it becomes vulnerable to mission drift or a gradual dilution of effectiveness as the institution becomes increasingly thin, first on the margins and then in the core enterprise—teaching and learning. The values-centric approach inherent in branding provides an institution with an anchor to guide responses to constituent needs and expectations. The brand is defined by where the institution's

values and the constituents' expectations intersect. In this paradigm, the brand becomes the filter through which everything is vetted (e.g., strategic directions, resource allocations, hiring decisions, and curriculum development). It serves as a lens to strategically focus the institution in the midst of fluid internal and external pressures as well as opportunities.

A values-based focus does not mean, however, that we can afford to ignore what our constituents expect from us. We will not thrive in a vacuum. Ultimately, the value of our brand is determined by those we serve. It is worth only what students and parents are willing to pay for it, donors are willing to give to support it, and faculty and staff are willing to contribute to make it real. The brand must have relevance to others.

Within the higher education branding construct, there are two major components: (1) promotion of the brand and (2) delivering on the promise of the brand. Both are addressed in this article.

Promotion of the Brand

Before the brand can be effectively promoted, the desired brand identity (how you want others to perceive the institution) must be defined. A brand rationale, brand attributes, and brand benefits should be clearly articulated and consistently reflect the institution's values while aligning with constituent expectations. As previously suggested, the brand lives in the hearts and minds of those we serve. Consequently, the logical place to begin defining the brand identity is with an assessment of the existing brand image for various constituent groups valued by the institution. Though the assessment can take many forms, the desired outcome is to gain insight into the current reality.

The current reality is then compared against the institution's vision for its brand identity to determine where gaps between the two exist. Recognized gaps enable marketers to target a brand strategy—increasing the probability of achieving related institutional objectives. A targeted brand strategy fosters effective positioning of a school's brand among competitors along with the management of brand assets such as institutional image, brand equity, the brand message, and the promise inherent in the brand message. Too often, the brand strategy is devoid of any assessment data and thus, positioning and messaging are not grounded in the current reality or a gap analysis linked to institutional aspirations. The end result is typically a failed promotional campaign defined by empty or unfulfilled promises.

Brand tactics emanating from a sound brand strategy yield successful promotional campaigns infinitely more often than the fragmented “flavor of the month” or the panic-driven “let's try anything” approaches common at many colleges and universities. For example, market segmentation inspired by a brand strategy focuses efforts on target populations who, if compelled to enroll, persist, advocate for, or financially support the institution, will impact strategic goals of the college more so than other potential segments. Likewise, a brand message spawned from a brand strategy is likely to have a laser focus that reflects the essence of the institution rather than the whims of a marketer or preferences of current students or administrators.

Assuming that brand tactics are aligned with the brand strategy and that brand strategy is aligned with the institution's mission and values, there are five universal tactics that should be employed.

1. **Seek to understand constituent needs.** Surveys, focus groups, observations, a review of historical data, and the like are used to collect information for pattern matching of constituent behaviors and understandings that reflect their needs of the institution.
2. **Identify market segments that are highly valued by the institution.** Define the characteristics of each segment, including motivators and barriers to supporting the institution's objectives.
3. **Determine which brand attributes will remove or lessen identified barriers and exploit motivators.** To illustrate, consider the market segment of out-of-state prospective students. Potential barriers may be distance from home or the perception that the school is a "suitcase campus." Motivators might include the reputation of a high profile academic program, tuition reciprocity, or the desire to experience new places.
4. **Use relevant brand attributes to effectively position the institution against would-be competitors.** What are your institutional strengths and competitor weaknesses associated with the needs of a particular market segment? How can you capture this niche and defend it against all who seek to encroach upon your market space?
5. **Differentiate the institution from competitors through relevant communications.** While remaining true to the corporate brand message, spin the marketing message in a way that differentiates your institution from competitors and is relevant to the targeted segment. Describe how their unique needs will be met by your institution (often referred to as a value proposition). Convey to them how your value proposition is different from direct competitors.

Beyond the tactics themselves, practical matters of implementation must be addressed as well. What communication channels will be most effective in delivering the message? Who will have the most influence over the targeted population and hence, should deliver the message? When will the message most likely influence decision-making? What resources and infrastructure are needed to ensure successful implementation? How will the quality of execution be monitored? How will effectiveness of the brand promotional efforts be measured?

The degree to which due diligence is performed prior to launching the branding campaign determines the success of the campaign. Even with careful planning and near-perfect execution, brand promotion is a hollow endeavor if a constituent's experience with the college or university is incongruent with the brand message. Delivering on the promise of the brand is the single most important aspect of branding a higher education institution.

Delivering on the Promise of the Brand

Many higher education marketing professionals believe their institution does not have a brand. Nothing could be further from the truth. A more accurate assessment would be that their institutions have failed to manage their brand. At colleges and universities where positive constituent experiences occur by chance or randomly rather than through a tightly integrated, promise-driven, and planned approach, a brand exists, but it suffers from benign neglect.

To effectively shape how constituents view an institution, you must begin first by understanding the promise inherent in the existing brand or the brand the school aspires to have. Such promises are often subtle and always symbolic. The power of symbolism should not be underestimated.

Put simply, there must be congruence between what an institution claims to be and what its constituents actually experience when they interact with any individual or unit affiliated with the campus.

Once the brand promise is broadly understood, there are five steps to ensuring consistent delivery of the promise of the brand.

1. **Define the brand promise.** The definition must be based on the institution's personality—congruent with what the institution espouses to be and more importantly, consistent with institutional behavior. Most colleges and universities have clearly articulated core values, which should be fundamental elements of the brand promise definition. These values and thus, the brand promise must be relevant both to internal and external constituents. Employees, for example, must passionately believe in and care about the promise for it to be authentically delivered through the educational experience and student services. Relevancy does not equate to standardized adoption, but instead it translates to individualized interpretations and behavior associated with the promise. Hence, the promise must be malleable enough to be accepted and practiced by different subcultures within an institution as well as individuals with their own unique beliefs and values. In the academy, this is the only practical way to strike a balance between the objective of universal adoption and maintaining a modicum of autonomy. Collectively, the college or university community must define desired expectations and behaviors associated with the promise.

2. **Live the brand promise.** Consider the role of all faculty, staff, and administrators as “institutional trust agents.” In reality, every encounter people have with the institution is a “moment of truth.” You have thousands of institutional “moments of truth” every day. Whether the encounter occurs in the classroom, in an administrative office, through a campus event, online, in person, or on the phone, each experience either fosters or erodes institutional trust. Think for a moment about your own personal and professional relationships. Is there a single valued relationship in your life that is not built on a foundation of mutual trust? Our students, their families, the school’s alumni, and others we serve are fundamentally the same. They will desire a relationship with an institution only if they trust you.
3. **Operationalize the brand promise.** The promise must be personified through our services, business transactions, human interactions, information delivery, and learning experiences. It must be embedded in the culture and become a part of our institutional DNA. It must be viewed as a covenant between the institution and those we serve—never to be broken. Finally, it requires an unfaltering focus on identifying and eradicating promise gaps using some combination of people, processes, pedagogy, and technology.
4. **Deliver the brand promise consistently.** To achieve consistency, institutions must (1) clearly define the desired constituent experience and (2) ensure the employee experience is aligned with the desired constituent experience. For instance, if a staff member feels mistreated by the institution, it will be virtually impossible for that individual to effectively represent the brand promise to the students they serve. So, to improve consistency of promise delivery to our constituents, we must first create an environment for employees that is conducive to feeling passionate about the organization and its

promise. The campus environment must be one that values the contributions of individuals and proactively enhances human capacity.

5. **Convey the brand promise.** Too often, higher education organizations permit their constituents to form impressions of the institution in an information vacuum—usually based on anecdotes, media coverage, and the negative experiences of the few. Effectively conveying the promise requires an ongoing internal and external campaign. It requires careful management of constituent expectations, the promotion of promise delivery successes, as well as intentional efforts to build institutional loyalty over time.

Conclusion

When marketing units are charged with institutional branding, senior management has unknowingly created a prescription for failure. A marketing department can implement only the promotional aspect of branding. They do not possess the institutional influence or professional expertise to successfully execute the delivery of the brand promise. As this article suggests, brand promotion without the brand promise is often counterproductive. When the expectations generated from promotional activities are incongruent with constituent reality, the image of the institution is tarnished and trust is eroded.

To mitigate image and trust issues, adopt a two-pronged approach to branding—promotion and promise delivery. Branding should not be relegated to just another marketing exercise. First and foremost, it must be about systemic institutional change. Use branding as a catalyst for defining who the institution is and what it aspires to become. If implemented properly, branding can be a means of unifying the campus around a common purpose and vision.

That said, you are advised against using the term “branding” to rally the institution around a change effort. To many in academia, branding is an impure concept best left to the commercial sector. So, cast the branding effort in a context that is more palatable such as “institutional promise” or “constituent engagement.” With acceptable terminology, a holistic approach, and the necessary antecedents for success in place, the conditions exist to radically improve an institution’s image and future reality.