Two Schools of Thought on Branding Education
By Rex Whisman

TRADITIONAL AND CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES

If you're like me, you find yourself standing in line more often than you want to admit waiting for your local Starbucks barista to take your next order. An event we repeat over and over while paying double what we would at the competition. During one recent visit a colleague and I were discussing how colleges and universities long for the day when their stakeholders – prospective and current students, faculty, staff, donors and the general public – are able to tell their "story" on a consistent basis, observe employees display on-brand behavior and experience customers line up to be served, just like at Starbucks. My conviction that colleges and universities can turn this aspiration into reality is confirmed by watching my fellow Starbucks patrons waiting for their coffee.

Competition among schools for the best students, faculty, staff and donors is fiercer than ever before. At the same time private funding continues to decrease while the market in many parts of the world for secondary students is shrinking. To address these issues, many schools have concentrated on external communications solutions like redesigning their logos, creating taglines and developing advertising campaigns. Let's call this the "traditional" approach to educational brand building. A growing number of schools are now realizing the need to build their identities through cultural change, like those in the corporate world. Let's call this a "contemporary" approach to educational brand building.

Like other industries before them, brand development in higher education derives from

the creation of corporate identity standards. Following this strategy, schools integrated their marketing communications. Today, they are frantically trying to determine how best to compete in the noisy marketplace of higher education. They're redesigning logos, coming up with catchy taglines and spending a fortune on advertising. German brand strategist Klaus Schmidt (2002) calls this "superficial tinkering." Schmidt also encourages organizations like schools to think holistically by including the entire organization in the brand building process.

In an interview with Swiss branding expert, Peter Lux, he states, "Creating brands for institutions like universities is extremely demanding. Most of us think about brands as logos, advertising, and other things related to the traditional approach, but brands aren't things at all. A well established brand is an imagined world—an idiosyncratic way of interpreting everything we link mentally to a college or university, and the people that comprise its community. When we limit our thinking to the traditional approach of brand building, we leave out the participatory benefits of the university experience."

Lux goes on to say, "While a traditional approach to brand building works for products that have identical characteristics, it is difficult to apply to service organizations, and other non-profit organizations that benefit from their complex characteristics. If we follow this view with respect to colleges and universities, then we understand the necessity to get as many people within the organization as possible involved in creating experiences that provide meaning and benefit."

If this is true, an interesting dichotomy occurs for schools taking a traditional approach to

branding. When schools limit branding to changing logos, creating taglines and developing advertising campaigns they risk reinforcing the skepticism of two key stakeholder groups— faculty and prospective students—have about branding. Most faculties associate branding with marketing, and generally don't like marketing. While brand savvy teens associate branding with advertising, and generally don't like advertising. Also, when educational brand building is too focused on external communications, schools often risk excluding faculty from the process and raise doubt about whether a process exists. Research shows that unless advertising is cause-related, teens can deem it gimmicky and not respond.

A contemporary approach to branding—defined by cultural change, and applied by an organization such as Harley-Davidson, LEGO, Starbucks and a growing number of colleges and universities—is becoming more prevalent. Skeptics exist within these entities as well, but *dichotomy* becomes *dialogue* when stakeholders realize a contemporary branding approach is not just about logos, taglines and advertising, but about them. Brand skeptics turn into brand champions when branding is about identity building from the inside-out and when it includes them in the process. This approach can resonate with faculty and prospective students more than a traditional approach because it demonstrates the school's commitment to communicating its true essence, core values and academic reputation, rather than simply attempting to recruit more students.

Joseph LePla, Susan V. Davis and Lynn M. Parker (2003) describe branding as the ability for an organization to align all actions and messages with core values, the promise the organization keeps to its customers and the sum total of all customer experiences. Scandinavian brand strategist Nicholas Ind (2004) defines branding in terms of storytelling and is the way communities share and preserve their heritage and build their culture. Can

definitions of branding by many of the world's brand leaders be applied to higher education? I believe the answer is yes.

GETTING BUY-IN TO THE CONTEMPORARY APPROACH

The contemporary approach might be a tough sell because it can take longer to implement than the traditional approach. But as the process moves forward from brand research, to brand assimilation, implementation and evaluation, momentum builds and the process becomes increasingly tangible, and the brand strategy comes to life. The rewards—creating dialogues among constituents that have never interacted with one another previously; gaining a clearer understanding of the school's mission, vision, values and goals; enabling consistent telling of the school's story—makes the journey worthwhile.

Colleges and universities that apply the principles that Lux, Schmidt and others speak of; can be successful in developing a distinct school brand. Whether one views brand building as internal culture building or holistic identity building is a matter of opinion. It is for schools to determine whether to pursue a traditional approach or a contemporary approach to brand building. To remain competitive and find solutions to issues facing higher education, make your own choice: Traditional or Contemporary? Folgers or Starbucks? Coffee in a can or a soothing environment where you can sip a tall, non-fat latte?

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