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We're with the Brand

The value of a unified brand strategy



Browne Review Implications
Naming Policies and Procedures

Relative Harm

Achieving balance in your brand family

By MARY ELLEN COLLINS

When Larry Hincker, Virginia Tech's associate vice president for university relations, arrived on campus 22 years ago, he was surprised to be asked what he wanted his business card to look like. Until he realized that different colleges and programs had cards featuring a wide variety of disparate designs. Even the name of the institution was inconsistent—some used Virginia Tech and others used Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. "I said to the president, 'We're never going to get a reputation if we don't know who we are!'"

Educational institutions understand the importance of having a positive image among their target audiences, but the process of creating, enhancing, and managing that image remains challenging to many.

"Historically, higher education has been skeptical about marketing," says Rob Moore, president and CEO of the marketing communications firm Lipman Hearne. "Twelve to 14 years ago, we would make a presentation

about marketing, and professors would say, 'We don't market, we educate.' There wasn't an understanding of the fundamental relationship between the experience you deliver and your ability to generate revenue from it."

Confusion over what branding is only adds to the challenge. Consultants define *brand* as promising an experience and delivering on that promise. In practice, however, consultants note that many institutional branding efforts seem to begin and end with creating and maintaining a graphic identity, a component that is merely the tip of the branding iceberg.

"A major issue in branding and brand architecture is the level of brand understanding and expertise," says Bob Brock, president and co-founder of Educational Marketing Group. "While most people in higher education acknowledge an intellectual level that branding is about the experience, reputation, and messaging rather than graphic identity, actions tell a different story."

only



In other words, people tend to work with what they know and like to work with what they can control.

“Since most communicators have never assumed responsibility for what the institution stands for—the brand promise and the actual experience—they fall back on what they know and have traditionally dealt with: consistency of the logo and signature,” Brock says. “This is historical, and it’s encouraged by institutions and leadership who don’t yet understand that brand goes very deep, impacting how institutions deliver their mission and how they envision the future.”

But experts note that they are seeing progress as branding becomes more accepted and people begin to acknowledge its importance.

“People are getting better at this and becoming more sophisticated about recognizing the need to define their brand,” Moore says. “The number of vice presidents and associate vice presidents with marketing in their titles has made a huge jump forward in the last

PETE MARSHUR for CASE

five years, and those marketing people are coming in and saying, 'Let's look at our branding.'"

Some campus marketers are making headway. When the U.K.'s University of Surrey underwent a rebranding effort four years ago, marketers sought internal buy-in as they communicated the importance of this effort.

"Most people at the university were aware that we were actually quite invisible as an institution and that we really needed to work to raise awareness of who we were and what we did," says Stewart Aitken, brand and creative development manager at Surrey. "We pushed the message that it's not enough to be great at what we do, we also need to be seen to be great at what we do. I think people were able to buy into that as a general concept."

MAKING SUBBRANDS MAKE SENSE

In complex, decentralized institutions, branding involves building individual but related brands or reputations for the overall institution, or core brand, and a whole family of subbrands—usually schools or colleges, other academic units, or programs. Some subbrands make perfect sense, but experts caution against creating too many.

"If an institution decides that virtually any unit that offers any product or service should be a subbrand, you create huge expenses and infrastructure costs," says Brock. "Every subbrand has to be supported, and they should receive [a share equal to] 60 percent to 80 percent of what you're investing in the core brand."

He offers three criteria for determining whether a unit should be a subbrand:

- Is the product or service the unit is offering substantially different from the core brand?
- Is the target audience different from that of the core brand?
- Does it need a public market position in order to be successful?

Shane Shanks, senior communications strategist with Zehno Cross Media Communications, cites Texas Christian University as an example of an institution with subbranding that works. The university's brand promises the world-class offerings of a major university with the personal touches and high-quality teaching of a smaller institution. Its Neeley School of Business, which is being developed as a subbrand, has an audience ranging from undergrads to executive MBAs. The tagline, "It's more than business—it's personal," reflects TCU's emphasis on the personal touch and its strong relationships with the business community in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, as does the design of the full-time MBA program, which offers hands-on experiences with major companies.

"TCU's subbrands work because they focus on distinctive programs and defined specific audiences, but they also echo the themes of the overall brand," Shanks says. "They might change up the slogans or the styling, but they tell the same story. If your institutional brand is strong, strategic subbrands can ... create a more vivid picture of why your institution matters."

The University of Surrey has made the strategic decision to have its core brand solely represent its

in short

RECOGNITION TEST. As any marketing pro will tell you, logos are not a brand, but they are an important element of branding. A recognizable logo, wordmark, or brandmark is worth a lot; just ask McDonald's or Starbucks. Studies show that children as young as age 2 begin to recognize logos and brands, although those that belong to most educational institutions likely aren't as recognizable as those of Fortune 500 companies with large advertising and marketing budgets. It's a given that you could pick *your* institution's logo out of a lineup, but can you identify the logos of 16 other colleges and universities? Try it. Take the quiz at brandmanagersnotebook.wordpress.com/2010/09/30/recognize-me-yet.

MEDIA BITES. A study from two University of Illinois researchers takes a historical look at the coverage of U.S. research universities in *The New York Times* over the past 60 years and finds that although the newspaper itself has contracted, reporting on research universities has remained at a consistent level. However, according to *The Soundbite University: 60 Years of University News Coverage*, when they are covered, universities are less likely to be the subject of an article. In 1946, 53 percent of coverage was about the research or activities of institutions; today, 85 percent of university mentions come via the affiliation of a faculty member who was interviewed for an article.

academic activities; the only exceptions are a few specific units, such as a sports park and research park, that meet the criteria to which Brock also subscribes.

“The brand architecture framework [was developed] to expressly help us avoid an uncoordinated, organic development of brands that tends to typify a lot of institutions,” Aitken says.

WHAT’S IN A NAME?

Named schools, often business schools, constitute many of the subbrands at larger institutions, and many have strong reputations in their own right. As a result of an increase in branding sophistication, many universities have realized the need to strengthen their connection to those schools.

At the University of Pennsylvania, both its business school—known simply as the Wharton School since its inception in 1881—and the Annenberg School for Communication have strong brands, but many people don’t realize they’re connected with the core brand. The institution’s 2001 strategic communications plan included the creation of a consistent visual brand image among the 12 schools and the university.

“I went and met with every dean, showed them our market research, and they all came on board,” says Lori Doyle, vice president for university communications. “They were very supportive of simplifying the names [and/or] logos of the schools.” All of the schools have added “Penn” to their name—for example, the Graduate School of Fine Arts is now PennDesign—except Wharton and Annenberg, which now include “University of Pennsylvania” in their logos.

Illinois’ Northwestern University—an institution with top-ranked, named schools of medicine, journalism, and business, among others—recently convened a branding and communications task force to review institutional messaging. It’s in the process of tweaking the logo for the Kellogg School of Management to make the university’s name more prominent and has added the institution’s name to the visual identity of the Medill School of Journalism.

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“I believe the name Northwestern University has 160 years of brand equity, and it’s useful to all of our schools to build on that equity,” says Alan Cubbage, vice president for university relations. “There’s value in having a strong institutional brand. Both the university and the schools have equity, and by using both, we strengthen the overall brand.”

Such visual and name coherence contributes to a win-win situation for the university’s core brand and its subbrands.

“You want to make sure the school gets the association of the parent institution, and the relationship works both ways,” says Lipman Hearne’s Moore. “The power of the brand needs to flow back and forth.”



IDENTITY HEFT. If you’re considering a new look for your logo, evaluate some of the reasoning and strategy behind changes that companies such as FedEx, Intel, and Xerox have made to their graphic identities. *Corporate Brand Matrix* (www.corporatebrandmatrix.com) features nearly 80 cases of companies and institutions that have undergone a rebranding effort and discusses the factors that drove their visual transformation and the tools used to achieve it. The sister site *Identityworks.com* offers one-stop shopping for information related to identities, symbols, and logos, including reviews of corporate redesigns; issue discussions; and tools to understand, plan, and manage an identity.

NECESSARY OR NEEDLESS? Whether a printed annual report is worth the time and expense may be the advancement equivalent of a Rorschach test, depending on your department or institution. A group of philanthropic and communications organizations sought to answer this question through research, the results of which can be found at whyannualreports.org and in the accompanying report, *Talking to Ourselves? A Critical Look at Annual Reports in Foundation Communications*. While the subject has generated much discussion among communications and development professionals, organizations can evaluate how stakeholders perceive their own reports by using the assessment tool included in the report.

ALL IN THE FAMILY

Every decentralized institution that has its own distinctive group of subbrands likely has a strong-willed group of deans and directors at the helms of those entities. Brenda Foster, a partner with Greatest Creative Factor in Educational Marketing, compares the interactions between subbrands and the core brand to family dynamics.

“The struggle is to find a balance between the two voices,” Foster says. “At what point does the child need the parent? At what point does the parent let the child go? If you’re a

new professional school, you’re dependent on the university brand. [Then]

you grow up, become a teenager, and want some

independence. It works best when they all grow up and find the balance and structure that allows interdependence so that everybody rises.”

As a result, marketing and communications professionals need to rely on a variety of strategies for managing and finding common ground within their brand family.

BE A PARTNER

Virginia Tech’s Hincker says the key to managing his institution’s complex brand architecture, which includes almost 20 subbrands and brand extensions, is to steer clear of mandates. “I’ve never tried to write policy,” he says. “You become marketing and communications partners with the different units.”

To help staff members who don’t have marketing backgrounds become savvy about branding, Hincker developed a brand ambassador program. He and his brand manager teach 10 one-hour classes, including “Expanding Brand” and “Designing for our Brand.”

“Most universities employ communicators outside the central public relations unit, and many use outside help. They all need to be acculturated in brand messaging,” Hincker explains. “Our brand ambassador training and certification not only extends brand adoption and understanding, it creates true ambassadors throughout the institution.”

About 100 people, including designers from outside the university, have completed the program. Another 35 are enrolled in it this year.

SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

When the marketing and communications staff at the University of California, Berkeley, an institution with 28 subbrands, created “Thanks to Berkeley,” a capital campaign marketing effort that incorporated elements of the Berkeley brand, *flexible* and *useful* were words they kept in mind.

“The idea was that when the campaign was over, the marketing would have helped to enhance overall brand awareness and visibility and create a more coherent campuswide approach given our highly decentralized

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environment,” says Mary Keegan, executive director of marketing and communications at Berkeley.

The effort was broad enough to be used for other purposes, and as a result of the online templates, photography, and other marketing resources Keegan supplied to departments across campus, all university units have incorporated elements of the campaign into their marketing materials.

“That’s why it’s very important that you start with something that can be adapted to a complex, multi-faceted environment,” says Claire Holmes, Berkeley’s associate vice chancellor of university communications. “A brand always evolves, and we have a great framework and structure in place so we can continue to refine it.”

CARROTS, NOT STICKS

Chris Cullen, director of marketing at Johns Hopkins University in Maryland, advises campus colleagues about branding for the institution and its 11 subbrands and compliance with the university’s brand standards. While he doesn’t have the authority to veto what schools or units do, he does point out how his department can help them reach their goals while still complying with the standards.

Late last year, a new director in the Sustainability Office had hired an outside designer to create a sort of Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval to recognize good sustainability efforts on campus, but the design didn’t meet Hopkins’ brand standards.

If I didn't regularly communicate with the deans, they'd be much more likely to go out and do their own things.

"We explained that we would love to be partners with him, but that we couldn't present his work in our communications if it's not in compliance," says Cullen. He told the director that his office could

make the concept work with some minor modifications. Cullen's staff made some small changes, and the director was thrilled.

"The marketing department can't be seen as a place that says no to logical ideas; we're a department that works toward yes," Cullen says. "At Johns

Hopkins, adults having logical, scientific conversations and developing rational solutions is central to the brand—we negotiate based on what the person wants to accomplish."

SHARE RESEARCH

Every other year, Cindy Hall, associate vice president of university relations at The Pennsylvania State University, conducts extensive market research to gauge the effectiveness of all the institution's marketing efforts targeted at prospective undergraduates. As the person who oversees the marketing and branding for an institution that includes 15 subbrands and encompasses more than 50 visual identities, she emphasizes the importance of sharing the rationale for all the branding and marketing decisions. She even invites 100 people from across the university to hear the results.

"We say, 'Here's our messaging, and this is the reason behind it.' From day one when we created the marketing department, we've been very market-research-driven," she says. "We try to educate everyone [as] to why we're doing what we're doing. That has helped a great deal in selling this throughout the university. When we go out and make a presentation to a dean, we always start with market research."

When talking to his nonmarketing colleagues at the University of Surrey, Aitken has found that equating the university to a service rather than a product has been a useful distinction. "This is closer to the notion of something experienced, [such as a] hotel resort, rather than consumed, [such as a] chocolate bar," he says.

COMMUNICATE, DON'T COMMAND

Trying to accomplish anything in a decentralized environment requires patience and a willingness to set ego aside.

"I'm a middle child, so I'm good at compromise," says Northwestern's Cabbage, who has positive working relationships with the communications officers at the university's 12 schools. "The important thing is to understand the strengths that everyone brings. You need to be cognizant of other viewpoints—try to look at something from a viewpoint other than that of central administration. Nothing gets people's hackles up more quickly than issuing fiat."

Although Penn's Doyle doesn't have managerial oversight for the branding efforts of the schools, they do seek her advice. For instance, the dean of the School of Social Policy & Practice, who refers to the school internally as SP2, told Doyle he wanted to change the school logo to reflect that.

"I said, 'No, because people wouldn't know what it meant,' and he was fine with that," she says. "The more you communicate the better. We want our schools to have their independence, but we want them to operate under the Penn brand. If I didn't regularly communicate with the deans, they'd be much more likely to go out and do their own things."

By nature, decentralized institutions have a lot of moving parts. Keeping a number of distinct but related brand identities and messages in sync is akin to keeping several plates spinning at one time.

"One just has to be patient, flexible, and let go of the need for über-control," says Berkeley's Holmes. Her perspective lends credence to the "catch more flies with honey" approach to managing multiple brands. Be open, clear, and collaborative. Give everyone a voice, keep everyone's best interests in mind, and don't get stressed. That's a pretty good recipe for creating harmony in any family. ■

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