An Academic Enterprise Approach to Higher Education Branding
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April 2011

Abstract

In the past decade many universities have undertaken a brand initiative. The expectation is an increase in enrollment or funding. The majority of initiatives are led by university communications or marketing professionals, some with an outside company, to develop an external marketing campaign. These campaigns often include creation of a new university tagline or logo. This type of agency approach to higher education branding often reinforces the skepticism of internal stakeholders. An academic enterprise approach that engages faculties is more sustainable.

Introduction

About 15 years ago, colleges and universities woke up to an alarming reality. In an education marketplace saturated with options, they needed to stand out. They needed an effective brand strategy. What many thought they needed was a new logo or snazzy tagline. And so, by the hundreds, they experimented with branding initiatives, spending untold sums on new logos, clever advertising campaigns and catchy taglines.

To what end? Distressing as it is to admit, too many of these institutions have little to show for their efforts. True, they may have a new visual identity or a slogan that rolls off the tongue, but they don't have a brand strategy that authentically represents who they are and what they stand for. In other words, they don't have a brand approach with shelf life.

So what went wrong? Why did so many branding initiatives result in less, rather than more, differentiation? And why, at so many institutions, did branding become a dirty word? The answers lie within the institutions themselves and with the approaches they adopted to the brand development process.

The Higher Education Context

Curiously, the very things that many of us love about universities—the delight in critical thinking, the robust culture of skepticism—makes them a challenging arena for branding. That's not to suggest that branding can't withstand a little skepticism or some serious scrutiny. But it is true that academic communities are often uncomfortable with the notion of branding, associating it with a subspecies of fluff and puffery. For those long steeped in academic culture, branding is often loathed. Branding is for Starbucks, for Southwest Airlines and Apple. Its applications belong to the for-profit and bottom-line worlds. In reality, higher education institutions possess assets parallel to these organizations. Starbucks places great value on their baristas just like universities should

their faculties and staffs. In the case of Southwest Airlines, employees come first, customers come second and investors come third (Blanchard and Barrett 2011).

The lack of branding is even true, oddly enough, in university business programs. Review the list of course offerings at any reputable institution in the United States, and chances are slim that you will find courses, much less a major or minor, in branding. Even marketing departments have been slow to develop curricula for branding. The topic has been left to the professional associations, but they seldom go beyond the occasional panel discussion.

In addition to the challenges posed by mindset, academic communities—so often strapped for cash—tend to greet branding initiatives as a drain on budgets. On campuses where valuable research projects often go unfunded, where faculty positions occasionally go unfilled, it's objectionable to see resources channeled toward a branding initiative. To the academic mind, there is always a better use for the funds.

Branding is made even more challenging by the organizational composition of the institution itself. Colleges and universities are made up of diverse departments and divisions that, though they share a common mission, often believe they have little in common. Apart from students, the academic side of the operation typically shares little with the athletics side. What's more, various departments are often pitted against one another for funding and recognition. In any given institution, it's not unusual for various disciplines to consider themselves unloved stepchildren.

Just as troubling, colleges and universities often lack an infrastructure for effective collaboration. Faculty and staff may have few opportunities to work together and to celebrate the institution's vision and mission. Even with governance models that enlist the Faculty Senate and various committees, university communities often feel left out of the institution's identity building. This culture has done much to undermine brand development on campus, where, when an initiative debuts, it is, typically if not always, greeted as a top-down mandate rather than a community endeavor. The cyclical nature of college and university business makes it difficult to embrace the belief of Starbucks Chairman, Howard Schultz that managing a brand is lifetime of work (Moore 2006).

Making matters worse, many institutions adopt an agency approach to brand development. In other words, they focus almost exclusively on external audiences and external messages. They orient their research to determining what will resonate with targeted groups outside the institution's boundaries. The end result is a branding initiative that not only fails to reflect and engage the institution as a whole, but that fails to differentiate the institution from its competitors. In fact, it fails to differentiate because it does not reflect authenticity. It's no wonder some colleges and universities were ready to give up on branding.

Several factors are reminding colleges and universities that their brand work is not finished. Generation Y who possess great purchasing power are outspoken about which brands they value (Yarrow and O'Donnell 2009). The economic climate demands that in

order to survive, institutions must understand who they are and more effectively communicate what they stand for. Decreasing federal and state funding are forcing colleges and universities to create self-sufficiency models.

The Three Waves of Branding

Branding in the marketplace of business categories comes in three waves (Hatch and Schultz 2008). The first wave is the marketing mindset. The brand initiative is started by the communications and marketing office and focuses on external messages communicated to external audiences. Often the goal is to come up with the killer campaign. Its weakness is that, too often, it fails to infuse the brand with the organization's true personality and authentic values, as well as lacks the requisite internal branding driven by employee engagement. Because of this disconnect, everyone from stakeholders to casual consumers question branding. It may seem to be all promise with no delivery.

The second wave, the corporate mindset, is triggered by the realization that the first wave was more of a small splash and is not going away. Higher education branding is coming to this realization. It also is realizing the need to expand the brand development process by engaging stakeholders like faculty and human resources. The organization discovers or rediscovers its mission and core values. Internal stakeholders are given a voice and forum with which to share their voice. The organization's culture takes on new meaning by defining branding as the process of aligning its internal culture with its external reputation.

The third wave enlists the enterprise mindset to ensure a holistic connection between vision, culture and reputation. Enterprise branding engages all stakeholder groups across the entity to create and sustain an organization that understands its brand and that is invested in its long-term viability. By fostering enterprise-wide belief in the brand, this model perpetuates itself. People who understand and respect the brand tend to reinforce it. That leads to a sustainable brand that supports and operationalizes the strategic plan.

Of the three waves, the third clearly affords the opportunity to co-create the brand strategy and promises the best outcomes. For organizations everywhere, the question becomes, how do we move from our current mindset to an enterprise mindset? For higher education, the question becomes, how do we move towards an academic enterprise mindset?

Embracing the Academic Enterprise Mindset

Most colleges and universities now realize that effective branding is more than a dash of market research, a stingy pinch of consensus building and a gallon of advertising. That's the first step in embracing a better way. Subsequent steps require a systemic and, frankly, labor-intensive approach to brand engagement. In campus settings, branding initiatives simply must begin with the faculty—the very people who deliver the institution's product—teaching, research and learning— to the customer. Without faculty

contributions to the initiative, branding will flounder, as will the institution's strategic plans. Before long, the school's reputation also will suffer.

For all the reasons explored earlier, engaging faculty members—many of whom already feel overloaded by their various teaching and research obligations—takes time and patience. It's important to hear and address their ideas and concerns. This is the only way to ensure that they support the branding process. More important, it helps to break down the silos that have come to characterize campus communities. It brings faculty together and helps them go beyond supporting the brand to actualizing it.

Although enlisting faculty in the initiative is critical, it should not be done to the exclusion of others in the institution, whether they manage student programs, coach a team or handle human resources challenges. An academic enterprise approach to branding will put faculty and staff from across the institution in the same room to ponder brand strategy and execution as they relate to mission, vision, values and strategic priorities. Through dialogue, the academic enterprise model will build community and a sense of common purpose. Along the way, it will educate everyone about the value of branding for day-to-day operations and for long-term sustainability.

The academic enterprise approach should also enlist students, parents and alumni. It's easy to overlook this key constituency, to think of them as passive receivers of the brand. But students and alumni are emblems of the brand. They represent the brand's legs, its mobility in the world. Presumably, they are putting their education to work and representing the institution's core values. Their affiliation with an institution is a badge of sorts—one they want to wear proudly.

The engagement efforts associated with academic enterprise branding take considerable time, but they are easier today than ever before. Progressive institutions enlist social media to keep the dialogue going, to share new information and to promote the widest possible participation. Branding through technology provides a 21st century edge in the competitive education marketplace (Chen 2010). Eventually, these efforts result in a brand platform that is anchored in authenticity and embodied by key stakeholders. When academic enterprise branding is done right, the campus community will share common ground, common language, common aspirations and common outcomes.

Once the community has arrived at a brand platform, then and only then should the focus turn to the marketing efforts that express the brand. In other words, the brand platform should drive marketing. Marketing should not drive the brand. If dazzling new logos and sexy advertising campaigns are in order, they should be shaped by the brand. The brand should also inform all other communications efforts, including social and new media. For example, if a brand platform emphasizes attention to detail, a social media query from a prospective student should not take days to answer. In other words, the institution's internal culture should align with its external reputation.

Within this alignment, the brand platform will do much more than shape marketing efforts. It will integrate with the institution's day-to-day operations and its strategic

planning. In time, it will even influence that planning. Administrators will look at the brand platform as a polestar of sorts.

Academic enterprise branding is about ensuring a sustainable future. It is about stakeholder engagement and buy-in, even from the biggest skeptics. For higher education, which is nothing if not focused on the future, it's the only branding approach that makes sense.

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