

Branding a Business School: the Intersection of Scholarship and Practical Experience

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OVERVIEW

Branding is a business tool and a fertile area for research, especially in marketing. However, like ad agencies who rarely brand themselves yet work tirelessly to help market client brands, business schools conduct research and teach branding but rarely apply the knowledge to branding a business school. This paper reviews pertinent branding scholarship and then demonstrates the application of this knowledge to conducting marketing research that is used to create a branding strategy and promotional materials in an actual case of a relatively young B-school.

BRANDING LITERATURE REVIEW

1. The key to marketing is positioning (Tybout & Sternthal; Aaker; Kotler and Keller)
2. Positioning most often consists of developing unique attributes and features of the product or service offered. (Tybout & Sternthal; Aaker; Kotler and Keller)
 - a. Product quality and particular features (tangibles) that generate preference and purchase are the oldest and most common type of marketing communications used to build brand value.
 - b. More recently there has been a focus on creating and maintaining differentiated sets of perceptions *of the brand's unique set of intangibles*.
 - c. Services branding has learned the value of intangibles like provider expertise from the example of successes in corporate brand building efforts which focus almost entirely on building brand reputation.
3. Brand communications are the means of creating, evolving or enhancing a brands positioning on the basis of managing its perceptions in the market.
4. Brand equity building is a core marketing process marked by a series of necessary strategic planning steps and integrated brand communication/promotion actions:
 - a. Inventory current internal perceptions to identify what those who will deliver quality can promise.
 - b. Inventory external perceptions of the brand's benefits today, and what benefits are wished for that the brand might add to its offering.
 - c. Among both constituents learn who the perceived competitors are.
 - d. From these inventories, develop a strategy that defines all constituents, and the intangible characteristics on which to differentiate the brand's promises and benefits from those of its competition.

- e. Develop a program that will deliver on the promised brand benefits.
- f. Develop a marketing and communications program to make constituents aware and desirous of the menu of benefits offered by the brand.
- g. These steps have been used regularly by product, service and corporate brands since the 1980's – but not by university business schools.

BRANDING EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

5. Education branding (especially universities and professional schools) is still largely at the simple stage of differentiating on the basis of self-defined sets of features and attributes.
 - a. In some cases (e.g. Ivy league and Big Ten Schools) there is the happy historical accident of prestigious history that differentiates individual university “brands” on the basis of reputation familiar to most of society.
 - b. Other schools must strive to establish their own basis for value. Most do this today by emphasizing quality of functional attributes that resemble those of many other schools: strong faculty, prestigious alumni, broad course range, numerous campus and housing amenities etc.
6. Business Schools constitute a special case of educational branding.
 - a. Their reputations must be differentiated without contradicting the identity of the university within which they are located.
 - b. The AACSB, which constitutes the single greatest claim to legitimacy for a B-School, has affected the market of B-school brands by promulgating a uniform set of standards for quality that make functional differentiation of any individual school problematic.
 - c. Thus the ability to differentiate that is central to successful brand positioning is severely limited.
7. This current AACSB creation of three functional B-School categories has the effect of eliminating the functional dimension as a differentiator as all schools must declare themselves to be one of the three forms: scholarly, practitioner or the combination of the two.
8. This situation forces a B-School to uncover possible *sets of intangible attributes* on which to differentiate itself.
9. B-Schools who understand the latest developments in branding of products and services as well as corporate branding can recognize the opportunity in this situation.
 - a. In addition to claiming a well understood functional category within which to define itself, a school can add unique combinations of situational (geography, a certain illustrious history) and other intangible attributes (e.g. a unique

educational experience for the prospective student, unique services to the local business and not-for-profit communities) in order to differentiate its position from other competitors.

- b. Less time and money can be spent on quality assurance once AACSB approval of mission and accreditation of performance is achieved. Instead, accreditation allows limited marketing budgets to concentrate on the unique intangibles that make especially relevant and distinctly valuable to pre-defined target constituents.

SPECIFIC CASE OF EDUCATION BRAND BUILDING: USING RSCH TO DEVELOP A BUSINESS SCHOOL BRAND

10. The application of previous academic research on branding is applied to brand building marketing communications via a two stage process in which
 - a. School perceptions inventories were conducted with internal constituents (faculty who will deliver on any brand promises made)
 - b. Competitive nonverbal symbol sets (school campus images) about higher education were tested to identify what meanings each conveys
 - c. Marketing communications alternatives developed from a single strategy were tested with internal constituents and external audiences to ascertain that reception of brand differentiating message was interpreted as intended

11. Two sets of findings:
 - a. Set one – qualitative research on choice of visual approach, and on verbal attitude and perceptions measures identifies differentiating variables

[These were then used to choose a final communications and promotional campaign materials design]

 - b. Set two – quantitative measures in which we determined that the visual set of variables and verbal statements measured are strongly correlated with such dependent variables as “would recommend” and with strong positive perceptions of faculty and other educational quality attributes.

IMPLICATIONS

12. That traditional imagery of higher education may not be compelling for marketing a new B-school brand

13. That images and words combined to convey intangible elements of a B-school brand are strongly correlated with such dependent variables as “would recommend” as well as positive perceptions of faculty and other educational quality attributes.

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