

Educational Branding—Two Schools of Thought

By Rex Whisman

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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 all their key stakeholders – prospective and current students, faculty, staff, donors, alumni and others– are able to tell their “story” on a consistent basis, and understand how their attributes distinguish them from their competitors. My conviction that colleges and universities can turn this aspiration into reality by building and maintaining a distinct brand, or identity, is confirmed by watching my fellow Starbucks patrons waiting for their coffee.

TRADITIONAL AND CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES

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 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 brand building. A much smaller number of schools, however, build their identities through cultural change from the inside-out. Their's is a long-term strategy. Let's call this a

“contemporary” approach to brand building.

Like other industries before them, brand development in higher education derives from the creation of corporate identity standards. Following this development, 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 calls this “superficial tinkering.” Schmidt also encourages organizations to think holistically by including the entire organization in the brand building process.

In my 2005 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.”

IT’S GREEK TO ME

Branding dates back to 2000 B.C. when the ancient Greeks marked their cattle as a means of differentiating one herd from another. In 1931 Procter and Gamble organized their products by brand labels. Perhaps because of its past connection with practices like these, branding connotes logos to many in the world of academe. Branding is also frequently associated with marketing, a link that stems from the continued popularity of advertising since the days when American car manufacturers Ford and General Motors engaged in fierce advertising battles following World War I.

If this is true, an interesting dichotomy occurs for schools taking a traditional approach to branding. When schools limit branding to changing logos and developing advertising campaigns they risk reinforcing the skepticism of two key stakeholder groups – faculty and prospective students. Most faculty associate branding with marketing, while brand savvy teens don’t like advertising. When brand building is too focused on external communications, schools often exclude faculty from the process and raise doubt about whether a process exists. Research also shows that unless advertising is cause-related, teens can deem it gimmicky and not respond.

A contemporary approach to branding – defined as cultural change, and applied by organizations such as Starbucks, The Virgin Group and a growing number of colleges and universities – became prevalent in the 1990s. 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. Brand skeptics, like faculty, 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 more with faculty and prospective students 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.

While at the University of Denver (DU), we applied the contemporary approach to the University's first brand building efforts, an approach similar to those that have been successfully executed by companies like Harley Davidson, Southwest Airlines, The Body Shop and those mentioned above. In response to critics who accused us of being "too corporate," we made it clear at DU that branding represents culture, image, reputation and tradition. We minimized all associations with logos, taglines and advertising. The results were positive. The reason? We engaged the faculty in the process of building our brand from the inside-out.

A MEASURE OF SUCCESS

Let's take a closer look at advertising, a primary communications channel for schools embracing the traditional approach to branding. As mentioned earlier, communications tools like advertising can easily deter faculty and prospective students. Advertising also has the perception, real or imagined, of being a short-term, tactical solution. Plus, a typical television ad buy in a city of any middle to large market can cost \$1 million or more, and anyone who has bought or sold advertising knows how difficult it is to

measure. A contemporary approach to brand building can be accomplished with minimal advertising. Leveraging public relations efforts costs much less, can be measured more effectively and can drive a school's image building efforts. Employee turnover, alumni giving, student persistence and other measurable assessments can help gauge the return on investment.

The contemporary approach might be a tougher sell in the beginning. It takes longer to implement and may have more skeptics at the start, but as the process moves forward from brand research, to brand optimization, assimilation, implementation and evaluation, momentum builds and the process becomes increasingly tangible. And the rewards – creating dialogues among constituents that have never interacted with one another previously, gaining a clearer understanding of the school's attributes, enabling consistent story telling, getting a greater return on investment – make the journey worthwhile.

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED

Passionate brand champions who advocate the contemporary approach are traveling down a new path to brand building. They epitomize what London-based, branding expert, Adam Morgan (2004) refers to as pirates. He argues that in order to succeed at brand building, and to rally others around your cause, you must be a pirate inside your navy, or college or university. In other words, you must shake things up a bit. Although you might be surrounded by skeptics, your passion will pay off. After all, isn't branding all about being different?

Colleges and universities that apply the principles of Lux, Morgan, Schmidt and others can be successful in developing a distinct brand when taking a road less traveled.

Whether one views brand building, as the road to piracy, internal culture building or holistic identity building is a matter of opinion. It is for you and your school to determine whether an outside-in approach or an inside-out approach to branding is more to your liking. Similarly, you and your school will decide to pursue a traditional approach or a contemporary approach to brand building. To remain competitive, find solutions to issues facing higher education, and to ensure future sustainability, 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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