

Branding of Universities: Trends and Strategies

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A sense of fierce, global competition over resources, students, and faculty is driving universities worldwide to launch strategic exercises and branding initiatives. Universities, like corporations, articulate their vision and mission statements for brand differentiation and marketing campaigns. One result is that, with the guidance of marketing and branding consultants, universities across the world have been replacing their traditional seals and emblems with stylized, eye-catching logos. This act wholly symbolizes the transformation of universities from professional (and often public) institutions of research and learning into market players.

BRANDING TRENDS

Brands are artifacts that uniquely identity the organization; they are taken to convey the personality of the particular university. In the bewildering global economy, where products barrage consumers with calls for attention, branding is considered an imperative for marketing success. This logic penetrated the global field of universities: while universities have always proudly rallied behind their

seal and regarded them as symbols of the university's community, academic branding is linked with a marketing strategy aimed at differentiating the university from the (presumably) competing 14,000 universities in the world.

Three trends of branding are identified in universities. First, in the past two decades many universities have restyled their insignia, or representative symbol: the traditional emblem, which is loaded with signals of the profession, is restyled into a logo, which can be easily mistaken for a commercial brand. Noticeably, this is a change to the aesthetics of the university's insignia: from a symbol that is loaded with figurative images (a book, a source of light such as a torch signifying the Enlightenment, or national icons) and invariably also meaningful texts (the name of the university and its year of founding, for example) to a "swoosh" image, which is only vaguely, if at all, reminiscent of the university's history (its founding fathers), mission (lab tools or open books), or character (natural environment, campus life, sports, and alike). Austere and minimally ornate, the restyled logos are characteristic of either new universities or those that underwent a strategic planning campaign. Therefore, the adoption of logo style signals that the currently legitimate form of visual representation for universities is to resemble that of corporations: an instantly recognizable and marketable image of a distinct organization.

The second trend is for universities to add to, rather than replace their traditional emblem. In this trend, these new icons serve different purposes: university seals, for example, are still commonly used for official university documents such as diplomas. Logos, in contrast, would be reserved for banners, and digital markers on Web pages and word marks (a simplified image of the traditional emblem along with the university name) are used for stationary and

business cards. This is a visual expression of identity differentiation, by audience and function; for example, universities rely almost exclusively on their logos in order to appeal to the young audience of prospective students, while reserving their traditional emblems for formal events such as graduation ceremonies.

The third and last trend is for universities to establish proprietary claims to their icons and tag lines by protecting these as intellectual property—to register these as trademark or service mark. Once registered as such, university insignia become sources of revenue through merchandising, where the university licenses the use of its icon to manufacturers who then produce and sell the well-known university sweatshirts and T-shirts. This act of proprietary protection of insignia is based on value propositions: university icons are no longer mere identity markers of the university as an academic community, but rather they have become commodities that leverage the university’s reputation.

STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

Now that branding is regarded as imperative and universities launch branding campaigns, it turns to professionals for guidance. Indeed, university branding becomes a subspecialty of branding and marketing consultancy: consultancy firms offer specialized branding and marketing services to universities, and branding associations establish chapters in university campuses. Such professionalization also drives managerial changes in universities, often with the creation of an administrative unit charged with brand management or with changing the orientation of the university spokesperson away from mere posting of information about university activities and toward proactive marketing of the

university to prospective students and their parents, donors, and partnering firms.

Once a branding campaign concludes with a newly stylized icon or set of icons, operational adjustments in universities follow. Most often, universities formalize their brand guidelines into regulations: many universities produce “brand books” to specify the logo’s color and size, describe the various icons and their functional roles, and explicate the laws regarding brand use. Also, any deviation from, or infringement of, these specifications is subject to penalty. Universities file lawsuits on other institutions that trespass upon the logo’s proprietary claim, and some universities also penalize academic departments within the university that do not follow the guidelines. These administrative steps are formally explained as matter of building a university-wide identity, but such explanations are also heavily infused with managerial arguments about administrative cohesion among organizational subunits.

CULTURAL MEANING

Branding is more than mere fashion, where universities learn marketing practices from firms and other successful universities; rather, branding is a meaningful change in the identity of the university. University logos convey little of academia as a profession, a national institution, or a knowledge organization; and furthermore, logos convey little of the university’s legacy or location. The act of taking on a logo-style icon is therefore an act of metamorphosis: shedding the signals that convey the meaning of academe as a guild-like professional institution and taking on signals that convey the commercial recognition of a brand and its value. Indeed, branding is an offshoot of the entrepreneurial

university and related processes of commodification and marketization: initially the entrepreneurial, socially engaged university was marketing its research through patenting, while today the university also markets its reputation through its brand.

Branding lends new meanings to long-standing academic categories. Branding brings market logic and managerialism to the university and heightens the sense of academic competition. In this way, the university was transformed into a “promotional university.” And promotion and marketing change the tone, if not the core, of academic work: from a branding perspective, excellence is a differentiation strategy rather than solely a professional duty. Emphasis on promotion is also accompanied by a redefinition of what a university does; such emphasis subjects knowledge creation, teaching, and study to the logics of marketing and service. Specifically, since brand reputation is built upon customer service and product benefits, universities become particularly attune to student evaluations of teaching and postgraduation salary benefits, and, as a consequence, curricular decisions (such as the decision to offer a particular course or to open a new academic program) are made in response to student satisfaction. For example, a course may be offered because of its popularity among students and high registration, rather than because of its place in the overall path of professional development and knowledge acquisition. Last, branding redefines the academic profession: by allowing consultants to guide strategy, faculty members delegate the responsibility of steering the university to “outsiders” and surrender the sense of academic community and autonomy to professional managers. In this way, the university is transformed from a guild-like institution into a modern organization. These, combined, signal the coming

of “brand society” onto academe and onto its prime institution, namely the university.