Interpretation and Implementation of Reputation/Brand Management by UK University Leaders

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Abstract

Reputation and brand management are topical issues in UK higher education but previous research has often focused on marketing practitioners within higher education (HE) institutions rather than the senior strategic leaders. This paper, however, examines university chief executives' understanding, attitudes, and interpretation of reputation and brand management. Current literature on defining reputation and brand, research on branding in higher education, and the role of leaders in brand management, are examined to give context to the work. Research was conducted through interviews with vice-chancellors, principals, and rectors from a selection of 14 universities representing three different "generations" (the 1992 universities, those formed in the mid-20th century, and older institutions). While the work is exploratory in nature it does highlight

this as a rapidly evolving area of perceived importance and discusses conclusions on some of the external and internal issues related to reputation and brand management in this sector.

Keywords:

Branding, brands, reputation, chief executives, universities, higher education

Introduction

The whole discipline of brand management has been described as "a cacophony of simultaneously competing and overlapping approaches," and although the discipline of brand management is still evidently evolving, there appears to be increased recognition by both managers and academics of the significance of brands as sources of sustained competitive advantage.¹ Investigation of brand management approaches and the application of these to the increasingly commercially oriented UK higher education sector would seem, therefore, to be both relevant and significant.

This research builds on earlier work on branding in higher education carried out in 2001. That research explored the opinions of key members of university marketing

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departments on branding in UK universities and is summarized in the article “Is branding in UK universities real?” and a subsequent paper in the *CASE International Journal of Educational Advancement*.²

An appropriate progression was to apply similar research to the senior management of universities: those who have control for strategic direction of institutions but who may not be formally involved in marketing and are less likely to be trained in marketing. The particular audience concerned was vice-chancellors (VCs), rectors, and principals.

The objectives of this research were:

- To identify the level of understanding of the role and importance of “reputation/ brand management” among leaders of UK universities,
- To identify examples of existing practice relating to managing reputations/brands in UK universities,
- To open up further opportunities for debate and discussion on the issues and importance of reputation/ brand management in universities.

Terms of reference

The term *chief executives* is used to denote leaders of UK universities. Their specific titles vary to include vice-chancellor, rector, and principal but this was considered an appropriate term to encompass the modern nature of the role of head of a university.

The research commenced by exploring whether UK university chief executives perceive a distinction between *reputation* and *brand*. Through the remaining questions, however, respondents did not necessarily draw a distinction between reputation and brand in their answers. For this reason in these questions the term *brand* may be used to denote *reputation/ brand* (based on the assumption

that *brand* is wider and includes *reputation*).

Literature Review

Interpretation of reputation and brand

The concepts surrounding brands are unusual in that, despite wide discussion in academic and practitioner journals, there is still a good deal of subjectivity and therefore limited agreed common models or practice. There is some evidence of historically differing academic approaches between Europe and the United States, typified by the writings of Aaker and Kapferer,³ which differ in content and form, in the value systems which underpin the mental frameworks, and interpretation of the term “brand.”

The terms “reputation” and “brand” are, however, often used interchangeably in general discussion, but require closer examination in order to assess university chief executives’ interpretation of the concepts. Brand and brand image are often examined and differing definitions are proposed by such writers as Ellwood, Kapferer, and Hankinson and Cowking.⁴ Patterson considers the concept of brand image and suggests that “there continues to be a large degree of confusion about what brand image actually means” and goes on to suggest a model of the “brand image system.”⁵

Few writers discuss and compare brand and reputation distinctly, however, an exception being Frost and Cooke who explore the area of corporate brand versus reputation in some detail, suggesting that “corporate brand” is a more established concept than “corporate reputation.” They find “no commonly agreed definition” for either term, but especially for “corporate reputation.” They ultimately suggest, however, that there are similarities

between the two terms and that they represent two approaches to the same objective—a strong and sustainable brand and reputation—and that many in their study “feel that they are actually aspects of the same thing.”⁶ In discussing these terms in this paper, the assumption has been made that precise definition is a subissue and the two terms may be used interchangeably, although the term “brand” may be used to *include* “reputation” in some circumstances.

Trends in the concept of branding in higher education

The concept of brands and brand management in the wider nonprofit sector has been a focus of academic research for some years, with writers such as Hankinson and Cowking, De Chernatony, and Kapferer exploring these areas.⁷

Branding in the context of higher education is an area which has been on the agenda of practitioners for some time. It still, however, receives limited discussion in academic papers, especially in a UK context. Recent articles by Bodoh and Mighall, suggest that “branding is emerging as a hot topic for those who want to consolidate their positions or save their skins” but suggest that “brands will present some real challenges in a sector that has been slow to embrace the basic principles of branding.”⁸ While the branding issue has become more topical in very recent years, writings in 2000–1 could imply that addressing the issues is a faltering process; Johnston sums up the consensus from practice journals when he states, “the higher education system certainly has a long way to go in terms of understanding and incorporating the branding concept.” He adds, “there has never been a more appropriate time for institutions to consider the role and purpose that branding may play within

the sector.”⁹ Bean suggested that “ironically, as an industry sector education has the least sophisticated brands with which to relate to its target groups.”¹⁰

In academic journals, higher education marketing in its wider context is discussed by papers such as Brookes,¹¹ but there is little discussion of branding as a specific area. The USA appears to be ahead of the UK in the acceptance and implementation of branding as a concept in higher education. Work by writers such as Sevier and Kotler demonstrate this, suggesting that branding in HE has become accepted practice.¹² One suggested reason for this is that the USA has gone through the clash of cultures between the traditional academic values and market-focused values 10 years earlier.¹³

Senior management attitudes and influence on brand

It is widely accepted that leaders have a fundamental part to play in shaping the brands of their organizations, both internally and externally. Writers such as Free suggest that “there is hardly a self respecting chief executive that has not become more acquainted, and, often familiar with the subject matter [of branding].”¹⁴ While the relationship between external and internal branding is complex and too wide to explore here, it is generally acknowledged that external branding should be built on internal branding. The chief executive has a key role in driving this internal brand and the best companies are, it is suggested, driven by a chief executive who understands that markets are internal as well as external.¹⁵ It is suggested that, particularly in services, “the Chief Executive, in whom brand ownership lies, must rely on what staff do and how they behave ... because that is the basis on which customers will

experience the brand.”¹⁶ Studies on the nonprofit sector, such as that by Hankinson,¹⁷ focus on the internal brand by exploring senior management attitudes. The increasing relevance of internal branding as a concept, and the crucial role of the chief executive in that, would therefore suggest that the focus of this research, in exploring their acceptance and interpretation of branding in UK universities, is a relevant one.

Methodology

Qualitative research was appropriate as it seeks a deeper understanding of factors,¹⁸ in particular in-depth interviews, which enable a more accurate picture of respondents’ true feelings on an issue to be deduced.

The approach of conducting interviews with opinion makers and decision takers is one adapted from a “delphi technique” which focuses on future trends, using trendsetters in any market as a barometer.¹⁹

The UK university sector can be segmented into three subgroups based on incorporation dates:

- “Newer” universities: 1992 and post-1992 institutions,
- Middle group universities created by Royal Charter in the mid twentieth century,
- “Older” universities incorporated before 1950.

Therefore qualitative research via structured interviews with 14 universities was broken down as follows;

- Four newer universities,
- Six middle group universities,
- Four older universities.

These 14 interviews constituted a sample of a little over 10 percent of the total population of 128 UK institutions with

university in their title as listed by UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service), and was considered an adequate response group size, as samples of less than 1 percent of a population can often give reliable information provided that the sampling procedure is creditable.²⁰

Findings

Do chief executives consider that their university has a *reputation*?

All chief executives considered that their university had a reputation, with the partial exception of one chief executive of a merged institution who considered that, while the two constituent institutions had reputations, it was perhaps too early for the new institution to have a meaningful reputation.

Do chief executives consider that their university has a *brand*?

There was less of a resounding “yes” to this question; although most chief executives considered that they did have a brand, many considered that this was more diffuse than the reputation and the opinion was expressed by at least two interviewees that there really was no institutional brand, more a series of niche brands in subject areas.

An interesting point made directly or alluded to by a number of chief executives was whether brand as they interpreted it was a constraining set of values and therefore fundamental to the institution, or whether it was something more superficial in nature and “wheeled out” when convenient.

What do chief executives consider to be the difference between the two terms’ meanings?

The consensus was that reputation was principally external in focus: the external

perception of the quality of the institution, or the “perceived aggregate quality.” It was also described as “what peers think of us.”

The brand was less clearly defined than reputation, as is perhaps to be expected. There was a common opinion however, that brand is created or manufactured (whereas reputation evolves) and that brand is particularly relevant for undergraduate audiences as it has a more commercial slant and connotations.

It was apparent that most chief executives did clearly perceive a wider meaning of the term “brand” to include such elements as values and quality as well as the specific visual elements of logo, strapline, font styles, and so forth. This was not universally the case, however, with at least two chief executives only citing the visual elements of what constitutes a brand. A number of key words run through the interviews and are summarized in Table 1.

An area of difficulty was that of the relationship between reputation and brand; while most chief executives suggested reputation being part of and informing/underpinning the brand, two chief executives considered that brand was a part of reputation or that brand was derived from reputation.

Table 1: Reputation v. brand: key words cited by chief executives to differentiate the two terms

Reputation	Brand
Quality	Consumer
External	Undergraduate
Evolves	Created/ managed
Peer groups	Logo/style/visual
Perceived	Persuade

Which term is considered more appropriate?

Chief executives suggested that either term was acceptable, although most recognized a subtle distinction in meanings. There were exceptions to this, however, perhaps reflecting more traditional academic attitudes; one chief executive stated that the term “brand” would not be acceptable to an internal audience.

Do the reputation/brand accurately reflect the institution?

In summary, the chief executives considered that reputation better reflected the reality of the institution than did brand, although this was by no means always the case.

Reputation was considered by most institutions in all three subgroups to be a fair reflection of reality. The exceptions to this were among the middle group, two of whom felt that their reputation was no longer a reflection of reality.

Brand was considered generally to approximate reality but responses here were disparate: among new universities the consensus was that brand was a good reflection of reality, although two tempered this by suggesting that only certain audiences perceived the correct message. Middle group universities were split, with half suggesting that the brand was correct among the “informed publics” or “approaching correct” while half thought that the current brand simply did not reflect current reality except in niches. The older group had a general view that reputation more closely reflected reality than did brand.

Throughout the sample there was a feeling of moving, albeit slowly and incrementally, in the right direction to building a brand that reflected reality. The disparate nature of the audiences, complex nature of the brand, and in some cases

lack of a clear brand vision and model were considered to make this difficult.

Answers to this question also related to the understanding of definitions of reputation and brand; there was a perception that reputation, being historically derived, is more likely to be accurate and difficult to change. Brand, however, being seen as disparate and artificially constructed, is perceived to be movable and able to be deconstructed and rebuilt.

Do the reputation/ brand differentiate the institution?

All institutions endorsed the need to differentiate UK universities. Almost all the chief executives considered that their institution was distinctive, but this suggestion was often qualified by limitations including:

- differentiated within our local region,
- differentiated from direct peers,
- differentiated with certain audiences.

When considering the three university subgroups it was apparent that there were differences. Newer universities all considered that they were distinctive and points of differentiation suggested included:

- Vocational,
- Regional focus,
- Business and professional links.

Middle group universities contained institutions that felt that they were not, or were only partially, differentiated. Points of differentiation suggested included:

- Employability,
- Research profile.

These points of differentiation, in particular the latter one, were often in

subject areas rather than institution-wide, however. It was in this group that the greatest proportion of chief executives expressed concern that their institution would have difficulty with genuine overall differentiation (with notable exceptions).

Older universities interviewed felt strongly that they were differentiated, and suggested points were:

- Employability,
- Position relative to immediate competitor set,
- City (location),
- Research.

How many of these are genuine points of differentiation and how many could apply to many institutions is open to debate, but undoubtedly overall reputation is also seen as a differentiator among older universities.

Who is responsible for managing reputation/brand?

Interestingly, most chief executives again dealt with reputation and brand synonymously in this answer. The responses were fairly easily summarized as all but one chief executive suggested that they had a key role to play in managing the brand of their institution. The other principal response to this question was the inclusive suggestion that “everybody” had a role to play in managing brand. One interesting point here was a variance in suggesting whether brand management was filtered down from the top or built from the bottom up; for example, one chief executive suggested that “presenting it and delivering it is the concern of the university management team” whereas others talked clearly of “development of common vision ... decided by all staff.”

A group cited by chief executives as important in managing brand were the

marketing department (or external relations and PR). An interesting distinction can be drawn here, however, in terms of whether marketing should be fundamentally involved in construction of the brand or whether it should simply be responsible for communicating the brand decided upon by the chief executive (and senior management). While the new university chief executives who mentioned marketing specifically all suggested that marketing should “guide in brand construction,” the middle group university and older group university heads who mentioned marketing alluded more to “implementation” and one talked of “leaving it to marketing not being enough.” Whether there is significance in this split is debatable, but clearly the role and relationship of marketing in brand management has yet to be clearly defined.

In summary, the subtext of most interviews seemed to suggest that the chief executives perceived a need to gain internal acceptance for brand and then to decide upon presentation and communication in conjunction with senior colleagues (and generally, but not always marketing or external relations). All then become important in communicating the brand although the chief executives themselves (supported by senior colleagues and marketing) perceived a pivotal role for themselves.

What should the role of the chief executive be in managing reputation/brand?

In common with the previous question, responses largely drew no distinction between reputation and brand. All chief executives saw managing reputation/brand as part of their role. Almost all went further, suggesting that it was a “core concern/key role.”

A number went further to suggest how

their “key role in managing the brand/reputation” translated to responsibilities. Approximately half of chief executives suggested that their role was to oversee professionals (marketing, PR, and external relations) in managing the brand. Also cited as important by almost all chief executives, across all three subgroups, was their personal PR and lobbying role with peers, policy makers, and media.

In summary, chief executives of UK universities across all three subgroups show a fair degree of consensus that reputation/brand management is central/key to their role.

Who are the key target audiences with which to establish reputation/brand?

See Table 2 for a summary of responses.

The most noticeable trend from the results to this question was a lack of commonality between target audiences cited as being important. There were exceptions, however, and a number of other noteworthy results:

- Industry/professions were cited as a target audience with which to establish brand/reputation by all but one chief executive, with employers mentioned as a distinct subgroup within this sector;
- Government/civil service were mentioned by only three chief executives, perhaps slightly surprisingly;
- Bodies such as HEFCE (Higher Education Funding Council for England), TTA (Teacher Training Agency), research councils, heads of careers, and Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) were alluded to by a number of heads but specifically cited by only three chief executives.
- Only two chief executives specifically mentioned “the media” as a target audience.

Table 2: Who are key target audiences with whom to establish the reputation/ brand? (Number of responses per category for each subgroup of university)

Audience	Newer unis	Middle unis	Older unis
Overall current students	2	5	2
Overall potential students	2	5	2
Home undergraduates	2		
Home postgraduates	2		
Overseas undergraduates	2		
Overseas postgraduates	2		
Industry/professions	3	5	3
Media	1		1
Local community		1	
Higher Education Funding Council for England/Teacher Training Agency	1	1	1
Research councils	1	2	
Heads of careers	1		
Heads of further education colleges	1		
Learning and Skills Councils	1		
Regional Development Agencies	1	1	
Gov/Civil service	1	2	
Other vice-chancellors		1	
Potential students'parents	1		
"The public"	1		

It should be noted, however, that a number of chief executives used rather nebulous phrases to explore the target audiences such as "those we are likely to do business with" and "those that have control over us." For this reason the audiences which were specifically suggested by surprisingly few chief executives (such as "media") may in fact be alluded to as part of these wider groups.

Overall, there was limited correlation between the target audience that chief executives suggested were important in establishing the reputation/brand. In particular the various subgroups within the student audience, many of which have differing motivations, need consideration, and perhaps a common model of understanding of other audiences could lead to greater correlation. Among the chief executives there appears to be recognition of the need to address these

disparate groups but only partial common definition of exactly who these are and how to prioritize them.

What helps and hinders the institution in building a reputation/ brand?

For the purpose of this question the terms reputation and brand were dealt with synonymously by chief executives except where indicated. In responding to this question it was apparent that chief executives were more easily able to identify and explore hindrances to building a reputation/brand than they were aids. The answers are explored under the "helps" and "hinders" headings respectively.

Aids to building an institutional reputation/ brand

The responses here showed only limited commonality and therefore it is difficult

to suggest themes becoming apparent. A number of factors were suggested by only one chief executive: history, location, links with further education (FE), “word of mouth,” “communicators—website, publications,” “inclusive structure,” “seen as 20 places higher than actual position,” “staff have helped build brand,” “strong overall brand—subbranding not an issue.” Perhaps the most enlightening factor, and the only one mentioned by more than one chief executive, was “the institution wishing to move forward to occupy a clear place in the market.”

Hinders building a clear institutional reputation/brand

Responses to this aspect showed greater commonality and therefore can be summarized with greater clarity:

1. *Institutional resistance to change.*

Interestingly, this was explored to include such factors as the institutional culture and cultural legacy. This seems a little at odds when considered in relation to some positive factors suggested such as “staff have helped build brand” and “inclusive structure” but may need further exploration. It may in fact simply be indicative of the complex issues facing chief executives when trying to build a clear reputation/brand for a diverse and not traditionally commercial organization. One middle group chief executive made an interesting comment in suggesting that internal building of a brand was hindered by the feeling that some “staff work *at* the university, but not *for* it.”

2. *Difficult to construct a real overall convincing brand that captures ethos and diversity.*

Two newer university chief executives suggested this. This point follows closely from the previous one in that it alludes to the difficulty of

branding an institution such as a university. Indeed, the third factor builds from this.

3. *Nature of brand model: lack of clear model to construct a brand.*

It was suggested that there is no evidence of a clear model for constructing a brand in institutions such as universities. One chief executive asked, “Do we build one strong overall brand which encompasses everything we do and all our services (are we a ‘Virgin’ type brand) or do we have a series of strong subbrands which have a higher profile than the overall institutional brand (are we a ‘Unilever’ type brand)?”

4. *Subbranding: schools/faculties who want a distinct reputation.*

This is clearly the articulation of the fundamental question in the previous “lack of branding model” issue. Several chief executives cited this as a hindrance to building a reputation/brand, although this was tempered by others who identified it as an issue but not necessarily negative (business schools were cited as an example of where it is necessary). Two interviewees were aware of this issue but felt that it did not affect their institutions, as the overall institutional brand was strong enough. This appears to be another area where there is no simple model or answer to suggest whether it is a positive or a negative and what the best practice should be. An interesting difference between the USA and UK was explored by one middle group chief executive who suggested a partial cause of the UK trend to subbrands pulling away from the overall institution. In the USA higher education cross-checking of quality is carried out by other departments within the same institution, whereas in the UK this cross-checking is carried out by a

similar external department from another institution. While there are doubtless arguments supporting this, it was suggested that this could lead to schools/faculties not relating as strongly to their parent institution as in the USA.

5. Other factors that hinder building reputation/brand but were suggested by only one institution chief executive included league tables, slowness to change, history and myth, and government policy changes
6. Government bodies such as the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and Teaching Quality Assessment (TQA) were suggested as a “big driver of brand” but neither help nor a hindrance.

Conclusions

Definition of reputation/brand and scope/relationship

The term “reputation” was, in general, clearly understood and embraced by chief executives. A consensus of interpretation can be summarized as “external perception of the quality of the institution.”

The term “brand” showed more variable understanding and interpretation. While it was, in general, embraced as a concept, this was not absolute throughout the sample.

Brand was interpreted with some degree of variability and terms suggested included “perceived aggregate quality” with mention of “visual communicators.” In general reputation was understood to be part of brand, but there were exceptions to this understanding. Reputation was considered to be particularly relevant for peers and brand for undergraduate audiences.

There were varying views about the

scope and role of brand: is brand fundamental and constrains all the organization does, or is it superficial and purely presentational when required. Most chief executives’ views tended more towards the former statement though suggesting that the brand “informs” rather than “constrains.” In essence, is a university brand *fundamental* or *superficial* (visual), or put another way, is branding a *philosophy* or a *function*?

The evolution of the discipline and subsequent modeling of branding concepts to the HE environment should lead to clearer conceptualization and definition of brands and their relationship to reputation.

Barriers to building a brand

The majority of chief executives suggested a lack of *real differentiation* in the sector. This appeared to be especially an issue for the genuinely diverse institutions who find it hard to encapsulate this in a few key points. There is no succinct answer to this complex issue, but there appears to be an opportunity to clearly understand current perceptions of institutions and therefore clearly articulate a desired brand positioning, rather than arrive at one by default

It was suggested that internal acceptance is one of the key issues which can hinder building a university brand. Research pointed to the middle group institutions having greatest difficulty in this area, thought to be due to (1) internal resistance resulting from organizational culture, and (2) genuinely diverse educational provision. Any model clearly needs to encompass internal marketing but it may be suggested that over time funding imperatives will lead to cultural shifts which more easily facilitate internal acceptance.

The lack of a clear model to facilitate

building a brand in a large and diverse nonprofit organization such as a university was seen as a limitation to constructing a clear brand. Most models deriving from commercial sources therefore may have only partial applicability.

Models of practical implementation

One of the key wider conclusions to become apparent from this research was that there appears to be little in the way of best practice or workable models for understanding, constructing, communicating, and maintaining a brand in a large, complex, and diverse nonprofit organization such as a university. This is particularly applicable to a number of areas:

Internal brand management—roles and relationships of leader, senior management, marketing department, and “everybody in institution” in brand management.

Institutional brand versus school/faculty subbrands—some chief executives saw this as “a problem,” others as “necessary.” The fundamental question appears to be: which is better, a “Virgin type” structure where the strong overall university brand acts as an umbrella for all that the institution does, or a “Unilever type” structure where the overall university brand is often subverted to subbrands and acts simply as a framework?

Reputation/brand research—is there a suggested best practice for evaluating and understanding this? Currently there is great diversity in how and whether institutions undertake this internally or externally, and which audiences they consider need addressing. It appears that older and middle group universities are particularly likely to undertake internal student-based research only, whereas newer

universities tend towards external wider based brand research as well. Does this reflect a differing approach to brand, or is it purely coincidental or financial priorities?

There was some variation in the target audiences whom chief executives perceived as being important to communicate reputation and brand to. Particularly notable here was the fact that some chief executives dealt with students as one category, while others broke to subcategories of overseas and home students, undergraduate and postgraduate students. There does not seem to be a high degree of consensus regarding key audiences for brand building and priorities within these audiences. One of the principal actions proposed from this initial exploratory research is the research and eventual proposal of a model of brand management applicable to HE institutions.

Overall conclusions

There was consensus that reputation/branding in UK higher education was an issue of great importance and likely to remain so. This was suggested to be particularly driven by tuition fees and funding issues, changing attitudes of students as consumers, government push to differentiation, and mergers and alliances.

It was considered that universities, while not often possessing natural brands, will be forced to occupy positions of distinctiveness. Whether those positions of distinctiveness will be genuine or have artificial construction is debatable. Six key factors were suggested, as the core criteria on a matrix to plot the positions that universities will have to occupy: *teaching-led v. research-led, science-based v. arts-based, basic teaching v. higher level teaching*. Other factors may be apparent

but were not suggested from this sample.

In general UK university chief executives are well informed and embrace reputation and brand management. There is, as is perhaps expected, less consistency in definition of branding as a concept than reputation, in particular whether it is a function or a philosophy.

University chief executives have to embrace an agenda that they see as important, but that has little in the way of best practice models to support them. United States higher education (while being subject to different funding imperatives) may offer positive role models in this respect. Closer liaison between UK and US management and marketing roles at all levels from strategic to functional may be appropriate to share best practice.

Overall, it is evident that clearer understanding of HE brands and brand management is necessary and further work is needed to identify branding issues and to propose workable models applicable to the UK sector.

Further Research

This was an exploratory study to consider the understanding, attitudes, and interpretation of UK university chief executives to reputation and brand, and as such the limited sample, while over 10 percent of the total population, can only lead to indicative answers. There are, however, further research questions suggested:

- 1 What are the constituent elements of university brands perceived as “successful”?
- 2 Can a model for university brand analysis and management be developed?
- 3 Can internal marketing models be applied to the higher education sector?

Implications for Practice

It is apparent that there are difficulties facing UK universities in terms of reputation and brand management, but there are a number of positive steps that university leaders and marketing practitioners may consider:

- One positive factor is chief executives’ apparent acceptance of the importance of the issue of reputation and brand management. This readiness to embrace the concepts is likely to lead to a proactive rather than reactive approach to the challenge.
- There is an opportunity, therefore, to clearly understand current perceptions of the institution (possibly through research) and thereafter clearly articulate a desired brand positioning, rather than arrive at one by default.
- Many UK universities have strong historical and cultural legacies, which, once understood, may offer a clear foundation for future brand design and communication.
- Internal acceptance appears to be critical for a real and sustainable brand, and consideration should be given to how to win acceptance of staff at all levels. A clear starting point is to call for the importance of the concept of branding itself.
- Loyalty is a starting point for internal acceptance. The attitude of working “at the university” and not “for the university” appears to be widespread and addressing the cultural issues which have fostered this attitude, while not easy, will be necessary in the long term.

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Practitioner's Perspective

This practitioner's perspective discusses three papers in this issue of the Journal, all dealing with the art, and even the science, of brand marketing. The papers are Chapleo's "Interpretation and Implementation of Reputation/Brand Management by UK University Leaders," Liston-Heyes and Heyes's "Brand Management in US Business Schools: Can Yale Learn from Harvard?" and Goldgehn's "Generation Who, What, Y?: What You Need to Know About Generation Y."

A thorough reading of Goldgehn's paper will reveal that it is much less paper on the branding of higher education, and much more a very solid round-up on the peculiarities of the students, particularly the traditional-age American students, who will be attending college and university.

As a reviewer of the literature on Generation Y, Goldgehn does a nice job synthesizing sometimes disparate sources into a set of common and valued themes. She notes, for example, that today's students are:

- Brand conscious,
- Sophisticated shoppers,
- Technologically savvy,
- Financially motivated,
- Informed decision makers.

Of course, these insights are useful. But buried within the larger body of the paper are a couple of significant points that make the overall paper well worth reading. First, she notes—drawing on Malcolm Gladwell's idea of a tipping point—that Generation Y students are able to be "tipped." She also suggests that while it may sometimes be difficult for a college to tip a student, they can sometimes be tipped by influencers (parents, club advisors, high school guidance counselors, coaches, youth ministers, and others). Recognizing this phenomenon, astute marketers need to always be aware of who influences their students and what influences the influencers.

Second, Goldgehn reminds us that building a brand in today's market requires that marketers throw away all recollections and memories of their own college days. Setting aside comfortable conventions from days of old is an important step in creating relevance in the hearts and minds of today's students. Any marketing conversation that begins with "remember when" will likely lead to a strategy that is troubled.

As you read Goldgehn's paper, I might make two suggestions. First, remember that all papers that focus on generational issues and titles often overlook the fact that for every couple of students that fit the profile, an equal number do not. Classifications are helpful, but classifications are also a form of stereotyping and can easily mask as much as they reveal.

Finally, while the technology of building a brand may change (use the web), the principle that a student must find your brand to be relevant to them has not. It is dangerous to let the technology of communication overshadow this principle.

The paper "Brand Management in US Business Schools" deals directly with brand marketing. Essentially, it sought to explore a sort of "efficiency gap" between the

brand that *should exist* at a business school based on such fundamental qualities as faculty quality, teaching resources, and other variables and the brand that *does exist* based on college rankings, especially the *US News & World Report*.

Clearly, any exploration of the gray area between “what should be” and “what is” offers those of us interested in building strong brands some meat to chew on. Fortunately, the authors do not disappoint.

At its most basic, the research sought to:

1. Identify those schools that exhibit best “reputation-building” practices (those which score “100,” see below);
2. For inefficient schools, provide a quantitative measure of efficiency which could form the basis for a performance-improvement target.;
3. For inefficient schools identify best-practice schools which could serve as appropriate benchmarks.

Using a technique called Data Envelopment Analysis (DEA), the authors looked at a number of variables (see Table 1 on p. 11) that predict quality found at 50 US business schools.

The authors then explored how well the internal “quality” of these schools correlated with their external “brand” distilled as a ranking in *US News & World Report*. The result is an indication of brand efficiency. An efficiency measure of 100 (see Table 2 on p. 14) means that the institution is a “best practice” institution. The farther above “100” a school is, the less correlation between the brand that is and the brand that should be. Of the 50 schools examined, 23 are “best practice.” This means, of course, that 37 of the 50 schools are not. And there’s the rub. We discover, for example, that the reputation of the Yale Graduate School of Business is 13 percent below what it should be given its fundamentals.

It is important to realize that this research is not simply a reiteration of college rankings. Rather, it focuses on the brand that could, even should be, based on fundamentals that are already in place. In other words, say the authors, the higher the score, the larger the potential for improving not the institution’s quality, but its brand.

This research highlights a very key issue: the lag, either chronological or perceptual, between what you are, and what you are known for. It plays directly to the adage, “we are a best kept secret.” In other words, a college or university may have valued fundamentals in place, but if it is not known, these fundamentals will not positively impact the brand.

In my opinion, this paper has only one flaw, and it is a very minor one. Early on, it spends a little too much time positioning the business school dean as the logical brand champion. In fact, there seems to be the feeling on the part of the authors that the business dean is a sort of brand dictator who merely has to say to her or his subordinates, “make it happen” and the proper brand recognition will fall into place. As we know from the article discussed below, building a brand is a much more complex, political, expensive, and time-consuming undertaking than that simple reduction makes it out to be.

Finally, we can turn our attention to “Interpretation and Implementation of Reputation/Brand Management by UK University Leaders.” The objectives of this paper were to:

1. Identify the level of understanding of the role and importance of reputation/brand management among leaders of UK universities;
2. Identify examples of existing practice relating to managing reputations/brands in UK universities;
3. To open up further opportunities for debate and discussion on the issues and importance of reputation/brand management in universities.

While these issues are interesting, the questions and answers they generate are largely intuitive. In almost all respects, the UK university leaders who participated in this study approach issues related to reputation and brand building in much the same fashion as their counterparts in the USA (and I suspect other countries as well). They believe:

- That their institutions have reputations;
- To a lesser degree, their institutions have brands;
- That reputations were a better indicator of quality than brands;
- That it is important for institutions to differentiate;
- That while they, as chief executives have a role in brand-building, so does the rest of the institution, especially the marketing department.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the paper was how consistently deans struggle to understand, or ignore, the difference between a reputation and a brand. While the deans tended to use the terms interchangeably, when pressed, they suggested that reputations center on perceptions of quality, and are “what peers think of us.” At the same time, the deans believed that brands are manufactured and have more of a commercial slant. In other words, brands are about selling. Deans believe that reputations evolve as quality increases. Brands, however, are created. The key points of this discussion can be found in Table 1 of the paper (p. 11).

Of particular note is what leaders believe hinder the creation of brand. When asked, they cited the following impediments:

1. Institutional resistance to change;
2. Difficult to construct a real, overall, convincing brand that captures ethos and diversity of the institution;
3. Lack of a clear model to construct a brand;
4. Subbrands: schools that want their own brands.

Except for item 3 above, these are exactly the same issues facing leaders of schools in other countries.

As you read Chapleo’s paper, keep in mind that all of the discussion about reputation and brand is institutional-centric. It is all about what institutions decide to be and decide to communicate. Missing from the whole conversation is the issue

of “relevance.” In other words, there is no marketplace validation (market-centric) for the reputation or brand that the institution wishes to develop, project, and live.

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