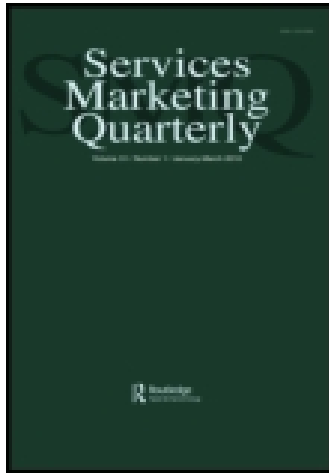


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Building a University Brand from Within: University Administrators' Perspectives of Internal Branding

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The branding process has evolved into a role that suggests a promise to meet consumer expectations. This promise has typically been developed based on external promotional strategies such as advertising and sales promotion. More recently, the brand messages conveyed to employees of an organization have been recognized as an important aspect of an organization's positioning. The objective of this study is to investigate the internal promotion of the brand within an industry that only recently began to embrace integrated marketing efforts: higher education. Administrators in higher education who regularly have an opportunity to convey the university brand promise to outside constituencies are surveyed. Respondents from private institutions reported greater brand clarity than respondents at public institutions.

KEYWORDS administrators, communication, higher education, internal branding, media, university brand

INTRODUCTION

From a communication perspective, branding is an organization's attempt to tell their story. The brand message is important because it suggests a promise

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to meet consumer expectations. More importantly, this promise enables organizations to position their product or service as distinct from the competition. As Sevier (2000) states, "Branding in the marketplace is similar to branding on a cattle ranch. The purpose of a branding program is to differentiate your cow from the other cattle on the range" (p. 5). In this sense, building brand identity does much of the 'work' for potential customers by simplifying consumer decisions, reducing the risk associated with a purchase, providing emotional reinforcement, and offering a sense of community (Court, Leiter, and Loch 2002). However, organizations that do not make it a priority to build brand identity find themselves at the mercy of how others choose to tell their story.

Building brand identity begins within the organization and requires coordinated branding communication efforts. Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate internal branding strategies implemented in the development of the organizational brand. More specifically, effectiveness of internal branding efforts within the services sector, for which there is sparse research, is investigated and higher education was the study's focus because it is a service industry. Administrators of higher education were selected as potential respondents due to their frequent opportunities to sell the brand while interacting with outside constituents of the university. Respondents were surveyed regarding their perspectives of how well they understand the university brand and how likely they are to implement their knowledge of the brand into their job responsibilities. Four items were used to determine the respective university brand strength among university administrators based on their perceptions of the distinctiveness of their university's brand, the clarity of their university's internal branding message, the degree of university involvement in the promotion of the brand, and their university's brand image as compared to that of prospective students' perception.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Internal Branding

Brands provide a great deal of value to consumers and perform the following functions for marketers: (1) identification of the source of the product, (2) assignment of responsibility to product maker, (3) risk reducer, (4) search cost reducer, (5) promise, bond, or pact with maker of product, (6) symbolic device, and (7) signal of quality (Keller 2003). While external branding simplifies a consumer's decision process through advertising and a strong brand promise, corporations have recognized the value of promoting the brand message internally as well. At Nike, specific senior executives are designated as "Corporate Story Tellers" and are responsible for reinforcing the company's advertising campaign to employees (Mitchell 2002). In doing so, they focus on anecdotal evidence of the company's innovative success rather than

financial numbers that may reflect the “Just Do It” culture of the organization. For example, Nike senior executives fuel an innovative spirit within the organization by recounting how, “Nike cofounder Bill Bowerman, in an attempt to build a better shoe for his team, poured rubber into the family waffle iron, giving birth to the prototype of Nike’s famous Waffle Shoe” (Mitchell 2002, p. 103). At Mayo Clinic, effective internal communication efforts were implemented which encouraged employees’ desires to put the patient first and “live” the Mayo brand which is defined as: “The best interest of the patient is the only interest to be considered” (Berry and Neeli 2003, p.103). Similarly, when Miller Brewing Company initiated an internal effort to improve employee morale, they discovered that employees took great pride in the company’s tradition of brewing. This pride was fostered with stories of “founder Frederick Miller carrying yeast in his pocket from Germany in 1855” (Mitchell 2002, p. 103) and with internal posters, books, and T-shirts strategically distributed within the organization to celebrate the vocation of brewing.

All of these examples reinforce the need to study the organization internally and make sure that the brand messages sent to employees closely match those sent to customers. Failing to match the messages can result in a demoralized and cynical staff that loses faith in the organization and is unable to “live the brand.” Presenting an accurate brand message to employees requires an effective internal communication model. In his book *The Corporate Brand*, Nicholas Ind (1997) outlines a model that provides a method of examining internal communications. Derived from the identity of the organization, its mission, philosophy, and core values, an internal communications umbrella links together three forms of internal communication:

- 1) one-to-one (task-based, individual, motivational, involving);
- 2) segments (task/process, group, engaging);
- 3) all (process, inform, instruct, motivational).

Among these three forms of communication, ‘one-to-one’ represents the most personal, strongest two-way interaction and ‘all’ represents the least personal, weakest two-way interaction. While the former may consist of daily interaction, briefings, and meetings, the latter typically employs newsletters, memos, and brochures as the primary means of communication.

Internal Branding in the Services Sector

For organizations within the services sector, brands also offer relationship benefits and create accessibility (Morel, Preisler, and Nystrom 2002). Given this harsh reality, service organizations have developed branding strategies that typically focus on differentiating the service via external promotional strategies such as advertising and sales promotional efforts. Recently,

however, service organizations have realized that brand messages conveyed to the employees of an organization are just as important as those sent to customers. Prior research supports the belief that all employees of an organization are internal customers (Gummesson 1987; Bowen and Schneider 1988; George 1990). Schiffenbauer (2001) maintains that the brand message will lose its credibility if it is not supported by the employees within the organization. As important internal promise deliverers, employees within the organization must align their performance with the external brand promise (Schultz and Schultz 2000) in order to maximize the strength of the brand (Arruda 2002). Hence, internal branding efforts are essential if employees are to understand and take ownership in the brand. This becomes even more critical for service organizations because consumer loyalty is typically challenged by service quality, which is often much more variable and more difficult to control than product quality (Schultz 2002).

Branding in Higher Education

Like many service-oriented organizations, universities are facing an increasingly competitive environment in which they must find ways to differentiate their institution and tell their story. Various technological and social changes continue to erode the monopoly that universities once had over intellectual resources and privileges (Burbules and Callister 2000). When addressing new challenges, the higher education paradigm must be continually reengineered from the ground up to facilitate an entrepreneurial spirit and a coordinated, customer-driven strategy (Dimun 1998). Universities have increasingly implemented integrated marketing techniques in an effort to strengthen promotional efforts (Wasmer, Williams, and Stevenson 1997). As part of institutional efforts toward a coordinated, customer-oriented marketing system, universities must also include a focus on developing the university brand.

Within the university setting, “a brand is a name, an image, a compelling description of an organization that captures the essence of the value that your college provides” (Frederick, Austin, and Draper 2000, p. 55). The usefulness of this brand is that it allows individuals to make a decision on a limited amount of information (Papp 2002). Selecting a university to attend is certainly a complex consumer decision, and looking to the brand simplifies the selection process for many. Thus, universities have increasingly recognized the importance of developing a brand identity for the university. According to Lawlor (1998) brand identity is “the essence of how you would like alumni, prospective students, legislators, and the public to perceive your institution” (p. 19). The University of Houston recently decided to take a proactive approach and implemented a five-year, \$5 million image campaign (Hacker 2005). Likewise, Point Park University in Pittsburg unveiled a \$1 million branding campaign via billboards, print ads, and other media (Schackner 2004).

When evaluating a complex intangible offering, consumers will look not only to the brand, but also to people within the organization for clues. According to Sevier (1994), university students generally offer four reasons for their school choice: (a) image or reputation, (b) location, (c) cost, and (d) the availability of a particular major. When asked to choose among the four factors, students invariably choose image. Berger and Wallingford (1996) apply the hierarchy of communication goals, widely used in consumer advertising, to the field of higher education and investigate the university selection process undertaken by prospective students. They concluded that “reputation” and “academics” were the two most important factors in selecting a school to attend, with “cost” and “location” following closely behind (“The brand called. . .” 2003).

However, developing and maintaining brands requires advertising and promotional resources. While cellular provider T-Mobile can afford to pay Catherine Zeta-Jones \$20 million dollars to enhance their brand (Schiering 2003), the marketing budget at an academic institution typically accounts for less than one percent of the total university budget (“Lipman Hearn. . .” 2001). In addition, 14 percent of public institutions faced budget reductions in recent years (“Lipman Hearn. . .” 2001) and many universities are currently bracing for further cuts. According to the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, recent budget reductions have strained about half of the state economies due to a lackluster housing market and reductions in state tax revenues as well as rising costs of other state funded programs (e.g., health care, Medicaid, elementary and secondary education) (Hebel 2008). For organizations within the services sector that face the challenge of developing the brand for an intangible and complex offering in a cost effective manner, developing the brand from the inside out can be a powerful strategy.

Public vs. Private Universities

Developing the brand identity is important for both public and private universities. Public universities in the United States are considered governmental agencies because they are supported in part by public funds from the state, whereas private institutions typically do not receive public funding. When comparing public to private institutions of higher education, one might expect to find lower tuition prices, higher enrollment, and greater diversity at a public institution. A study on administrative (job) satisfaction, however, reflects more similarities than differences between the two types of institutions. According to Volkwein and Parmley (2000), no statistically significant differences exist between public and private institutions for (1) global satisfaction, (2) satisfaction with intrinsic rewards, (3) satisfaction with working conditions, (4) satisfaction with people they come in contact with at work. Additional similarities between public and private institutions include: proportion of students from racial and ethnic backgrounds is almost the

same, proportion of students from low and middle-income backgrounds is almost the same, students who have dependents or support themselves is almost the same (“Independent Colleges and Universities...” 2001). In addition, private universities are more affordable than many realize due to the abundance of scholarship opportunities to prospective students.

Some valid differences regarding aspects such as institutional growth and organizational strategy, do exist between public and private institutions. For example, growth is not always good for private schools because tuition price paid covers only a fraction of the cost of an education (Winston 2001) and they are not subsidized by the federal or state government. In addition, public schools have resisted changes in core mission (“A study of factors...” 2003). Both of these findings may translate to differences in the internal branding efforts between public and private institutions, and prompt an examination of these differences.

METHODOLOGY

The survey method was used in this study to assess the clarity of university brand messages within institutions, university commitment to the brand, and the effectiveness of internal branding promotional methods targeting administrators. The survey instrument was based broadly upon the work of Aurand, Gorchels, and Bishop (2004) which discusses the status of internal branding in the corporate sector. The on-line survey instrument was developed and made available to university administrators across the United States. The survey was sent to individuals in the following university positions: Chief Admissions Officer, Associate Admissions Officer, Enrollment Management, Financial Aid, Registrar, Student Recruitment, Development/Institutional Advancement, Associate Development Officer, Alumni Affairs/Relations, Annual/Planned Giving, College Newspaper Advisor, Community Services, Information Office Services, Public Relations, Publications, Sports Information. We chose these positions because these individuals typically have contact with the universities’ outside constituents.

Following a pretest of the on-line instrument by university employees, cover e-mail messages were sent to 2,619 university administrators whose e-mail addresses were obtained through a list broker. The cover e-mail message explained the nature and purpose of the study, guaranteed the participant that his/her participation would be anonymous and that all individual responses would be held in strict confidentiality. Each recipient of the cover email message was directed via an imbedded hot-link to a website at which the survey resided. The total number of respondents was 343 reflecting a response rate of 13.1%. According to one direct mail list broker, a response rate of 5.0% is deemed acceptable for business-to-business surveys (Greatlists.com 2006).

FINDINGS

A multi-item measure and Likert-type scales were employed to capture and evaluate university administrator demographics, brand perceptions, and opinions regarding communication media effectiveness. Brand strength was gauged using scales derived from the work of Michaels, Cron, Dubinsky, and Joachimsthaler (1988) and Aurand, Gorchels, and Bishop (2004) and implementing ANOVA testing. Cronbach's Alpha was utilized as the measure of reliability (Churchill 1979) for administrator brand strength and the measure offered satisfactory results $-\alpha > .783$ (Peter 1979).

Communication media effectiveness, the measure of how well a particular media was able to internally convey the brand, was evaluated based upon a Likert-type scale involving four different media (brochures, campus meetings, e-mail messages, and university memos) all of which were identified as viable sources of internal branding messages.

As Table 1 illustrates, over 350 experienced university administrators from both public and private universities completed the on-line survey and submitted it for analysis. Due to institution size, public school administrator participants outnumber those of private school participation by nearly a two-to-one ratio.

Participants were responsible for a wide variety of externally focused functions including public relations, marketing, development, admissions, fund-raising, alumni affairs and student recruitment. They were familiar

TABLE 1 Participant Demographics.

Demographic variable	Number	Percentage (%)
Public institution	227	66.3*
Private institution	116	33.7
Total	343	100
Participant Primary Area of Responsibility		
Public relations	79	23.9**
Marketing	42	12.7
Development	39	11.8
Admissions	34	10.3
Fund-raising	28	8.5
Alumni affairs	21	6.3
Student recruitment	19	5.7
Other	69	20.8
Total		100
	Mean	Std. Deviation
Participant Experience in Higher Education	18.06 years	9.584
Participant Employment at Current Institution	12.40 years	9.023

*N = 353, Valid Responses = 344.

**N = 353, Valid Responses = 331.

with the academic environment as mean participant experience in higher education exceeded 18 years and employment at their current institutions surpassed 12 years. Based upon the variety of externally focused functions that participants were involved in and the participant experience in higher education, it was determined that the sample was representative of American university administrators who served as viable brand touch points for their respective universities.

Brand Strength

Four items were used to determine the respective university brand strength among university administrators: 1) Administrator perception of the distinctiveness of their university's brand, 2) Administrator perception of the clarity of their university's internal branding message, 3) Administrator perception of the degree of university involvement in the promotion of the brand, and 4) Administrator perception of their university's brand image as compared to that of prospective students' perception. Based upon these four measures, school administrators appear to be in general agreement with, but do not have a particularly strong perception of, their respective universities' brands. With an overall mean brand strength score of 2.38 on a six-point scale (1-Strongly Agree; 6-Strongly Disagree, arrived at by taking the mean of the four brand strength measures) it does appear that university branding initiatives are proving to be effective. Some differences among institutions exist, however, as brands are perceived to be stronger among private university administrators than with their peers at public universities. As is noted in Table 2, private university administrators have a stronger brand perception than do their peers at public universities with each of the four variables used to determine university brand perception. As a result, the mean brand strength for private school administrators is stronger than that of public school administrators.

While brand strength among university administrators may not be particularly strong, it does appear that universities are quite involved in the promotion of their respective brands. Table 2 illustrates that among the four brand strength components tested, administrators demonstrate the strongest level of agreement with this aspect of brand strength (1.96 overall; 1.72 among private school administrators; 2.07 among public school administrators). Unfortunately, respondents do not believe that these branding initiatives are extremely successful in producing the same brand perception among administrators and prospective students (2.86 overall; 2.97 among private school administrators; 2.63 among public school administrators). Somewhat similar results are apparent regarding the clarity of the brand message that the university communicates to its respective administrators.

TABLE 2 Perceived University Brand Strength among University Administrators Public vs. Private University Participants.

	Overall mean	Public mean	Private mean	Sig.
The university presently, or has been, involved in promoting its brand image over the past two years	1.96	2.07	1.72	0.014*
The university clearly stands for something distinctive	2.18	2.36	1.85	0.000*
The university communicates a clear message concerning its brand image to administrators	2.56	2.67	2.31	0.012*
Administrator has the same perceptions of the university's brand image as prospective students	2.86	2.97	2.63	0.013*
Administrators' Brand Strength Mean	2.38	2.50	2.12	0.001*

Mean based upon six point Likert-type scale: 1-Strongly Agree; 6-Strongly Disagree.

* $p \leq 0.05$.

Alpha – University Brand Perception Strength – 0.783.

Impact of Brand Image on Administrator Job Functions

A university's brand image has a relatively strong impact upon how university administrators perform their externally oriented job functions, but the impact is not as strong with regard to how administrators manage their staffs. For example, Harvard is promoted as "always innovating" while Brown University is positioned as the "free-choice curriculum" school (Hesel 2004). Coincidentally, university administrators' opinions regarding the understanding of the university brand *held by their staffs*, and the degree that *their staffs* use the university brand value in their everyday work are slightly weaker than their opinions regarding the degree to which the brand image is utilized by the administrators themselves.

When reviewing the findings in Table 3, it might first appear that the impact of the brand image upon how university administrators perform their job functions would be stronger among private university administrators than public administrators. However, the differences are not statistically significant except in the area of staff management, where the impact of the brand image is stronger among private university administrators than public university administrators.

With regards to private vs. public university administrator opinions of *their staffs* understanding and use of the brand image in everyday work, private university administrators have a stronger opinion concerning *staff understanding*, but there is no statistically significant difference regarding *staff usage* of brand values.

TABLE 3 Impact of University Brand Image on Administrator Job Functions Public vs. Private University Administrators.

Job function	Overall mean	Public mean	Private mean	Sig.
<i>Administrators' Job Functions</i>				
Recruits students (if applicable)	1.82	1.91	1.64	0.052
Develops community and campus relationships (if applicable)	1.96	1.97	1.95	0.911
Engages in alumni fundraising (if applicable)	2.04	2.08	1.98	0.465
Manages his/her staff (if applicable)	2.40	2.54	2.13	0.008*
<i>Administrators' Perceptions of Staffs</i>				
(My staff) clearly understands the values the university brand stands for (if applicable)	2.11	2.20	1.94	0.045*
(My staff) uses the brand values in their everyday work (if applicable)	2.28	2.36	2.13	0.099

Mean based upon six point Likert-type scale: 1-Strongly Agree; 6-Strongly Disagree.

* $p < 0.05$.

Brand Communication Media Effectiveness

The means by which brand messages are transmitted to internal university constituents can conceivably be as important as the message itself. University administrators were asked to evaluate the brand communication effectiveness of four media alternatives commonly found within the university setting: 1) University brochures, 2) Campus meetings, 4) Emails, and 5) Memos. As can be seen in Table 4, university brochures are both the most commonly used brand communication medium and apparently most effective as well. Campus meetings and emails are found to be similar in both usage rate and potentially effectiveness. Memos, the least used and possibly the least effective of the four media evaluated, were still identified as being utilized by nearly three-quarters of survey participants. Again, while it might appear that private university administrators find brochures, campus meetings, and emails to be more effective than their peers at public universities, none of these differences are statistically significant.

TABLE 4 Brand Communication Effectiveness – by Media Public vs. Private University Administrators

Media	N (%)	Overall mean	Public mean	Private mean	Sig.
University brochures	326 (92.35)*	2.10	2.15	1.94	0.068
Campus meetings	303 (85.84)	2.67	2.70	2.60	0.413
Email	294 (83.29)	2.68	2.73	2.58	0.241
Memos	264 (74.79)	2.80	2.78	2.84	0.643

*N = 353, Mean based upon five point Likert-type scale: 1-Very Effective; 5-Very Ineffective.

* $p \leq 0.05$.

In summary, a large, representative sample of experienced university administrators dealing with external relations and employed at both public and private American universities took part in the study and provided detailed insight into the strength of their university's brand, the impact that the brand has upon their work initiatives and staff management, and the effectiveness of common communication media in the delivery of the brand message. It was learned that university administrators are in general agreement with but lack exceptionally strong perceptions of their universities' brands. Also, university brands are stronger among private university administrators. A university's brand image has a relatively strong impact upon the manner in which university administrators perform their job functions, but less of an impact upon how they manage their staff and how their staff utilizes the brand in their everyday work. Finally, it appears that university brochures are the most common media used in the delivery of the brand message to internal audiences, and it is also believed to be the most effective.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Interbrand, an international consultancy specializing in brand strategies, defines a brand as:

A mixture of attributes, tangible and intangible... which, if managed properly creates value and influence... [F]rom a marketing or consumer perspective, [value] is *the promise and delivery of an experience*... Brands offer customers a means to choose and enable recognition within cluttered markets. (2005, retrieved from www.interbrand.com)

To relate this definition to a university brand, the term *consumer* or *customer* can be replaced with *student*. Just as an effective consumer brand helps attract the best customers, a strong university brand may influence its ability to compete for the best students, to increase alumni association membership and contributions, and to attain monetary donations. It might also have an indirect impact on support for liberal arts programs and athletic programs. In this context, the importance of administrators in managing the promise and delivery of student experiences in a cluttered market is notable and was a focal consideration of this research.

The findings suggest that while the universities represented in the study were somewhat active in promoting their brand identities externally, there could be greater clarity among administrators – of both public and private institutions. In other words, *internal* brand communications effectiveness should be enhanced. While brochures are considered the most frequently used AND the most effective means of communicating the university brand *internally* (followed by campus meetings, e-mail and memos), it is clear that improvements are necessary. While this study did not explore the alignment

of brand communications across centers, departments, schools, and other subdivisions of a university, this is an area of possible future examination. Universities might consider the tool kits and techniques used by multi-division corporations in their internal branding efforts. Similarly, new media or combinations of media might be tested for effectiveness.

Perhaps a more significant finding was the difference between public and private university respondents. Administrators from private schools (as compared with public schools) are more apt to believe that their universities are distinctive, and that this distinctiveness is clear to both administrators and prospective students. In particular, private-school respondents indicate a greater impact of university brand on how they manage their staffs, and whether their staffs understand the values of their universities' brands. Due to the economic challenges facing both public and private universities today, a strong brand is needed to solicit more funds and donations in a competitive environment. Therefore, it seems appropriate for public university administrators to probe their private organization colleagues to uncover the strategies and tactics used in this context. Is the private university brand that much more distinctive so that internal communication is streamlined? Is the content of the internal communications (in addition to the media used) more effective? Are different standards of, or approaches to, staff training being utilized?

Indiana University is an example of a public university that responded to recent economic challenges by creating an office that would communicate both externally and internally to improve the university's brand image. After observing a lack of growth in the number of applicants for four straight years, the newly formed Office of Communications and Marketing at IU conducted an analysis of Indiana University's brand image (Zack 1998). Focus groups consisting of prospective students, business leaders, and politicians provided valuable information about the school's brand image to key university administrators. In the year following the school's extensive research on its institutional image, Indiana University worked to change their brand image and subsequently experienced an increase of 9% in applications even though Indiana high school graduates only increased 2% (Zack 1998).

The fact that Indiana had an internally branding campaign in place and was able to assess its effectiveness highlights a limitation of this study. Many of the institutions were no doubt in various stages of implementing an internal branding campaign. Perhaps some had not even started an initiative at their institution which may complicate the perceptions as related by the respondents. A future study may include surveying many individuals at institutions that had implemented an internal branding initiative and making comparisons across institutions.

In conclusion, public and private university administrators must evaluate not only the external distinctiveness and value of their brands, but must

also evaluate the perceived strength of this value internally and look for opportunities to enhance it. In particular, public university administrators should scrutinize internal brand communications activities of their private-school counterparts to discover opportunities for improvements. Progressive university administrators do not leave the image of the university to chance. They tell their own story by carefully managing the university brand image with accuracy, clarity, consistency, and continuity (Sevier 1994).

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