

## A STUDY ON BRANDING IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR

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### ABSTRACT

*Over a long period of time, the word 'brand' has been used in business, marketing and advertising to distinguish the product of one unique seller from another. Today, we are living in a world of 'customerisation' in which customers opt for a product based on their desirability and according to their favourability and loyalty to a particular product, due, perhaps, to the unrivalled quality of the brand. Given this scenario, higher institutions share similarities with business products, as the core business and product of an educational institution are teaching and learning.*

*The research on branding in higher education has grown; a specific focus on internal branding in this sector is still scarce. Brand support by mid-level administrative staff and deans is a key element in internal branding of a university. This study explores the extent to which internal branding contributes to this group understands of and engagement with a public institution's rebranding campaign. It identifies challenges and practice insights for practice for internal branding activities when engaging these internal stakeholders, linking to wider brand management theory and practice. This paper addresses a gap in the public sector brand management literature and demonstrates theoretical and practical implications for improved understanding and brand management strategy.*

**Keywords:** *Branding, Higher education institution, Brand identity*

## **Introduction**

As many countries move towards a progressively marketwise higher education sector, branding has been increasingly adopted as a strategy to distinguish a university from its competitors. However, the complexity and particular characteristics of higher education make branding more challenging than in traditional commercial contexts. Research suggests that the importance of higher education brand management increases in circumstances such as this, as there is a need to succinctly articulate the essence of the institution in an increasingly competitive market and to communicate signals of quality.

Branding in higher education has therefore been identified as a crucial area of future brand theory and practice, and there is a growing body of research on the subject. For example, Chapleo and Clark explored how a branding committee was used to facilitate a university's branding process, and Dean et al. explored how personnel co-create brand meaning via their experiences and social interactions in the university context. In the current study we refer to internal branding as "the activities undertaken by an organization to ensure that the brand promise reflecting the espoused brand values that set customers' expectations is enacted and delivered by employees.

## **Brand Management**

To build a strong image has always been an important aspect of product and brand management. The more the stronger brand is created, the greater will be the revenue generation both in short and long term. So, the ultimate goal for creating brand value is to come up with the brands that last for decades. As far as consumer behavior theory is concerned, a brand is defined as a mark that differentiates a branded identity from others, which could be a symbol, slogan, mark, tag line, specific design, colorful pattern or a best possible combination of all of these. Therefore the ability to memorize and recall a brand is "brand awareness", whereas the limit to which brand is valued by the customers is called brand equity which is interlinked with the brand trust and loyalty. In one liner, the greater the loyalty and trust of brand is developed in customer's mind the more will be the brand equity. This brand equity can be achieved through quality, product perceived value and its attributes which are valuable for customers. It is the brand value and brand perception which effects on consumer purchasing behavior, even before the consumer has prior purchase experience. So the importance of creating a strong brand value can't be put aside which have direct impact on customers selection procedure, even if they have little or no experience with previous purchase.

**Brand Awareness**

Brand awareness is related to the power and familiarity of a brand about which a customer/ consumer is fully aware of. The prior research in the field of brand management has proved it that a more recognized or familiar brand gets lot more positive response than a non-familiar one, even if the unknown brand has more quality orientation. The brand awareness is consider as a first step towards knowledge and attitude of the brand which give an in-depth overview of what the product is all about? As Aaker(1996) believes that brand awareness can be analyzed from three different aspects i.e. recognition, recall (first recall) and dominant and he further adds that consumer is simply concerned in remembering the brand name. Also, it is important to mention that creating awareness amongst masses could be an expensive task to do, the expense of which can be compensated if it is done effectively to increase the brand equity.

In more philosophical terms, brand recognition/ awareness is all about recollection of a brand or once a product is re-bought. As mentioned above, the brand gives a positive feeling which makes customer realize that a product/ service coming from a particular brand would surely be of high quality as the company has spent a lot on its promotion. Brand recognition has its strong impact on product class that in some cases it proves out to be a wholly solely recognition for product category e.g. "Cola". In this context the first word striking customers mind would be "Pepsi" and "Coca Cola". This particular glimpse of recall is called "first recall", and no wonder it's the dream of every brand to recognize itself in the category of first recall. However, one can confirm a positive brand awareness if the product falls amongst top few brands in this first recall category.

**Brand Association**

The association of brand is direct indicator of brand quality, discussed above. According to Keller (1993), Brand association can be sub categorized in to various forms of associations which include product attributes, attributes like price, customization, emotional attachment etc. These associations are determined by the brand identity which then makes customer a repetitive consumer. The brand association set initiatives for designing the communication message that may further result in to high perceived value of a product/ service. In Higher education, brand association can be termed as quality faculty, the offerings of programs/ courses of interest, the fee structure, industry linkages and so on. An emerging brand institution must include these association parameters in its promotional campaign so as to brand itself up to student's association.

### **Brand Identity**

Aaker (1996) differentiates brand Identity and brand image by simply dividing the level of perception that how brand wants to be perceived is brand identity whereas how it actually is perceived by the customers is brand image. He further adds that brand identity results in provision of “direction, purpose and meaning of the brand”. This set standards for a target market at which branding should be done in a more structured way. The brand image aim to promise the customer and a brand identity often comes out to be an output of experiences which customer shows with it in terms of trust enhancement between the producer and customer, as a result of which brand attains the status of competitive advantage.

### **The Concept of Branding in the Higher Education Sector**

The concept of branding is not new because it has been in use for many centuries. Keller (1993) argued that, due to the perceived risks attached to the purchase of services, consumers preferred to use such services which are familiar to them and which they can trust. Governments in different parts of the world have started developing attractive policies, especially based on the provision of quality education in neat, clean and safe environments. Globalization has made higher education a tradable commodity. Therefore, they have started marketing activities to position themselves in the global market while analyzing their strengths and weaknesses and identifying the unique selling points. For this purpose they are focusing on Brand Value.

The views on higher education branding fall broadly within the established dividing lines when it comes to interpreting the general transformation of higher education. Several writers are optimistic, seeing branding as an instrument for improving competitiveness and reputation. For example, Melewar and Akel (2006:41) stated the following: In a market where students are recognized as customers, universities and colleges have to implement strategies to maintain and enhance their competitiveness. They need to develop a competitive advantage based on a set of unique characteristics. Furthermore, universities and colleges need to communicate these characteristics in an effective and consistent way to all of the relevant stakeholders. Under these circumstances, universities have finally realized the role of corporate identity as a powerful source of competitive advantage

### **Challenges in Higher Education Branding**

The branding of education services may encounter number of challenges which an ordinary commercial service provider may not because non commercialized institutions

have to be more intelligent in their marketing and branding efforts (Vijender, 2007) because educational brands are used for long-term consumption purposes than a typical commercial one. Secondly, most of the education branding hasn't been the focus and centre line of case studies or scholarly articles; however they can be cherished as a commodity brand when the demand exceeds the supply. Also in case of conventional product like cola or biscuits. the product differentiation is very less which increase the scope for branding whereas in educational branding the element of differentiation could be high i.e. Number of degrees, courses offered etc. Which ensures a limited branding scope of higher education institutions? As far as diversity and strength of students are concerned the study ambitions, aim and involvement may vary from portion of society to certain limit, whereas lot of students may not like these offerings which makes branding of educational institutions a little tough. The element of similarity can't be neglected irrespective of constant claims by different institutions as being "best", "Top quality providers" etc., which ultimately make them similar at one point. Further the chances of getting off track in this branding strategy can't be put aside as the focus totally shifts to new offerings & increasing market share which may affect teaching and learning capabilities of these institutions.

Another important challenge in Higher education branding is the difference in perception of owners and consumers. The institutional owner looks over his/her competitors who may not what exactly or is equally important for the students or guardians. The investment of higher education institution is mostly focused towards building, infrastructures, cafeterias, sports facilities etc. This investment could be vulnerable in contrast to same investment in FMCG market because in educational sector trust and relationship may take long time to develop and are breakable in shorter span of time, which in the FMCG market is totally opposite.

### **Challenges in engaging internal stakeholders with a new university brand**

In this study, it seems that those interviewed do have a degree of 'buy in' to the institution's brand, and the challenge is to further embed that formally through the internal branding process and subsequently to the way deans and mid-level administrators support the new brand values.

With this in mind, it is of concern that some consider that the internal communications and engagement process used for the institution's rebrand is an exercise in

generating superficial 'buy in' without genuine value. Although the most cynical views were expressed by a minority of the interviewees, it is important to pay attention to these critical voices, in order to lessen possible dissent and give opportunities to contribute to brand building, and thus better engage them in the process.

This study found that the sense of imposition of the institution's brand among several respondents from different departments is a significant negative; in short it seems it is very hard to build 'buy in' to one overall institutional brand. This observation compliments findings of Chapleo who reported on schools and faculties seeking to build a distinct reputation. Furthermore, Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana (2007) note that in the worst case, without brand harmonization, individual schools or faculty branding may even damage the entire university brand.

Specifically, at this institution, it seems that before the programme there was a sense of internal fragmentation, amounting to continuing identification with individual school and department sub brands, which is a common issue in building one consistent brand identity at the university level. Most, however, acknowledge the benefit of centralized brand management activities in mitigating this negative outcome. This study therefore also supports Miller et.al.'s study of the importance for internal communication to boost employee support of a new organizational branding strategy.

### **Beneficial practices in promoting a new university brand internally**

Consideration of opinions of the respondents in the context of the literature allows the identification of a number of areas, which, whilst they do not necessarily constitute 'best practice', certainly offer insights for those undertaking internal branding programs. This paper has suggested the need to build a case for a rebranding exercise before you start the rebranding exercise, as scholars have reported strong internal resistance and cynicism towards branding efforts, even in terms of parodying the branding campaign of the university. In this case study, it seems Marketing and Communications missed an opportunity to clearly build a case for why they needed to rebrand.

In keeping with this above mentioned theme, measures to help build acceptance were suggested; key advice given to other higher education institutions was to consult. Seemingly, the value of receiving on-going feedback and input from the regions where the institution has several campuses is key. It is important to bear this in mind as multi-campus universities with

regional centers have been regarded as particularly challenging in terms of building a consistent brand identity at university level.

However, a robust view was that after consulting you must move on to implement, as ultimately it is marketing professionals who drive the process. As the example of the initially suggested slogan “Unearth Your Potential” shows, it would be useful to test visual imagery and slogans amongst relevant stakeholders before the actual launch, in order to check interpretations and ensure that the brand identity concept is comprehensible and appealing.

Additionally, this research has revealed the importance of providing information on provenance of data used to support decisions; this is probably more important in the context of higher education than in many other sectors, as employees typically have a substantial degree of freedom, and higher education institutions are reliant on knowledge workers and their expertise.

## **Conclusion**

This research has revealed for a higher education institutional rebrand to be successful, it is necessary to ensure that mid-level administration and management are aware of the benefits of branding. By accomplishing this level of ‘buy in’, future cynicism and criticisms among this important stakeholder group may be mitigated. For example, if all members of this stakeholder group are explicitly educated about the positive benefits of establishing a strong institutional brand, there will be fewer questions regarding the use of university resources for this activity.

It is further concluded that marketing is just more than an important factor for survival in today’s hyper competitive scenario truly need an effective marketing suggestions for their familiarity and brand management, if they really want to be recognized in line with the same stature as other counterparts. Furthermore, the intellectual students of Punjab University in majority prefer the modern methods of marketing for educational institutions. Majority of them have no complaints if universities use tools like billboards, news paper ads etc for its recognition.

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