

Universities will need to turn to branding concepts in the coming future. Having a simple and easily-communicated vision remains paramount. Brands allow universities to relay their core focuses.

# C Can Universities and Branding Co-Exist?

# Brands Universities

**I** *By Kabir Sehgal*

In an age of “back to basics” branding in the corporate world, scrambling away from merger mania that obsessed corporate America in the Y2K days, one of the last branding- disbelievers is quietly stepping into a branded way of life. As to not upset their clients or stakeholders, higher education is gracefully entering their branding plea: “Guilty, we need a crisper identity.” Universities the nation over are starting to see advantages of potent identities lest they be stuck with a confounding identity, an identity that is uninviting to students, alumni, and finances. Today universities are gracefully undergoing visual identity programs (e.g., University of Hawaii, Rutgers), but explicitness be damned. To mention “branding” or “marketing” of an institution is arguably taboo: at odds with learning and ways of learning.

The future of university branding remains undoubtedly bright because other options have dwindled. Universities in effect must answer their own multiple choice test: what’s the best way to solidify one’s identity? The all-purpose test for discovering a university’s brand is simply asking the next passerby, “What do you think of Notre Dame?” or any other college. Strong university brands will receive crisp answers, “football program,” “economics department,” or “computer science.” Answers such as “it’s fine,” “it’s nice,” or “it’s a great school” is code-speak for poor identities. Unable to evoke or provoke an image won’t help your university, only able to soar Icarus-high before fate sets in.

Images clarify identity. Tuck School of Business's Kevin Keller writes in "The Power of Branding" about a host of visually-stimulating brands:

When you slip into your Armani suit before going to work in the morning, strap on your Rolex, and slide behind the wheel of your Mercedes-Benz, you're doing much more than getting dressed, keeping time, and driving to the office. You're defining your image and signifying your success. When playing shortstop for your firm's softball team, outfitted in Nike gear, you're not just a weekend warrior—you're Derek Jeter's kindred spirit.

Each brand Mr. Keller cites evokes a visual reaction. Rolex is chic, Mercedes squeals with prestige. The power and pleasing effect of images is difficult to wrestle. We have an insatiable desire to experience that which we know. Too difficult to argue with perception.

The horror for many universities comes in the examples. Too often the quick and easy business examples illustrate the power of branding, only for university stalwarts to declaim business as ominously at odds with education. But the options are thin, and universities are covertly using branding concepts. Quite simply, the conventional ways of alumni communication, fundraising, and communicating a message just aren't working, mainly because universities have too broad a focus and increased competition. Colleges are turning to strategic plans, core values, direct mail-marketing as tools to relay their message—all branding concepts.

Having too broad a focus is at odds with branding. When a university bills itself as too many things to too many people, it turns into the Chevrolet of education. Chevrolet doesn't evoke a strong visual identity because Chevrolet can mean big (Suburban), rugged (Silverado), small (Malibu), and a host of other descriptors. Volvo, on the other hand owns "safety." If you don't want safety, don't buy Volvo—clean and easy. Branding means focus, and some universities are too frightened to make a choice, thus the poor identities will forever choke. Administrators might recognize potential and possibilities, but choosing a focus "to be the leader in engineering" or another field will inevitably anger many stakeholders. Branding experts maintain that focus means sacrifice. To focus and deliver on a small handful of promises is too much of a leap.

*"Branding experts maintain that focus means sacrifice. To focus and deliver on a small handful of promises is too much of a leap."*

But universities are getting the message. In Emory University's new President James Wagner we find the new era president. In the Atlanta Journal Constitution, Wagner says, "The brand names in the Northeast are a lot older than the Southeast...It's so much harder when you don't have 200 years of history." President Wagner can see the schools ahead and behind him. Once in the competitive mix, the same students, faculty, speakers, and grants are placed on the auction block. A stronger identity would secure another feather for one's cap.

University branding means discovery and definition: talk with stakeholders and discover your identity. What do alums think? Professors and students? Your competition? A strong vision is one that takes into account many stakeholders but, in the end, is in proper keeping with branded specificity. In a succinct sentence, how do you define your university? To differentiate a university, a definition must be crisp and easily definable. To settle on a brand means that the university must understand its core, communicate it effectively, and do everything within its power to strengthen the core. A brand is much like concentric circles—everything is related back to the core, the brand.

To predict the future of university branding is simpler than originally thought, though the branding movement must dispense with "branding" as a name. Public affairs offices and development programs will have an easier time selling the concept with a neutered name. But the avenues of college and branding will continue to intersect no matter the concept name. There's too much good in having a crisp identity.

Kabir Sehgal  
Co-founder , BuzzFlood