

The Enrollment Management and Marketing Nexus (Part II)

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This is the second installment of a three part white paper series titled, “The Enrollment Management and Marketing Nexus.” Part I was devoted to institutional branding—one of the three core components of the nexus. Part II, the focus of this white paper, looks at the role of the brand promise in the nexus. In a few months, you will receive Part III, the academic program mix.

A **brand promise** is essentially the point of difference the brand commits an institution to delivering consistently to its constituents (Krueger, 2007, March). This author concurs with the findings of Westervelt (2007) that most brand promises in higher education are abbreviated versions of institutional mission statements. This approach represents a flawed mental model of what a brand promise should be. Mission statements are purpose statements that convey why an institution exists. Mission statements usually fail to differentiate schools from their competitors and seldom reflect a promise of what institutions will deliver to students and other constituents. Moreover, mission statements rarely change, which is often not the case with brand promises.

That said, a school's mission statement, vision, and core values should be the foundation for the brand promise (Ehret, 2008, July). The challenge in creating a brand promise is to design a concise statement that reflects these foundational elements while differentiating the institution among its competitors and identifying a promise that employees and others can become passionate about and constituents can experience with every encounter they have with the institution.

A Brand Promise that Differentiates

To differentiate effectively, the brand promise must be bold yet credible. The higher education marketing landscape is replete with brand promises using words like excellence, quality, and learning. Few, however, claim something profoundly different or life changing. In developing a brand promise, consider an element of the institution's personality that goes beyond what students and others expect. Ideally, the promise should create a "wow" effect. Think about a relationship or an experience you want to create for all students. Perhaps, you may even create a promise around a guarantee, such as job or graduate school placement within six months of completing a degree.

The brand promise should "catapult" you over your competitors. What is the next iPod or iPhone equivalent in the academy? It could be an innovative approach to curriculum or pedagogy, a unique integration of the living and learning experience, a study abroad experience for every student, or simply packaging what you already do in a way that makes it distinctive. It is what marketing guru Seth Godin refers to as the "purple cow"—it's different from all the other cows and thus is memorable (2002). The magic in creating a "purple cow" is providing your constituents with something they don't know they yet need—just when they are ready for it (Kerner & Pressman, 2007). Whatever distinctive position you claim, you must be prepared to deliver on its promise 100% of the time.

A Brand Promise that Inspires Passion

Brand promise statements are powerless unless everyone on campus passionately embraces and lives them. Certainly, college and university employees do not come to work each day with the intention of undermining the institution's brand. More likely, they are not necessarily even cognizant of the brand or its importance to the school's vitality. Generally speaking, employees are not "wired" to deliver experiences that align with the brand promise. They naturally respond to teaching, advising, and service encounters in ways that are largely driven by their personalities (Lebard, Rendleman, & Dolan, 2006).

To help faculty and staff transition from a state of minimal brand awareness into brand enthusiasts, institutional brand champions must facilitate the metamorphosis. The following is an adapted excerpt from a white paper I recently published titled, "The Branding of Higher Education" (2007). The five steps outlined here provide a road map for actualizing a brand promise.

1. **Define the brand promise.** The definition must be based on the institution's personality—congruent with what the institution espouses to be and more importantly, consistent with institutional behavior. Most colleges and universities have clearly articulated core values, which should be fundamental elements of the brand promise definition. These values and thus, the brand promise must be relevant both to internal and external constituents. Relevancy does not equate to standardized

adoption, but instead it translates to individualized interpretations and behavior associated with the promise. Hence, the promise must be malleable enough to be accepted and practiced by different subcultures within an institution as well as individuals with their own unique beliefs and values. In the academy, this is the only practical way to strike a balance between the objective of universal adoption and maintaining a modicum of autonomy. Collectively, the college or university community must define desired expectations and behaviors associated with the promise.

2. **Live the brand promise.** Consider the role of all faculty, staff, and administrators as “institutional trust agents.” Whether encounters with students occur in the classroom, in an administrative office, through a campus event, online, in person, or on the phone, each experience either fosters or diminishes institutional trust. Think for a moment about your own personal and professional relationships. Is there a single valued relationship in your life that is not built on a foundation of mutual trust? Our students, their families, the school’s alumni, and others we serve are fundamentally the same. They will desire a relationship with an institution only if they trust you.
3. **Operationalize the brand promise.** The promise must be personified through your services, business transactions, human interactions, information delivery, and learning experiences. It must be embedded in the culture and become a part of your institutional DNA. It must be viewed as a covenant between the institution and those you serve—never to be

broken. Finally, it requires an unfaltering focus on identifying and eradicating promise gaps using some combination of people, processes, pedagogy, and technology.

4. **Deliver the brand promise consistently.** To achieve consistency, institutions must (1) clearly define the desired constituent experience and (2) ensure the employee experience is aligned with the desired constituent experience. For instance, if a staff member feels mistreated by the institution, it will be virtually impossible for that individual to effectively represent the brand promise to the students they serve. So, to improve consistency of promise delivery to our constituents, we must first create an environment for employees that is conducive to feeling passionate about the organization and its promise. The campus environment must be one that values the contributions of individuals and proactively enhances human capacity.
5. **Convey the brand promise.** Too often, higher education organizations permit their constituents to form impressions of the institution in an information vacuum—usually based on anecdotes, media coverage, and the negative experiences of the few. Effectively conveying the promise requires an ongoing internal and external campaign. It requires careful management of constituent expectations, the promotion of promise delivery successes, as well as intentional efforts to build institutional loyalty over time.

In forming a brand promise, you must engage the campus community in the process. Gain an understanding of what your people already are passionate about or could be if a promise reflected their values and the values of the institution. While it is unrealistic to expect to find unanimous consensus, look for themes that can be woven together to create a single brand promise that the community will actively support (Lull & Thiebolt, 2004). In order to identify a single brand promise that will be fervently believed and practiced, you will need to sacrifice other alternatives.

A Brand Promise that Delivers

Carlzon (1987) coined the phrase, “moments of truth” in his book by the same name. The application of this phrase to higher education simply means that colleges and universities have thousands of “moments of truth” with those they serve every day—both in and outside the classroom. Each of these “moments of truth” is a measure of how well an institution is delivering on the promise of its brand. With each encounter, trust in the brand is either enhanced or eroded. Failure to carefully manage these “moments of truth” renders a brand and its inherent promise worthless—often with severely negative consequences to the image of the institution.

Though they never used the jargon marketers espouse, academics were the first to shift the focus from the institution (or faculty) to the students. In November of 1995, the cover article in *Change* initiated discourse in the academy over a

paradigm shift from instructor-centered teaching to student-centered learning (Barr & Tagg, 1995, November). Admittedly, it has taken years for this seismic shift to infect academic culture, but the metamorphosis that has transpired is revolutionary. The “sage on the stage” has gradually been supplanted by faculty who engage their students in active learning; coach and facilitate rather than lecture; customize the learners’ experience based on their needs and learning styles; and leverage technology to enable learning. By fostering a learning environment where students are encouraged to collaborate, create knowledge, synthesis and apply information, strategize, and even find entertainment in the learning experience, faculty have created the conditions for managing “moments of truth” (Tapscott, 2009).

In the service sector of higher education, the movement gained momentum with a collaborative effort among a handful of “best practice” institutions, IBM, and the Society for College and University Planning. This group produced the first book dedicated solely to student services (Beede & Burnett, 1999). However, it was the second book published by these organizations that directly addressed the notion of delivering on the promise of the brand. In that book, *Innovations in Student Services: Planning Models Blending High Touch/High Tech*, a rising star at Disney, Cynthia Wheatley, wrote vividly about the importance of delivering service reflecting an organization’s brand (Wheatley, 2002). She focused on the areas of engineering the service experience; having reliable delivery systems; utilizing a service lens that considered three dimensions of service delivery:

people, processes, and place; mapping the service; aligning the employee's experience with the student's experience; as well as reaffirming the value of active participation of the student in his or her own learning experience.

Although the learner-centered model of delivering education and services has been embraced by most institutions—in theory by virtually all and in practice by a growing number—it is just now being adopted as part of the brand strategy by colleges and universities. Until recently, branding on most campuses has been viewed as purely a promotional endeavor and thus, has been relegated to a marketing department or a division of institutional advancement or enrollment management to implement. Arguably, brand positioning, promotion, and the other facets of brand development are essential to any institution that competes for students and external funding. However, successful brands deliver on the claims they promote.

The delivery component of a brand strategy is significantly more difficult to engage in than the promotional dimension. As illustrated in the following graph, Lebard, Rendleman, and Dolan outlined a two-year, four stage process to creating brand enthusiasts throughout an organization (2006). The process begins with promoting brand awareness among employees, followed by teaching brand knowledge, then developing brand believers, and lastly delivering consistently on the brand promise. It is important to note that the frame of reference for these authors is business, not higher education. In my experience,

this is a protracted evolutionary process in the academy, which unlike business is not a command and control environment.



Source: Lebard, Rendleman, and Dolan, 2006.

Any culture that values collegiality and a degree of autonomy may find such an organizational transformation to take five years or longer. So, for institutional leaders, such an endeavor requires patience, focus, and the will to stay the course. According to Heaton and Guzzo, aligning a human capital strategy like

the one proposed by Lebard, Rendleman, and Dolan with brand strategy has one overarching organizational benefit that makes the effort worthy of such a prolonged investment of time and resources—constituent needs end up driving the entire enterprise (2007).

Beyond the time and resources required to create a brand-oriented, learner-centered culture, common barriers to delivering on the promise are substantial and include:

- Inadequate staffing
- A lack of investment in organizational learning
- Inadequate technology to support the delivery of services and education
- Inefficient business processes
- Inaccurate or inaccessible information
- A lack of employee incentives as well as accountability for adherence to brand promise principles and values
- Poor communications, particularly across functional and organizational boundaries
- Organizational structures that inhibit the support of a holistic approach to brand delivery

Daunting as it may be, the Herculean effort to deliver what is promised is a requisite to a successful brand strategy. Without it, institutional branding will be an exercise in futility.

Conclusion

Differentiating an institution among its competitors is as much a product exercise as a promotional one. Even the best marketing efforts will not overcome lackluster or low demand programs or cumbersome and inefficient services. Likewise, a brand that fails to inspire employees has little chance of receiving broad-scale adoption. A branding effort that is not personified internally is “full of sound and fury; signifying nothing” (Shakespeare, 1605–06). There will be obvious incongruence between the expectations created with external constituents through related marketing activities and their experiences with the institution. External constituents must experience brand promise with each interaction with the institution for the brand to be real.

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